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## Tougher emigration laws for women

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New Delhi, Aug. 2: From now on, not just housemaids but also other women with emigration clearance required (ECR) passports will not be allowed to work in countries that don't have a labour welfare pact with India.

"Till now this applied only to housemaids. But from now onwards, all women holding ECR passports will be banned from going for employment to countries which do not sign a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) with India on labour welfare," an official in the ministry of overseas Indian affairs (MOIA) said.

This is expected to come into effect from September itself and is among several new policy decisions taken by MOIA to safeguard the interests of Indian workers abroad.

Earlier, these instructions only applied to women going abroad as domestic help or household service workers (HSWs) but now their scope has been widened following increasing reports of abuse and exploitation of Indian women workers, abroad.

There are over 200,000 Indian women working as HSWs in the Gulf region itself. The number of Indian housemaids has sharply increased in the last three-four years — from about 5,000 women, mostly from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, in 2004 to 15,000 in 2005.

India has signed bilateral labour welfare pacts with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A similar agreement with Malaysia and an additional protocol with Qatar have also been finalised. Bahrain and

Oman, two other major Indian labour importing Gulf countries, have also agreed to sign such agreements with India.

The policy of not allowing emigration to women below 30 years and compulsory attestation of employment documents by the Indian mission will now apply to all women holding ECR passports and not just those going as HSWs, according to the MOIA official.

Minister for overseas Indian affairs Vayalar Ravi said he was particularly concerned about exploitation of women workers. "We don't want to completely ban the emigration of women workers but actually check it," he said speaking at a function earlier this week where the MOIA signed a MoU with the International Organisation for Migration. (IANS)