



Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf

A CASE STUDY OF DUBAI, UAE

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1 INTRODUCTION

Just a few decades ago, the Arabian Gulf was a vast stretch of desert. The economy for many Gulf cities was based on regional trade, and the hearts of the city were centered around trading ports. The Gulf as we know it today, featuring futuristic skylines and unparalleled luxury, is a result of extremely rapid and expansive development plans that were financed through oil wealth. Because Gulf countries hosted small local population sizes, they looked outward to find the solution for their labor deficit. At the time, the Gulf already hosted significant migrant populations. As the demand for labor increased, migration evolved as the most efficient solution for balancing the labor deficit.

With the rapid influx of migrant workers to meet the labor demand, the *kafala* system emerged as the mechanism which regulated the migrant labor population. *The kafala* system, best described as a sponsorship system, has played a central role in the rapid economic development in the GCC states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Though it has allowed the Gulf States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmetically, the system has had an array of undesirable byproducts that have significantly altered the texture of Gulf society. The *kafala* system promotes the rapid influx of migrants to meet the labor demand while simultaneously subjugating this imported population through its lax regulations and exclusion from the legal framework in Gulf States. As a result, the Gulf has witnessed an emergence of multi-tiered societies where locals are situated in the top tier and migrant populations consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society. The *kafala* system has produced structural inequalities in Gulf States, and has resulted in the justification of human rights abuses against migrant laborers. Today, the effects of the *kafala* system are visible in every aspect of Gulf society. The spatial layout of Gulf cities speaks to the social dynamic that the *kafala* system fosters. Just as nationals live and exist in the heart of the city, they are central to the benefits of the *kafala* system. Migrant labor populations typically live on the periphery of Gulf cities, which mirrors their marginalized role in society.

2 HISTORY

The history of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially in terms of migration flows, is popularly divided into periods of pre-oil and post-oil. However, the Arabian Gulf hosts a long history of global connectivity and interaction with its neighboring countries. The oil boom in the 1950s and 60s in the Arabian Gulfs parked rapid development, which put a demand on labor.¹ Due to small population sizes in the Gulf, GCC countries relied on imported labor to balance out their local labor deficits, which has primarily been sourced from the Indian subcontinent and South Asia.²

Long before the discovery of oil and the arrival of the British and Portuguese in the 16th century, the dominant industry in the Gulf was pearl diving, which fostered a flourishing trade market between the Arabian Gulf and its Persian and Asian neighbors. Gulf locals took advantage of the rich pearl beds

¹ From here on out, the Arabian Gulf will be referred to as the Gulf. This refers to the area of GCC countries before they were formalized as modern states.

² The Indian subcontinent refers to the Southern region of Asia that projects into the Indian Ocean, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

situated in the Indian Ocean, and their livelihoods were formed around the trade of this amenity. The Indian and Iranian merchants, who were wealthier than their Gulf neighbors at the time, profited from trading pearls and returning home with high quality goods to sell (Vora 2013, 54). They also participated in trading textiles, rice, and other foods and spices (Gardner 2010, 26).

Because the Gulf was not as wealthy or developed as its neighbors India or Persia, powerful members of South Asian families profited from setting up banks in the region, serving as financiers to ruling families and oftentimes loaned money to the pearl divers and ship owners. This dynamic allowed the merchants to profit from interest rates at the expense of the divers who were actually taking part in the manual labor (Gardner 2010, 26).

The pearl industry and the presence of Indian and Persian merchants established trade ties between the Gulf and its neighbors on the opposite side of the Indian Ocean long before the arrival of the Portuguese and the British. When the British arrived in the Gulf and established its protectorate of several sheikhdoms along the coast in 1820, the pre-established trade ties between the Gulf and its regional neighbors were formalized.³ This shift was reflected in the emerging Indian population in Gulf port cities, and dependence on India and South Asia as trade partners intensified. Further trade activity was to be limited to British colonial goods, which resulted in a deepened connection between the Gulf and India (Vora 2013, 54).

2.1 WAVES OF IMMIGRATION TO THE GULF

Because of the long-standing presence of Indians and Persians in the Gulf, flows of migration to and from the Gulf have continued for much of known history. Andrew Gardner divides these flows into three overlapping waves. The first wave dates back to the beginning of known history in the Gulf and ends with the arrival of the British. For much of known history, Indian merchants travelled across the Indian Ocean to participate in trade of rice, cloth, food and spices (Gardner 2010, 26). These merchants often returned back to the subcontinent, though some remained and established themselves as bankers and financiers. This phase set the framework for future trade and migration conduits.

The second wave began with the presence of the British in the Gulf, dating back to 1820. The establishment of British protectorates, known as Trucial States, formalized the connection to the Indian subcontinent. Because of the proximity and established British presence in India, Britain's relations with the Gulf were largely conducted by British Indian officials. The presence of British administrators in the Gulf fostered the migration of Indian bureaucrats during this period (Gardner 2010, 27). During this period the Gulf also began to form the basic infrastructure of a modern government, which included the establishment of governmental departments and institutions.

The third and final wave is characterized by the booming oil industry in the Gulf. This phase began in the 1960s and gathered speed in the 1970s. Though oil was discovered in the early part of the 20th century in the Gulf, the widespread success of the oil industry was not seen until the 1960s and 70s (Gardner 2010, 27). The new and rapid influx of wealth in these recently independent countries inspired plans for development and modernization, which necessitated the importation of labor.

³ Sheikhdome refers to a geographical area that is ruled by a sheikh, or a local ruler.

During this period, many of the Gulf States gained independence from Britain. The British government realized that it could not afford to continue its protectorate of the Trucial States. The British government announced this decision in 1968, and by 1971 the Treaty that established the Trucial States had ended. Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Rashid of Dubai met after the announcement in 1968 to discuss a federation of the Trucial States. Bahrain and Qatar denied the invitation to join the federation and formed their own separate countries. When the protectorate of Trucial States officially expired on December 1, 1971, Abu Dhabi and Dubai formed a union along with the leaders of five other sheikhdoms (Gornall 2011). Today, these make up the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates.

The demographic profile of the typical migrant also shifted during this third wave. Until the late 1980s and 1990s, the majority of migrants came from other Arab countries, such as Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq (Babar 2014). This time period saw a sharp decrease in the numbers of Arab migrants and a substantial increase in Asian migrants, a shift that is often referred to as the “Asianization” of migrant labor (Kamrava and Babar 2012).

Gulf countries were initially very tolerant of Arab migrants due to their cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Though the cultural similarities between locals and Arab migrant populations once appealed to Gulf governments, the booming oil industry forced leaders to reevaluate the presence of other Arabs in the Gulf. At the time, Pan-Arabism ideologies successfully blanketed the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. The Pan-Arabism ideology viewed Arab countries as a single nation and supported the unification of all countries in the greater Arab world. This integration of the Gulf with the rest of the Arab world would entail the redistribution of oil wealth among the Arab community. These thoughts and ideas were viewed as progressive and revolutionary, and leaders in the Gulf began to view this movement as a threat to the stable, authoritarian monarchies (Babar 2014).

The booming oil industry allowed Gulf States to develop extensive welfare programs which provided generous benefits for its citizens. With the rise of the welfare state, Gulf countries became more limited in their scope of tolerance for migrants. While Gulf countries once offered naturalization programs for other Arab migrants, these programs were phased out by the 1970s (Babar 2014). Other nationality and citizenship laws were instituted, making welfare benefits exclusive to Gulf nationals. Gulf leaders began to view Asian migrants as less of a threat than Arabs, and their position as laborers in the region became preferred for many reasons. Kamrava and Babar explain that Asians are less of an ideological threat than their Arab neighbors, Asians tolerate lower wages, they are easier to lay off, easier to segregate, and they tend to migrate without their families (Kamrava and Babar 2012, 8). By the end of the 20th century, South Asians became the face of migrants in GCC countries.

While the narrative of migration in GCC countries oftentimes perceives oil as the determinant for migration flows, the longstanding history of the Indian and Persian presence in the Gulf demonstrates otherwise. However, the oil industry *did* serve as a catalyst for inflows of immigrants, particularly those working in the construction and labor industries.

Before the discovery of oil, Gulf cities were centered around regional trading ports and mercantile centers. The rapid success that oil brought to the region allowed countries such as the United Arab Emirates to devote oil revenues to development and modernization plans, which aimed to construct a global and cosmopolitan landscape. Somewhere between the mercantile history and the new cosmopolitan prototype of Gulf countries, Asian migrants became socially and physically marginalized on the periphery of the successes of these new, iconic cities. In the case study of Dubai, I will discuss the

shift from the city-center in the Dubai Creek area of Dubai's mercantile days to the "New Dubai" in the post-oil landscape and how this move left migrant workers behind.

3 TRENDS AND STATISTICS

All six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates - are characterized by a demographic imbalance between migrants and nationals. All six countries are included in the top 20 nations in the world with the highest proportion of migrants to nationals (Kamrava and Babar 2012, 8). The United Arab Emirates is a quintessential example of this rapid increase in the sheer number of migrant workers in a short period of time (See Figure 1). From 2007 to 2008, there was a jump from 3.11 million migrant workers to 4.07, a 30% increase over the time period of one year (Janardhan 2011, 97). In Qatar, the economically active population doubled three times from 2004 to 2011 (State of Qatar 2011). By 2011, non-Qataris reached 93.9% of the total population (State of Qatar 2011).

This dynamic places a myriad of pressures on local populations, local governments and on the migrants themselves. Not only has this increase in immigration had a drastic effect on the population demographics, but also on the workforce. It is estimated that by 2020, Emirati nationals will account for less than 4% of the total workforce in their own country (Janardhan

2011, 98). The Gulf countries have historically had small native-born populations, so extensive development and modernization plans in GCC countries required an influx of labor to put the blueprints of these elaborate projects to life. The construction industry is one of the most essential to these projects, so I will focus on this particular industry throughout this paper.

This rapid growth of the migrant population has marginalized nationals in terms of jobs and employment in the private sector. Because Asian immigrants are willing to work for lower wages and are easier to manage, construction companies and service sector employers prefer non-nationals. Another byproduct of oil revenue is the welfare state, which allows governments to provide extensive benefits to its citizens. As part of these benefits, the government reserves public sector jobs for citizen workers. For example, non-nationals make up almost 85% of the total population in the United Arab Emirates (Central Intelligence Agency 2013). Of the employed non-nationals in the country, 64.6% are working for

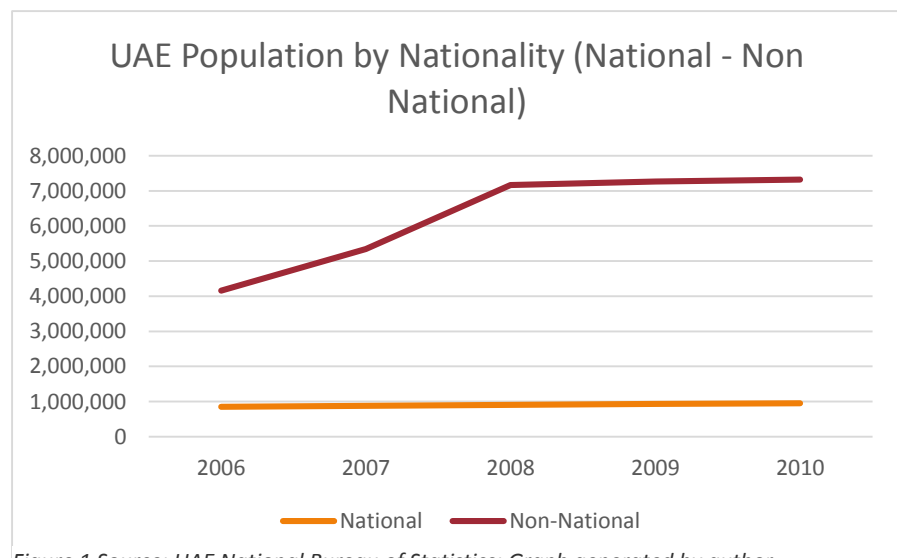


Figure 1 Source: UAE National Bureau of Statistics; Graph generated by author

the private sector compared with 7.4% of employed nationals (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 18).⁴

This dynamic is very apparent in Gulf cities. The segregation of nationalities between sectors of the economy was visible within the first few hours I spend in the UAE. The Dubai International Airport, owned by the Dubai government, is fully staffed by Emirati nationals, which is indicated by the traditional Emirati garb. However once you leave the airport and get in a cab or enter a mall, it appears that low-wage service sector is dominated by South Asian migrant populations. When dealing with the Immigration Office or other divisions of the government, it was apparent that all employees were Emirati nationals.

3.1 REMITTANCES

As hosts to a large number of foreign workers, GCC countries have become significant contributors to global net remittance totals. According to a calculation by N. Janardhan, remittances from GCC countries total \$35 billion each year (Janardhan 2011, 121). The top remittance recipient in 2010 was India, who received \$55 billion (World Bank 2011). The Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Egypt were also in the top 10 recipients (World Bank 2011). Not surprisingly, these are the countries that constitute a majority of the migrant population in Gulf countries.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman were in the top 10 remittance-sending countries in 2009 (World Bank 2011). The United Arab Emirates and Qatar do not have any data on remittances. The charts in Figure 2 illustrate the sheer quantities of money that GCC countries are contributing to the global economy through remittances.

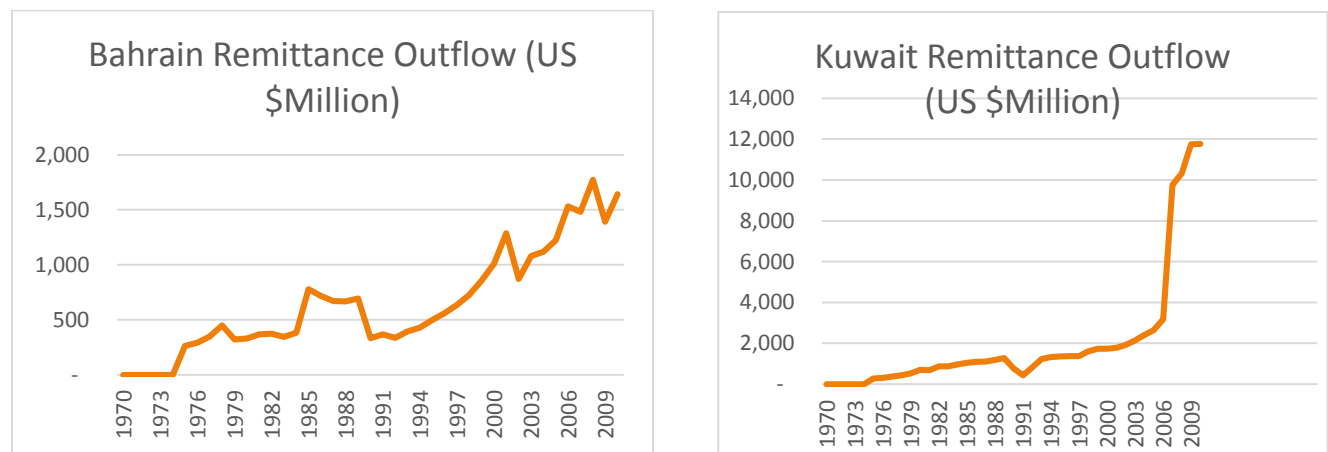
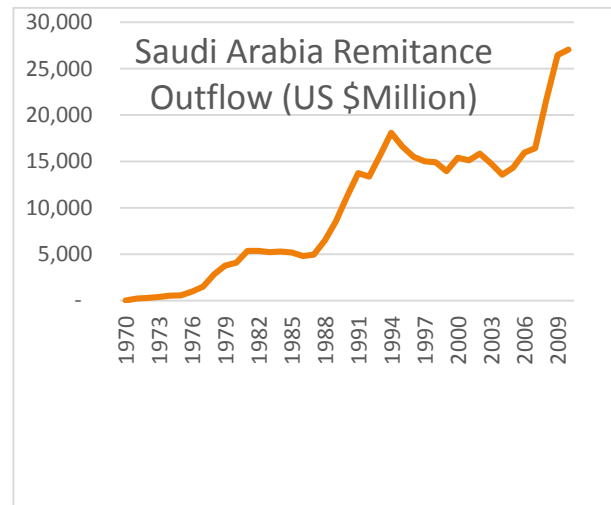
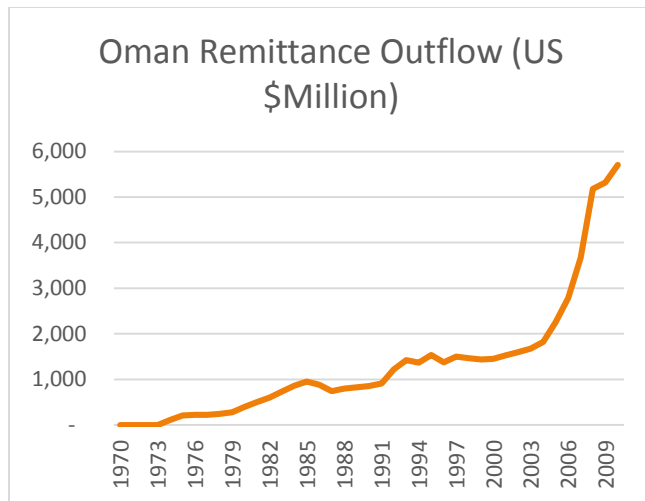


Figure 2 -- Source: World Bank; charts generated by author

⁴ The next largest sector of non-national employment is housework (i.e. maids).



3.2 EMIGRATION

Of the 232 million migrants in the world in 2013, more than half were concentrated in just 10 countries. Of these ten countries, the United Arab Emirates hosted 8 million and Saudi Arabia hosted 9 million (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2013). India consistently tops the list of the immigration source countries in the GCC, and South Asians make up the majority of the population in the United Arab Emirates (Janardhan 2011, 96). In 2013, 2.9 million Indians were residing in the UAE. India to the UAE was the second most populated corridor of migration in 2013.⁵

These numbers do not indicate motivations for migration, whether political or economic (or both), however they are telling of the broad trends that the Gulf has witnessed. Though South Asian labor migrants dominate the migrant population in Gulf countries, the migrant population is still very diverse. For instance, while their numbers do not constitute a significant amount of the total population, there are many East African and European expatriates living in the Gulf (Central Intelligence Agency 2013).⁶

4 TREATMENT OF WORKERS

The rapid influx of migrant workers to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has provided the necessary manpower for the light speed execution of development plans in the Gulf. From the tallest building in the world, the artificial palm islands, to the fastest roller coaster in the world in Abu Dhabi's Ferrari World, the United Arab Emirates has consistently topped lists and broken records in the last few decades. The *brand* that the city of Dubai has become offers unparalleled luxury with the only seven star

⁵ The first was Bangladesh to India; the 9th was India to Saudi Arabia. (DESA International Migration 2013: Migrants by Origin and Destination).

⁶ Most of the population statistics produced by the government are broken down by national/non-national categories, so it is difficult to find information on the population broken down by specific nationalities. However, the East African diaspora is visible in Gulf society. For example, I had encounters with many Kenyans and Ugandans who were employed in the service sector. Further, there was a significant West African population in the student body at the American University.

hotel in the world (Burj al Arab), and bountiful glitz and glamor with endless nightclubs and five star restaurants. Like all good things, this luxury and extravagance comes with a price. The hands that physically built the iconic infrastructure of the Gulf have become invisible. Their hard labor tends to fall in the shadows of the buildings which they build, and their narratives not only fall on deaf ears, but they are oftentimes never articulated in the first place.

After spending time in the Gulf, it is noticeably clear *how* these countries were built. You cannot leave your house without noticing the toil of the South Asian migrant population. They often line the streets, perfecting the artificial landscapes that don't belong in the desert in the first place. They erect the buildings in which nationals and Western expats live and work, and they plant the palm trees that surround them. The lives of migrant workers can largely be characterized by a dedication to providing the luxury and extravagance which nationals and Western expatriates enjoy.

With the shift of Gulf cities to new, more cosmopolitan areas in the early part of the 21st century, the demographic imbalance became polarized at the expense migrant workers. As the wealthy urbanized and moved to newer areas of the city, populations that could not keep up remained on the periphery of the city. This divide was not only physical, but as Gulf cities became more developed and modern, boundaries between nationals and non-nationals became more defined both socially and institutionally.⁷

This shift essentially deteriorated the quality of life for migrant workers, who built these new cities with their own hands and were then forced to live on their peripheries. Hiring foreign workers in low status sectors of the economy allows countries to fill the low rungs of society with foreigners without creating sharp class divides within their own local population (Weiner 1990, 3). Because the GCC countries were newly independent, there were often few mechanisms to ensure protection for laborers. Migrant workers are mistreated throughout every stage of the immigration process, by the recruiting agencies in their home countries, the GCC governments themselves, and by their employers. The reality of the lives of migrant laborers is not simply characterized by harsh working conditions, but injustices that deny this portion of the population basic human rights. The rest of this section is dedicated to discussing these injustices and discriminations and how they create a cycle of debt and misery for the South Asian demographic in the GCC.

4.1 RECRUITMENT

The beginning stages of the migration process are in the sending country. Agencies recruit workers in the home country and arrange a contract between the worker and the employer in the destination country. This is perceived as an invaluable service to the migrant, who oftentimes has a vision of foreseeable success for their new lives in the destination country. This idealized vision allows recruitment agents to charge inflated prices for their services, averaging between 2,000 and 3,000 US Dollars (Human Rights Watch 2006, 8).

The recruiters arrange employment contracts, apply for worker visas in the destination country, and purchase air travel. If a migrant is not able to pay the recruitment fees him or herself or with the

⁷ This will be discussed in a later section.

help of friends and family, he or she can take a loan attached with staggering interest rates from the recruitment agency (Human Rights Watch 2006, 8).

The combination of recruitment fees and interest rates tacked onto the loans to pay the fees puts migrants in a disadvantaged state of debt before they even arrive to their destination country. To add to the financial stress, agents and brokers in sending countries often have meager information about the contracts which they arrange (Gardner 2012, 57). Employers often switch the terms of contract upon arrival to the destination country, which include much lower wages and poorer living conditions than they were promised by the agent in their home country (Human Rights Watch 2006, 34). This transaction of misinformation perpetuates what Gardner calls the “migration industry,” where agents and employers “profit from the migration flows, using poor information to extract profit from the flow of unskilled migrants to the region,” (Gardner 2012, 57). The recruiters create and exploit this idealized vision of life in the Gulf to make a profit.

Once the migrant arrives in the destination country and begins work, the shock of reality of life in the Gulf as a migrant worker begins to set in. It usually takes about two years for workers to pay back debts to their recruitment agencies and to their friends and family (Human Rights Watch 2006, 8). At this point, romanticized visions of life in the Gulf that were formed in the sending countries have likely been contradicted by the reality of lived experiences. The migrants themselves also contribute to this transaction of misinformation. When they realize that their initial views of life in the Gulf were rooted in fantasy, feelings of embarrassment set in. The migrants and their families made great sacrifices to send them to the Gulf, so the migrants do not want their families to be disappointed or worried that their living conditions in their new homes are abysmal. The combination of pride and desire to prevent their families from feeling worried results in migrants depicting idealized images of their lives in the Gulf that contradict reality. Andrew Gardner noted that many of the migrants he interviewed sent pictures of themselves sitting behind a desk back to their families, which further perpetuates the issue of misinformation in sending countries about life in the Gulf (Gardner 2012, 58).

4.2 PASSPORT CONFISCATION AND TRAVEL BANS

One of the most common and consistent injustices cited by migrant workers is the confiscation of passports upon arrival in the destination country. Though the practice is illegal in most GCC countries, passports are widely and systematically confiscated by companies and employers. Of the 60 construction workers interviewed in the UAE for Human Rights Watch’s “Building towers, Cheating Workers,” none reported that they were allowed to maintain possession of their own passports (Human Rights Watch 2006, 10).

The practice of confiscating passports effectively places a travel ban on migrant workers. This procedure is justified by companies so that workers do not abscond and break their contracts. Confiscating passports exacerbates a non-negotiable power dynamic between the employee and the employer, with the employer holding all of the power. This dynamic allows companies to treat workers unjustly and makes it nearly impossible for workers to break free of their harsh living and working conditions.

Passports are also often held as collateral to prevent workers making any legal claims against their sponsor or employer (Gardner 2010, 62-3). This provides yet another conduit for companies to profit from the injustice done to migrant workers. If a worker wishes to break away from his contract, the only

way of doing so is to buy back his passport from his employer and return home. Because the worker is already in debt as a result of the recruitment fees, paying more money to leave without paying off preexisting debt is unlikely. The workers are therefore beholden to their sponsor.

4.3 WAGES

Another aspect of life as a migrant worker in the Gulf that contradicts romanticized views fashioned in the home country is the insufficient wages that the workers receive as compensation for their intensive labor. On average, a construction worker in the United Arab Emirates makes \$175 per month, a sum that falls short of a living wage (Human Rights Watch 2006, 23).

Not only are the wages consistently low for the service sector in GCC countries, but there is also a wage disparity based on nationality and ethnicity. Inconsistent value is placed on the work done by certain nationalities, with South and East Asians on the bottom rung of the ladder. The work of Arab migrants and Western expatriates is valued much higher than Asian migrants, but still Emirati nationals are placed at the top of the ladder, earning much higher wages for less demanding work.

This phenomenon is supported by numbers found in the Labor Force Survey conducted by the Dubai government. The mean income per month for an Emirati national is 20,557.50 AED (5,597.69 USD), with the median at 18,000 AED (4,901.29 USD). For non-nationals, the mean income for month is 5,813.08 AED (1,582.87 USD), and a median of 2,500 AED (680.74 USD) (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 36).⁸

An examination of wages in the public and private sector offers another piece of supporting evidence of the wage disparity in GCC countries. In a closer look at the wages of all residents (including nationals and non-nationals) in the United Arab Emirates that breaks down economic activity by sector, it is found that almost one-third of construction workers make less than 1,300 AED (\$353.98) per month. 23.8% make between 1,300 and 2,999 AED per month (\$353.98 - \$816.61), and 24.5% make between 3,000 and 7,999 AED per month (\$816.88 - \$2,178.08) (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 33). A vast majority of the construction sector does not even earn half the median earned by nationals.

On the other hand, the majority of public administration officials make over 18,000 AED (\$4,901.29) per month. 25.4% make between 8,000 and 17,999 AED per month (\$2,178.35 - \$4,901) (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 33).⁹ Also in the public sector, almost half of legislators, senior officials and managers in the United Arab Emirates make above 18,000 AED per month (\$4,901.29). 37% make between 8,000 and 17,999 (\$2,178.35 – \$4,901) (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 32). This same ethno-national hierarchical structure that exists in the Emirates is present across Gulf countries. In a study on labor in Kuwait in 2009, Dinkha and Dakhli found that Kuwaiti nationals earn higher pay for the same jobs (Dinkha and Dakhli 2009, 52).

The wage discrepancies between migrant workers, nationals and Western expats create a social hierarchy that places migrant laborers in the lowest bracket of society. The legal structure in place, of which the *kafala* system is a part, creates a system of favoritism, which benefits nationals in all areas of

⁸ Note that the numbers for non-nationals also include Western expatriates who likely skew the data upward. Western expats are in a position to own and operate companies, where Asian migrant workers have less social and professional mobility.

⁹ I looked at Public administration because the majority of nationals are employed by the public sector.

life, including business ownership, education, work, welfare benefits and various other rights (Dinkha and Dakhli 2009, 51). The random valuation of labor based on nationality creates what Dinkha and Dakhli call a “multi-tier labor market,” which applies different laws, wages, and benefits to each socially insulated tier (Dinkha and Dakhli 2009, 48).

The tension between the lowest rungs of society and nationals is ever-present in the Gulf, and treating migrant workers like they don’t exist is a socially engrained practice that is taught at an early age. It is so deep-seated that even tourists catch on to the systematic erasure of the labor force of the Gulf. Upon arrival to the United Arab Emirates, one of the first things that I was told was never to make eye contact with a laborer on the street. Inter-class dialogue is seen as socially unacceptable, and this dynamic of separation and exclusion has instilled a culture of racism and classism in the Gulf. Disparities among the expatriate population are also present. For instance, Western expatriates do not receive the benefits of citizenship, but they have more social mobility and access to white-collar industries. On the other hand, it is extremely rare to find expatriates of Asian or African descent working a white-collar job. This portion of the migrant population dominates the service sector of the economy.

4.3.1 Withheld Wages

In addition to inadequate wages, another one of the most common complaints among migrant workers is withheld wages (Human Rights Watch 2006, 29). The monetary compensation for the strenuous labor is already initially inadequate, but companies and employers systematically withhold wages from workers for months at a time. According to labor laws in the UAE, withholding wages from workers is deemed illegal.¹⁰ However, like many other regulations in the country, this law is commonly ignored.

Withheld wages has been the leading cause of strikes in the UAE and across the Gulf (Human Rights Watch 2006, 30).¹¹ Though unionizing and striking is deemed illegal throughout the country and punished by deportation, the consequences associated with withheld wages are grave enough to drive workers to risk deportation. When wages are withheld, workers are forced to borrow money with interest just to obtain the resources needed to survive. Withholding wages is comparable to confiscating passports as a mechanism utilized by countries to prevent workers from absconding. A worker is less likely to quit and return home if that means sacrificing months of pay, especially if they are already in debt to the recruitment agencies back at home.

4.4 LABOR CAMPS

One of the most shocking and heartbreaking aspects of the reality of the lives of migrant workers in the Gulf are their living conditions. Workers are piled into labor camps on the periphery of the city, which are segregated from the city center both geographically and socially. Their distance from the city and from the eyes of nationals allows the companies and government to overlook the unsanitary and ghastly living conditions of migrant workers.

In Dubai’s two largest camps, Al Quoz and Sonapor, the typical dwelling is a small room of 12 by 9 feet which sleeps as many as 8 workers (Human Rights Watch 2009, 23). Other accounts of labor camps cite as many as 12 workers sharing one room (Ali 2010, 91). Not only are these camps overcrowded, but

¹⁰ This is likely true across the GCC, but I have not examined each country’s laws regarding labor.

¹¹ Strikes in the UAE due to withheld wages will be discussed in the case study of Dubai.

they lack sanitary living conditions. In Sayed Ali's account of Sonapur, he disclosed that many of the compounds have poor drainage and sanitation. Septic tanks have overflowed, leaving pools of stagnant sewage throughout the compound. This is to no fault of the workers, but rather the camp owners who consciously choose not to operate the camp in a proper manner (Ali 2010, 91). In another camp that Human Rights Watch visited, electricity was cut off because the company chose not to pay the bills (Human Rights Watch 2006, 34).

In April 2009, BBC's Panorama program exposed that the UAE's largest construction firm, Arabtec, housed their employees in filthy and overcrowded camps. Raw sewage laid in stagnant pools throughout the camp, requiring workers to tip toe on stepping stones just to navigate in their living space. Many of the toilets lacked water, resulting in massive piles of raw feces (Allen 2009). This exposé was one of the first of its kind, revealing the inhumane living conditions in which migrant workers are housed.

GCC governments lack the mechanisms to prevent these sorts of injustices done unto migrant workers. In the case of the Arabtec situation, the government fined the company 10,000 AED (\$2,723) in the aftermath of BBC's expose. However, this is a small sum for such a large company. This suggests that the governments do not see any responsibility for the behavior of corporations working in their territory, and a later section will demonstrate how governments use free trade zones to allow foreign companies to operate outside of the legal framework.

The government also tacitly promotes this marginalization of migrant workers through legal codes. Even if companies or employers desired to house their employees in the heart of the city with acceptable living conditions, the government makes it difficult to do so. In 2006, the Dubai government cracked down on bachelors living in villas in family designated neighborhoods (Ali 2010, 93). Because single men are legally forbidden from family residential areas, migrant workers particularly in the construction sector, which is dominated by males, are systematically excluded from these neighborhoods. Coincidentally, these are the neighborhoods that occupy the center of the city. When a construction firm in Dubai headed by a European family decided to house its employees in villas in the Jumeirah area, officials from the municipality evicted the workers and encouraged them to find housing in a labor camp (Ali 2010, 93).¹²

It is important to note that the frequency of laborers forced to live in camps is high. A survey conducted by the Qatar government in 2008 showed that of all the housing in Qatar, ¼ of the housing units were dedicated to worker housing compounds, and about 60% of the population of Qatar lived in these compounds. Of those that live in worker compounds, ¾ of these residents are male expatriates (Permanent Population Committee of the State of Qatar 2009).

As GCC countries modernized, developed, and globalized, the center of the city shifted from older port areas to new, globalized city centers. This shift simultaneously raised the cost of living in both areas. From 2005 to 2006 in Dubai, rents drastically increased in price. In some areas, rent increased over 100 percent and continued to increase into 2008 (Ali 2010, 93). As GCC countries and cities globalized, migrant workers were left behind and were unable to keep up with new lavish lifestyles that global GCC cities promoted. The shift from regional mercantile trading centers to global oil producers effectively marginalized the labor force of Gulf countries.

¹² Jumeirah is a coastal residential area in Dubai known for its exceptional beaches and living areas. Because of its reputation as one of the nicest areas of Dubai, it is one of the most expensive places to live in the city.

The location of labor camps on the outskirts of Gulf cities allows nationals and other Western expatriates to remain ignorant to the lives of migrant workers. The map below of the major labor camps in Dubai provides a telling illustration of their sidelined position in the city. This contributes to the inherent classism of Gulf societies, and instills a state of silence in Gulf residents when it comes to the lives and living conditions of migrant workers.



4.5 BAN ON LABOR UNIONS, STRIKES, AND ORGANIZATION

Another mechanism that GCC governments utilize to subordinate migrant workers is through prohibiting laborers from joining labor unions, organizing, and striking. The voices of migrant workers are practically nonexistent in legal narratives. As Human Rights Watch points out, there are no organizations independent of the government to advocate for migrant workers' rights. There is also no mechanism to systematically report abuses of workers (Human Rights Watch 2006, 24).

Though the *kafala* system forbids strikes among laborers, they have been quite common among construction workers across the Gulf. From May to December of 2005, over 800 workers united in one of the UAE's biggest protests. Workers effectively blocked Dubai's main thoroughfare to protest the systematic practice of withholding wages. The strikers cited four consecutive months of withheld wages by Al Hamed Development and Construction Country. The Minister of Labor quickly demanded that the company pay the delayed wages, and his timely response was promulgated as a sign that the government is dedicated to holding companies accountable for the treatment of their workers (Human Rights Watch 2006, 31). However, the government fell short of actually ensuring that the company paid

the workers their wages in the aftermath of the scandal. One Pakistani employee of the company told HRW that Al Hamed only paid two of the four months of withheld wages. Further, the leaders of the strike were dismissed from the company and deported back to their home countries (Human Rights Watch 2006, 31).

During the construction of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, the tension between workers and their companies was extreme.¹³ Because of the global nature of the construction of the Burj Khalifa and its symbolic precedence throughout the world, the construction process was watched with much more scrutiny than ever before. By March of 2006, the tensions were so high between the workers and their employers that 2,500 migrants banded together to protest their working conditions. They were unsatisfied with their low wages, living conditions, and delayed payments (Janardhan 2011, 109). The protests turned violent, and the government responded with a new rule that any expatriates who provoked riots would be deported and unable to return to work for a year (Janardhan 2011, 109).

The *kafala* system's ban on labor unions and strikes among migrant labors allows Gulf governments to treat the workers as temporary guests who are privileged to be working in the Gulf. This sets a tone for the workers that they must watch their every move, and even something as simple as demanding the pay that they are owed can earn them a ticket back to their home country.

4.6 HEALTH

Not only do the unsanitary living conditions discussed above pose health problems for migrant workers, but workers in many sectors are also subjected to hazardous working conditions each day. The construction industry is a perfect example of the hazardous working conditions that workers face.

The construction industry experiences high injury and death rates in the Gulf. In the Emirates, labor laws require employers to protect against the hazards of injuries and disease, provide emergency health care for their workers, pay for the medical treatment of injured workers, and to report injuries to the Ministry of Labor (Human Rights Watch 2006, 48). This same law regulates the maximum number of working hours, requires annual leave and overtime, and delineates terms of recruitment. The law also requires the government to set a minimum wage, however this portion of the law was never executed.

While administrators in the Ministry of Labor in the UAE are to supposed ensure that employers are in compliance with safety and health regulations, companies can generally evade complying with these regulations since the Ministry has been largely ineffective in their oversight. The Ministry only employs 140 inspectors to oversee 240,000 businesses and companies (Human Rights Watch 2006, 44). This is a glaring disproportionality, which indicates that the government is not truly dedicated to ensuring the health and safety of migrant workers, who are usually employed by the private companies which the Ministry of Labor is supposed to oversee.

Numbers and statistics prove just how hazardous the working conditions in the Gulf are for construction workers. In the UAE, there are more than 700 deaths and 90 suicides each year (Ali 2010, 83). Though there are no official government figures on work related injuries due to a lack of systematic reporting by companies, a number can still be synthesized through independent investigation and local trade publications. *Construction Week*, an online publication for construction news in the Middle East,

¹³ The construction of the Burj Khalifa will be discussed in greater detail in the case study of Dubai.

reported that in 2004 alone, 880 migrant construction workers died, 460 of which were Indian, 375 Pakistani, and 45 Bangladeshi (Human Rights watch 2006, 11). Another means of determining the number of work related deaths is through consulates. The Indian Consulate in Dubai reported 971 deaths in 2005, 61 of which were on-site accidents (Human Rights Watch 2006, 11).

Extremely long work days, few days off, and the heat are a few of the conditions which contribute to hazardous work environments.

4.6.1 Hours and Rest Days

Construction workers in GCC states and other laborers in the service sector are forced to work long days, lasting up to 12 hours each day, with only one day of rest each week. The Dubai Labor Force survey shows the disparity of working hours between nationals and migrant workers. In every sector surveyed, non-nationals worked more total hours per week than nationals (United Arab Emirates Government 2009, Table 28). 4.1% of nationals worked more than 60 hours each week, while 30.4% of non-nationals worked more than 60 hours each week (UAE Government 2009, Table 23). In the construction sector alone, 22.1% work more than 60 hours a week, while only 4% of those working in public administration and defense and 10.5% of federal and local government employees average over 60 hours each week (UAE Government 2009, Table 25 and 26). When looking at average hours per week, non-national construction workers average 51.8 hours while nationals in the public administration average 40 hours a week (UAE Government 2009, Table 29).

Not only are the working hours much higher for non-nationals, especially in the construction sector, but the Labor Force Survey also indicated that employees of the sectors that average more hours make less money. In a distribution of paid employees who worked more than 48 hours per week by level of monthly wages, 64.7% of service workers make less than 1,300 AED each month (\$354). On the other hand, 41% of legislators and senior officials who work more than 48 hours a week make between 8,000 and 17,999 AED per month (\$2,178 - \$4,901) (UAE Government 2009, Table 41).

4.6.2 Heat

The Gulf can be an excellent travel destination due to its year-round heat and plentiful beaches. However the heat positions the Gulf as a dangerous destination for workers who are laboring outdoors for lengthy periods of time each day. During the summer months, the Gulf countries reach up to 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit).

According to the Dubai Chapter of the World Safety Organization, heat-related illness is the most important issue facing construction workers (Human Rights Watch 2006, 41). Extreme heat can cause strokes and dehydration among other health concerns. Rashid Hospital in Dubai reported that as many as 5,000 construction workers were brought into the emergency room for heat-related incidents during July and August of 2004 (Human Rights Watch 2006, 41).

In 2005, the UAE government instituted a ban on outdoor construction during the hottest hours of the day to address the health concern that the heat poses (Ali 2010, 83). However, because there are few inspectors to ensure that companies and employers are in compliance with health regulations, the companies rarely abide by this regulation. Regardless, requiring or allowing workers to work during the peak heat hours is punishable by a fine that equates to pocket change for large companies.

5 LEGALITY

The GCC has created a unique paradox of crafting ultramodern, luxurious cities for locals and Westerners to enjoy while denying these same luxuries to the migrant population that makes it all possible. GCC governments have created a legal system that systematically denies rights to migrant workers while promoting extensive and lucrative benefits for nationals. On the surface, this allows Gulf countries to appear as modern, cosmopolitan, and developed. However, you don't need to spend much time in the Gulf to find that the treatment of migrant workers starkly contrasts with the modern and stately infrastructure. This section aims to explain how GCC countries legally perpetuate the denial of rights and harsh abuses of migrant laborers.

5.1 KAFALA SYSTEM

GCC countries employ a system known as *kafala* that allows the government to monitor migrant laborers through national sponsors. The system ties each laborer to a *kafeel* (sponsor) in the destination country, who is responsible for arranging his or her visa and employment contract. The *kafeel*, or sponsor, is usually also the migrant's employer. The system requires all labor migrants to operate through contracts, which usually last for two to three years at a time. Through locating the responsibility of migrants at the level of the sponsor, the state evades any sort of legal accountability for the migrant labor population. This controversial system allows Gulf governments to avoid recognizing migrant workers as residents, meaning that they are not obliged to uphold their rights or to administer benefits in the way that they do for nationals. This system situates migrant workers as temporary, or "guest" workers of Gulf countries, which creates an environment of temporality and impermanence for the laborers. The *kafala* system dictates the lives of many workers in Gulf countries. In the United Arab Emirates, about 90% of the population is on a temporary visa (Ali 2010).

Gulf governments choose to uphold the *kafala* system because it is an easy method of ignoring and profiting from the human rights abuses of migrant workers. By using the language of "guest" or "temporary" workers, GCC governments have created a legal system that excludes migrant workers from society (Vora 2013). The *kafala* system is an outgrowth of a cultural practice that was used to organize labor on pearling dhow boats, so the system is viewed as a cultural legacy in the Gulf. The system emerged as it is practiced today in the 20th century, but is only partially coded in the law (Gardner 2010, 59).

The *kafala* system requires migrant laborers to have a sponsor in the destination country, which effectively ties the migrant to the sponsor for the duration of his or her stay. This structure makes it hard for workers to abscond from their contracts, which usually last for about two to three years. The system also requires nationals to comprise a majority of ownership for all companies in the country (Ali 2010, 27).¹⁴ Because at least 51 percent of the company must be owned by nationals, large numbers of nationals are profiting as business partners in exchange for carrying little weight. For instance, if a business startup plan was only lacking a national owner, the creators of the business will find a national to sign the paper saying he or she owns a portion of the business. The national does not have to put up any capital of his or her own but still profits from the business venture (Ali 2010, 27).

¹⁴ With the exception of the free trade zones, which will be discussed later in the paper.

This system produces a wide range of negative consequences for migrant workers while simultaneously benefiting the sponsors, companies, and GCC countries. Governments prefer to exclude the migrant labor population from the legal framework of the country because when their voices are not engaged in legal affairs, they pose less of a threat to the political and economic structures present in the country (Ali 2010, 27). When migrants have no voice in the legal system, their grievances are not taken into account in policy, laws, and other government operations.

Governments also benefit because labor management is left to the companies instead of to the state (Kamrava and Babar 2012, 11). This limits the role of the government in protecting workers' rights, and allows the state to point fingers to the hiring companies when they find themselves under a microscope for allowing human rights abuses. The migrant is connected to his or her *kafeel*, not to the state, allowing the state to articulate itself as a minimal player as the guarantor of rights.

5.2 OVERSIGHT DEFICIENCY

Through allowing GCC governments to control migrant populations through sponsor proxies, the *kafala* system provides a mechanism for states to exclude migrant laborers from many different spheres of society. In addition to locating the responsibility of migrant laborers at the level of the employer instead of in the state, the government systematically ignores its own laws aiming to protect migrant workers through a lack of oversight. Though there are in fact laws in place to protect migrants from labor abuses, Gulf governments oftentimes fail to provide the necessary mechanisms for enforcing these laws.

In the case of the United Arab Emirates, laws are in place to protect workers from abuse beginning with the recruitment process in their home countries. There are laws banning recruitment agencies and local employers from charging the migrants any fees associated with the recruitment process (Human Rights Watch 2006, 11). Employers or sponsors in the UAE are required to pay a fee for each worker they recruit into the country, which is used to pay for things such as the employment visa. Though the employer is legally required to cover this cost, these fees are usually levied onto the migrant during the recruitment process (Human Rights Watch 2006, 26). UAE Labor Law no. 8 of 1980, which applies to both nationals and migrants, regulates maximum working hours, provides for annual leave and overtime, regulates terms of recruitment, and requires employers to protect against the hazards of work-related injury and disease (Human Rights Watch 2006, 48). Employers are required to report work-related injuries to the Ministry of Labor, and they are also required to pay for the medical treatment for injured workers (Human Rights Watch 2006, 49).

Though there are established penalties for violations of the law, deficiency in governmental oversight has allowed companies to abuse migrant laborers against the will of the law. The Ministry of Labor only employs 140 inspectors to oversee the practice of over 240,000 businesses and companies, which serves as a tacit promotion of the violation of these labor laws at the expense of the migrants (Human Rights Watch 2006, 44).

Even if there was an effective mechanism in place to ensure the compliance of the labor laws, the penalties are almost laughable. The penalty for a violation of any part of UAE's Labor Law No. 8 includes imprisonment not to exceed 6 months, and a fine between 3,000 AED and 10,000 AED (\$833-2,778) (Human Rights Watch 2006, 27). These fees are a small chunk of change compared to the exorbitant profit earned by large companies in Gulf countries.

GCC governments have done little to prevent the abuse of migrant workers. If anything, their efforts can be considered reactionary. Governments prefer what David Mendicoff calls “ad hoc accommodations” that promote informal regulation of abuses (Mendicoff 2012, 194). Using ad hoc measures allows GCC states to uphold their neoliberal policies, which promote a free market, while avoiding the obligation to implement regulatory mechanisms. This perpetuates the status of the migrant population as “temporary” instead of an integral part of their communities. Regulatory, legal enforcement would undermine the dynamic of temporality that the *kafala* system instills (Mendicoff 2012, 2014).

5.3 INTERNATIONAL LAW

Though the role of international law holds less authority than domestic law, it is still important to address the potential role that international law may serve in standardizing the treatment of migrant workers across the board. While international legal norms have no authority to prevent abuses on the domestic level, they are an important means of urging countries to adopt and uphold policies to protect the rights of migrants.

A number of international conventions and declarations set forth the rights of all human beings, regardless of state ratification. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights define the rights of all persons to be the right to life, liberty and security; the right not to be held in slavery or servitude; not to be subjected to torture, cruelty, or inhumane treatment; the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile; the freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state; and the right to work, free choice of employment and just working conditions (Martin 2012, 218-9).

The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families reestablishes these basic human rights previously set forth, but now in a context specific to migrant workers (Martin 2012, 219). The Convention aims to protect workers from torture, inhuman treatment and punishment, forced or compulsory labor, attacks on honor or reputation, unhealthy working conditions, unequal treatment between migrants and nationals, among others (Martin 2012, 220). The GCC states are clearly in violation of many components of this Convention. However, the Convention is only ratified by a little more than 40 states, which doesn’t include any of the six GCC countries.

Though it appears that governments are willing to talk about international migration, it is apparent that there are no genuine efforts to improve migration policy. Susan Martin suggests that the most effective way of altering migration policy on the international level would be through coordination between destination and sending countries (Martin 2012, 221). If the effort becomes bilateral, workers’ rights have the greatest chance of protection.

Further, GCC states should work towards ratifying international declarations and conventions that provide a standard for the treatment of immigrants and migrant laborers. These are pre-packaged policies that have great potential to benefit GCC states if adopted and implemented.

5.4 ASIAN EMIGRATION POLICIES

Another mechanism that perpetuates the flow of Asian migrants to Gulf countries is Asian emigration policies. If any actor was to advocate for the protection of the rights of migrant workers in the Gulf, it would seem that it should be the sending countries. However, because the majority of immigrant-sending countries are dependent on remittance flows from the Gulf, they create policies that promote outward flows of migration.

When examining emigration policy, India is a quintessential example for many reasons. Indians make up the largest foreign population group in many GCC countries, and it is one of the largest contributors to the global stock of migrants. Supporting a surplus labor population, India is more reliant on remittance inflows than ever. Money flowing from workers in the Gulf makes up a large part of the GDP in some Indian states such as Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (Vora 2013, 27). Because of this reliance, India has crafted emigration policies that make the process of travelling abroad and remitting money back to India much easier.

The Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973 was created with the purpose of increasing the flow of remittances from the Gulf to India. The classification of Nonresident Indian (NRI) was added to categories of Indian residents with the purpose of including migrant workers in Indian society and allowing them to continue reaping economic benefits without actually living in India (Vora 2013, 27). NRIs can still contribute to India's economy through remittances without receiving the political benefits that an Indian citizen would receive.

In 1999, a new policy created another category for Indians residing outside of the country called the Person of Indian Origin (PIO). This policy distributed cards to Indians living abroad with foreign passports in an attempt to include them in India's economy (Vora 2013, 27). Today, India is exploring dual-citizenship models that would allow Indians who are living and working abroad to remain a part of India's society (Vora 2013, 25). This psychologically promotes feelings of inclusion and instills an attachment to the home country, which in turn encourages participation, namely economic participation, in society.

Another country that embraces and supports the emigration of their population is the Philippines. Because of the lack of local employment and job opportunity, the Philippines recognizes the importance of sending the surplus labor supply abroad. In 1974, the Labor Code of the Philippines was created as a response to the lack of local employment opportunity and identified contract labor migration as a viable solution (Modarres 2010, 7). The Labor Code increased the level of foreign currency and expanded overseas opportunities. In 1982, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration was created to oversee the process of migration due to the sheer number of Filipinos seeking employment abroad (Modarres 2010, 7).

These emigration policies certainly benefit countries who are significantly contributing to the stock of international migrants economically. However, the desperation for remittances clouds the priorities in crafting emigration legislation. Countries such as India and the Philippines continue to promote emigration due to a significant labor surplus, which indirectly contributes to the abuse of migrant workers abroad. Asian policies that aim to maintain economic integration of emigrants legitimize the impermanence of migrants in destination countries and its ramifications that the *kafala*

system produces. In addition, focusing on sending surplus populations abroad, local governments should ensure that the rights of their citizens are upheld in destination countries.

5.5 SOCIAL AND SPATIAL SEGREGATION OF MIGRANTS FROM SOCIETY

So far I have discussed legal mechanisms that promote and perpetuate the ill treatment of migrant workers living in GCC countries. The *kafala* system allows GCC countries to perpetuate the inhumane treatment through ignorance and through locating the management of migrant laborers at the level of the employer instead of the state. Immigrant-sending countries contribute to this perpetuation through the promotion of mass emigration of the local population and supporting the pursuit of seeking work abroad in order to create an employment equilibrium in their own countries. Immigrant-sending countries also do little to promote dialogue with destination countries.¹⁵ Finally, international legal instruments aim to standardize the rights that migrants receive on a global scale, which would in effect tame the harsh treatment with which migrant laborers are met in the Gulf. Though these efforts on the international level are genuine and provide a framework for change, they hold no legal authority on the domestic level and are therefore often ignored by GCC countries.

Beyond the legal mechanisms that allow for and promote negative terms of migration to Gulf countries, there are also inherent social and spatial structures present in Gulf societies that further contribute to the marginalization of migrant laborers.

5.5.1 The Welfare State and the Benefits of Citizenship

Revenues resulting from the oil boom in the Gulf not only provided the financial resources to implement expansive development plans, but have also allowed GCC governments to provide extensive benefits to its citizens. The welfare state present in all GCC countries instills a mentality of racism, classism, and superiority on the individual level. The root of this phenomenon is located on the level of the state, as they are generating welfare benefits that are transferred to national citizens. However, the effects that the welfare state has on the society are produced by the nationals themselves.

The government begins this process of discrimination by creating rigid boundaries and classifications between citizens and non-citizens; nationals and non-nationals; Western expatriates and Asian and African migrant laborers. By instituting these distinct categories that are based on race and nationality, the government contributes to a racist and classist populace. The state situates citizens in a superior position by providing housing, health care, a guaranteed income regardless of employment, and education at all levels (Vora 2013, 10). The wage disparity based on nationality discussed above is another mechanism used by governments and companies that transmits a racist mentality to the mindset of the population.

The lack of rights and benefits for non-citizens in GCC countries creates a visible dichotomy in Gulf society, which allows the citizenry to develop a superior mentality. This superior mentality can be argued to be one of the causes of the social marginalization of migrant laborers. Migrants are thought of as a populace on the periphery of society, education, wealth, and as an inferior group as a whole. I argue that this attitude is a direct result of the rigid class system based on nationality that the welfare state produces and perpetuates through the exploitation of the labor population.

¹⁵ The same can be said for immigrant-receiving countries.

5.5.2 Wasta

Another mechanism contributing to the citizen-noncitizen dichotomy is a social structure called *wasta*. *Wasta* is an Arabic word literally meaning connection, but can be best described in its colloquial use as “social capital” (Gardner 2010, 154). Bourdieu describes social capital as “the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition,” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). The phenomenon is best described by one of Andrew Gardner’s informants:

Wasta is a way to get there. When I say that I have a wasta in the Traffic Directorate, it means that I’ve got somebody there who can help me cut through the red tape. They can take care of my problem.... ‘with wasta you can do anything.’ ‘You better get wasta’ is a very common clause in speech. If you have wasta, you can get it done in a day. It means you can get it done if you have a way – an intermediary way, to get in, or someone inside the system. People even talk about Vitamin W – that’s wasta.

It does not take long to recognize the importance of having *wasta* in the Gulf. If you don’t have special connections when trying to get something done, especially with the government, the task immediately turns into a significant obstacle when the same problem would be simply a speed bump for a national.

Wasta is generally reserved for Gulf nationals, and at best, other Arab migrants. *Wasta* is obtained through familial, tribal, and sectarian affiliation, meaning that foreigners inevitably lack this important connection to mobilize their positions in society (Gardner 2010, 155). By using special connections to get things done, national citizens profit both economically and socially. Because *wasta* is distinctly held by nationals, they are inherently situated in an exceptionally high rung in society, contributing to the superior mentality of nationals. The system of *wasta*, whose benefits are exclusive to citizens, makes migrants conscious of their subordinate role in society, creating a more rigid class system based on nationality and race, which results in a mentality of exclusion and separation for migrants and non-citizens.

5.5.3 Spatiality and Geography

The final method of constructing a psychological dynamic of separation between citizens and non-citizens is through the physical exclusion of migrants from the city. The contemporary infrastructure of Gulf cities is a result of the shift throughout the period of rapid influx of oil wealth. This shift relocated the centers of Gulf cities from areas based on mercantilism and regional trade to areas based on tourism and international trade. This shift left migrant laborers, particularly in the services sector, behind in less developed niches of the city.

The geographical shift to new central areas of the city left migrant laborers on the physical periphery of Gulf cities. As oil revenue provided the resources necessary for GCC states to modernize and develop, Gulf cities simultaneously became more expensive places to live. This was not a problem for nationals as they received increasing benefits, but the hike in the cost of living in central areas pushed the lower rungs of society to the edges of the cities where the cost of living was affordable.

Today, homogenous neighborhoods in Gulf cities serve as testimony to the socially institutionalized dynamic of separation that both the state and its citizens have created. For example, in the heart of Dubai, you will find neighborhoods of Emirati families and areas populated with Western and Arab expatriates, which are off limits to laborers (Bristol-Rhys 2012, 79). In these areas of the city, the only time you may see an Asian or African migrant will be if they are working in the malls, driving taxis, or perfecting the landscapes that line the roads. If you travel to the edge of the Dubai, you will find less developed neighborhoods which house less fortunate Arab and other migrant families. Once you leave Dubai and enter into neighboring Emirates, here you will find many neighborhoods for migrant

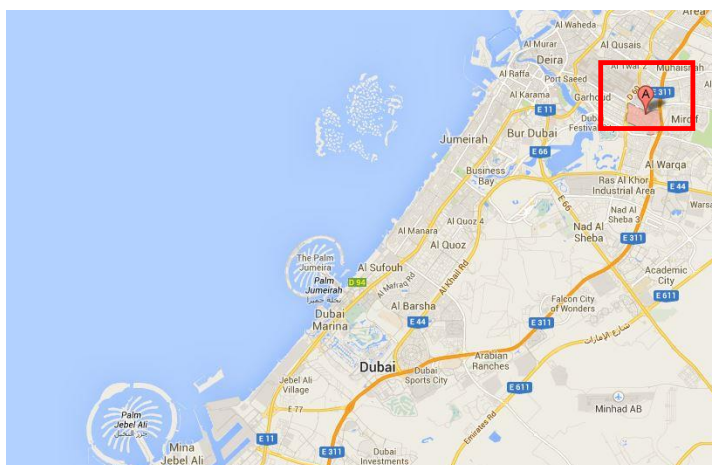


workers and families. In Sharjah, the Emirate neighboring Dubai to the north, I saw many classified advertisements for apartments searching for a tenant of a specific nationality. For example, I saw many signs reading “Apartment available for Indian tenant.” As you will see in the pictures below, the quality of life diminishes the further away you go from the heart of the city.



Heart of the City

1. Jumeirah, travelsmadness.com
2. Dubai Marina, Time Out Dubai
3. Dubai Marina, [Sara Hamza](#)



***Periphery of the City:** both pictures taken in Al Rashidiya, an area at the Northern border of Dubai. Photos taken by Sara Hamza*



Neighboring Emirates: 1. Ras Al Khaimah, far northern Emirate of the UAE. In the neighborhood of Aj Jazirah Al Hamra, an old coastal town with a number of development projects underway; 2. Dirt Streets of Sharjah, the Emirate north of Dubai. Photos taken by Sara Hamza

Free Trade Zones also serve as a mechanism that produces a segregated society based on nationality. Free Trade Zones are exceptional areas where businesses and companies are not required to meet the requirements that are compulsory throughout the rest of the city (Gardner 2010, 140). In these areas, companies are not required to be owned by nationals, so by nature they attract foreigners. Though these areas provide a haven where foreigners can feel a sense of belonging, the irony is that these areas also generate feelings of exclusion through constructing physical areas exclusive to foreign business investors.

Rapid development and modernization has resulted in a geographical hierarchy with the center of the city at the top of the pyramid and the peripheral areas at the bottom. The “out of sight, out of mind” mentality and the drastic hike in rents as a result of modernization and development has created a spatial structure that places migrant laborers and labor camps on the very edge of the city.¹⁶

By placing labor camps on the periphery of the city, workers are both spatially and socially insulated from society. The geographical separation is more obvious than the social segregation that laborers experience. By placing labor camps on the outskirts of the city, it makes it nearly impossible for laborers to interact with the rest of society. These areas are generally not served by public transportation, and taxi fares from these areas to the city are extremely high (Gardner 2010, 66). Even if the workers could afford the taxi fare, their long and arduous work days and little time off provides another obstacle for workers to venture to the city. Because of the exhausting nature of their work,

¹⁶ Refer to the map of major labor camps in Dubai.

laborers tend to find small tea shops in close proximity to their camps to spend their down time (Gardner 2010, 66).

Social exclusion experienced by laborers is a bit harder to explain than physical exclusion and relies on testimony from the laborers themselves. Through interviews conducted by Bristol-Rhys, she found that workers understand and perceive the geographical separation as a method of institutionalizing social exclusion. Though the physical marginalization of migrant laborers makes it difficult for them to interact with the rest of society on a practical level, there are also unspoken barriers of where workers can and cannot go (Bristol-Rhys 2012, 77). For example, the laborers are systematically excluded from areas such as malls because they are generally too expensive “to even purchase a cup of tea,” (Bristol-Rhys 2010, 77). However, laborers are also socially excluded as they avoid these areas out of a fear of harassment by security guards. Mall security guards reported that they were instructed to prevent laborers from entering because “they would just sit on benches and stare at women,” (Bristol-Rhys 2012, 30). This generalization of the migrant labor population made by locals and Westerners has produced a social monopoly over certain spatial areas of the city.

There are even socially-constructed barriers that exclude laborers from public areas. When asked if the workers walked down to the Corniche to sit in the parks, one worker responded,

No, no, that is too far and it is also too difficult! The police watch you very closely down there, we have been told, because they don't want all of the men from the camps crowding the area. We were told by our company that we should not go there at all (Bristol-Rhys 2012, 77).

When Bristol-Rhys asked why the workers felt uncomfortable going to these parks and other public places, she found that the workers did not understand the concept of *public*. When she explained that this meant that they are open to *all* of the people in the city, the worker responded, “No, Madam, no, this is not the case because we are not people of the city, we live in the labor camp and are not public,” (Bristol-Rhys 2012, 77).

The language barrier presents another obstacle to inclusion for migrant laborers. Companies systematically hire people from different areas in Asia so that they have less in common both culturally and linguistically (Gardner 2010, 63). India, for example, is home to hundreds of dialects which can even vary within the same state. The differences in language both between the laborers and with the local population present a significant barrier to societal immersion.

It is important to note that the migrant population in the Gulf is extremely diverse. It consists mostly of South Asians and other Arab migrants, and smaller minority groups include Western Europeans and Africans. Religion adds yet another layer of variation within the migrant population. Religion differs across nationality lines, but also within the same nationality group. India provides another great example as the Indian diaspora in the Gulf consists of both Muslims and Hindus. Vora points out that Hindu and Muslim Indians in Dubai felt a sense of both solidarity and difference with one another. Muslim Hindus feel a sense of belonging to the *ummah*, or the global community of Muslims, which generates ideological similarities with the Islamic state of the UAE. Hindus and Christians often perceived Muslims from South Asia as having an advantaged position in society due to religion, and that they found more success in assimilating with Emiratis. However, Muslim Indians do not perceive their religion as benefiting them in more ways than their Christian and Hindu counterparts (Vora 2013, 83). Variation in language, religion, and nationality have all worked to create cleavages not only with locals,

but also within the migrant population itself. This heterogeneous population prevents societal immersion and also presents a barrier of unification of the migrant population. A disengaged migrant population allows GCC states to exploit workers with ease.

The testimony from the workers interviewed by Bristol-Rhys proves that the exclusive nature of society in the Gulf has produced a mentality of segregation and separation. In addition to the state of impermanence that the *kafala* system institutes, systematic separation created by the state through free trade zones, exclusive neighborhoods dedicated to certain nationalities, and extremely high rents in the heart of the city have also resulted in socially constructed and spatial boundaries. Variation within the migrant population has further contributed to cleavages both within the group and with the local population. This has ultimately perpetuated the lack of efficacy in ameliorating the appalling effects of the *kafala* system. Laborers are conscious of their role in Gulf societies, and discriminatory policies and rules have shaped the superior mentality of nationals and the inferior mindsets of migrant laborers.

6 CASE STUDY: DUBAI

Dubai, one of the seven Emirates in the UAE, provides a perfect case study of a Gulf city that developed at light speed. Located on the shores of the Persian Gulf, the city of Dubai has become infamous for its iconic, ultramodern architecture, manmade islands, and its futuristic atmosphere. The discovery of oil is often seen as the distinct catalyst that carried Dubai from its mercantilist history to its new role as a global player in the realm of tourism, finance, and real estate. However, the lived experiences during the periods of rapid transformation are often left out of modernization narratives of Gulf societies. Though discovery of oil certainly played an important role in the rapid transformation of Dubai from a regional port city to a globally important trading center, the role that various sub-groups and migrant populations played in this transformation are integral to Dubai's iconic presence in contemporary landscapes.

Dubai is known for its luxury and extravagance, but you do not have to travel far to find contrasting lifestyles. When one thinks of expatriates, there is common image of Westerners seeking tax-free work. The reality is that the majority of expatriates are Arab immigrants and, in greater numbers, migrant workers from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. They provide the backbone of society and labor to provide the Gulf with its iconic infrastructure.

Dubai serves as a quintessential example of a developed Gulf city, while at the same time constructs itself as a distinctly different place than anywhere else in the world. Dubai is a city of dualities and divides, and is home to many political, social, and spatial boundaries and dichotomies. All of the legal and social mechanisms discussed in the previous sections have played out in a way that has created rigid boundaries between different social classes, races, nationalities, and religions. These dichotomies between various populations in Dubai are perpetuated by the government through rigid distinctions between citizens and residents, nationals and non-nationals, locals and expatriates, as well as temporary workers largely from South Asia and Western migrants. These distinctions used in political discourse trickle down to every level of society. Because the government makes distinctions between different nationalities and legal statuses, the citizenry follows suit and uses these same distinctions in commercial enterprise, in the media, and in daily life. This dynamic of exclusivity and separation in Dubai

then trickles down to the migrants themselves, perpetuating feelings of inferiority, unimportance, and exclusion.

Though the contemporary condition of groups insulated by nationalities and social status is a result of deep-seated and long standing histories of exclusion, Indians and other Asian populations have longstanding ties to the Gulf. Though the *kafala* system excludes these populations through denying them any form of legal belonging, they have played an integral role in the development of the city throughout the 20th century. Because they cannot enjoy any form of legal belonging to the Emirati nation, but simultaneously serve an integral role in the operation of governance, to national identity and citizenship, and to the functioning of Dubai's global market, Neha Vora describes the Indian diaspora in Dubai as a group of "impossible citizens" (Vora 2013, 3).

Today, nationals have become a minority group in the Emirates. According to government statistics from 2011, foreigners make up more than 88.5% of the population in the Emirates, and more than 90% in the Emirate of Dubai (Human Rights Watch 2014). This group is largely made up of low paid migrant workers from South Asia, who provide the foundation of the country's workforce. 95% of the workforce in the United Arab Emirates consists of foreigners (Human Rights Watch 2006, 7). It is estimated that by 2020, Emirati citizens will account for less than four percent of the total workforce in the UAE (Janardhan 2011, 98).

6.1 HISTORY

Though Dubai's period of development and modernization was extremely rapid, the lived experiences during this period are crucial to contextualizing the narrative of Dubai's history. The discovery of oil and the rapid influx of revenues to Gulf monarchies and nationals have provided the financial resources necessary for modernization. However, the hands that physically built the iconic infrastructure of Dubai and provided the necessary manpower are often excluded from the story of modernization. Throughout the 20th century, the migrant populations that played an integral role in the Dubai's development have been marginalized and excluded from the return on the city's profitable modernization efforts.

Prior to the discovery of oil, Dubai was known as the main trading center of the region (Ali 2010, 15). Traders and merchants from neighboring countries along the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean travelled to Dubai to participate in the trade of pearls and gold. In the early 20th century, the pearl and gold industry facilitated trade with India, Pakistan, and Persia, which formed the foundation of the relationships and the initial exchange of populations between these countries (Ali 2010, 15). During this time period, people were concentrated along the Dubai Creek due to its geographic importance for trade. This caused commercial and residential rents to increase, which essentially produced an area exclusive to upper-class individuals and families while simultaneously marginalizing those who were financially unable to survive in these areas (Ali 2010, 15). This pattern of the wealthy occupying and monopolizing the current city-center and simultaneously marginalizing the less fortunate segments of the population is a recurring theme throughout Dubai's history.

After roughly 20 years of economic depression due to the collapse of the pearl trade industry, Dubai finally saw an upsurge of commercial activity and trade with India and Pakistan in the 1950s (Ali 2010, 15). Because of Dubai's reliance on trade for economic prosperity, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al Maktoum refocused efforts on developing the city with the aim of boosting the economy (Ali 2010, 17).

Sheikh Rashid plan's included dredging the creek, which had become extremely silted in many crucial areas, the building of an international airport, and the construction of more ports (Ali 2010, 17-18). These projects required more manpower than Dubai could supply, which initiated the first influx of migrants to Dubai for the specific purpose of providing labor. Migrants during this period came from India, Pakistan, and Iran. In 1968, Dubai hosted a population of 65,000; twenty to twenty-five thousand of which were Iranian, 12,000 Pakistani, and around 8-10,000 were Indian (Ali 2010, 18). During this time, areas such as Karama and Satwa were intentionally built as areas of low income housing to house migrant workers. These areas are still known today as poor parts of the city. This was one of the initial acts of insulating migrant workers from the rest of society. In previous time periods, traders from South Asian countries were of a wealthier class than those who were now migrating to supply labor. Because of their economic class in previous eras, Indian and other Asian merchants lived among Gulf nationals and were easily assimilated and included in Gulf society.

Around the time of initial development efforts, oil was discovered in Dubai in 1966 (Ali 2010, 26). Oil revenues were not the sole cause of development in Dubai as development projects were already underway; however, the rapid influx of profit provided the necessary resources for the Dubai government to continue these projects at a breakneck speed. Oil revenue not only benefitted the state, but it allowed the Dubai citizenry to experience new, luxurious existences, which starkly contrasted with previous Bedouin lifestyles (Ali 2010, 27).

6.1.1 Welfare Programs

By the early 1980s, the government experienced enough oil revenue to begin providing welfare programs to its citizens. These programs have developed over time and continue to provide significant benefits to the Dubai citizenry. Some of the benefits include schooling up to the PhD level anywhere in the world, free plots of land, interest-free loans to build a house, and payments to nationals to marry other nationals. The government provides well-paying jobs to its nationals, which often require little work, subsidized housing for low income nationals, and generous charities to nationals who cannot work (Ali 2010, 176-77).

Welfare programs have contributed to the rigid class boundaries in Dubai. Through providing generous benefits to citizens and denying non-nationals the same benefits, migrants are placed outside of the legal framework of the country. There are no processes of naturalization for migrants in place in the UAE, which not only excludes migrants from legal consideration, but the mentality of exclusion initiated on the level of the state transcends to the mindset of Dubai's population.

The welfare state that has developed in the United Arab Emirates has created a consumer culture among Emirati nationals, which has produced and perpetuated a status quo where locals act as consumers and migrants as producers (Ali 2010, 28). The welfare state has fostered a superior mindset among nationals, which ultimately causes locals to rely on migrants to supply the manpower for the menial jobs which they view as inferior. Because these jobs, such as those in the construction sector, are necessary to support the consumer culture in Dubai, Emiratis remain reliant on an imported labor supply.

The consumer culture in Dubai can be seen in the centrality and importance of malls, night clubs, fine dining, and luxury hotels (Ali 2010, 9). Malls serve many functions in Gulf society. They serve as meeting grounds, as an escape from the year-round heat, as ostentatious displays of wealth and luxury, a tourist destination, and as a central hub of each Gulf city. In each Gulf city which I visited, the most

recommended tourist attractions were the grand mosque, the *souq* (market), and the mall. These recommendations highlight some of the most important aspects of society in Gulf cities: religion and shopping.

The consumer culture that has been made possible to Emirati citizens through the generous benefits of the welfare state have also simultaneously excluded migrants from the luxurious lifestyles that the consumer culture supports. In particular, migrant workers are systematically excluded from this lifestyle, as many Western expatriates already have the resources necessary to participate in similar patterns of consumption. Many of the mechanisms discussed above (such as low wages for migrant workers, exclusion from the welfare state, and geographical separation from the city) are employed in Dubai to socially exclude migrant workers from society.

6.1.2 Free Trade Zones

By the 1980s and 1990s, trade interests in Dubai had expanded. Previous development efforts initiated by Sheikh Rashid bin Al Maktoum paved the way for Dubai's emergence onto the global playing field. A component of these development efforts spurred by Dubai's neoliberal policies aiming to attract foreign investment was the creation of free trade zones scattered throughout the city. Jebel Ali, Dubai's first industrial free zone, opened in 1980 and was the first geographical area in the city that operated outside of the legal structure upheld throughout the rest of Dubai. Because the free zone was not required to abide by the rules and regulations set forth by the *kafala* system or the country's other laws which are rooted in Islamic principles, Jebel Ali offered 100 percent business ownership, no import duties, minimal capital requirement, and relaxed work visa regulations (Vora 2013, 46).

The first free trade zone located in Dubai's Jebel Ali port was extremely successful in attracting foreign investors and providing them with a way to actively contribute to the economy. This success initiated the development of a series of other free trade zones which all operated outside the parameters of the existing legal structure, each with a unique theme ranging from the service industry, to investment, to media cities (Vora 2013, 46). The relaxed regulations within these zones attract multinational companies and Western expatriates interested in business enterprise in Dubai's booming economy. Dubai's recent ascension as an important global player provided new frontiers for multinational companies interested in expanding their global influence.

While free trade zones in Dubai created a new way for foreigners to participate in the stimulation of the economy, they have simultaneously contributed to the hierarchy of the city where the employees of the service sector consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society. Those who supply the manpower for the service sector of the economy, which are primarily South Asian minority groups, are marginalized from society through exclusion from areas of the city which allow foreigners to profit from the booming economy. While free trade zones offer Western expatriates forms of economic inclusion, those in the service sector, who do not have the resources necessary to participate in business enterprise, are left on the periphery of the city geographically, economically, and socially.

This structure allows the government to administer different laws for different segments of the population. Nationals benefit from welfare assistance and profit from the policies of the *kafala* system. Western expatriates benefit from economic opportunities in free-trade zones and are free to operate outside of the parameters of the legal structure. On the other hand, migrant groups fall outside the parameters of any benefits or protection from the government which provide forms of inclusion and

belonging to the city, and are also kept in a perpetual state of inferiority by the rules of the *kafala* system. Dubai's neoliberal policies ensure economic success for nationals and Western expatriates while making it impossible for migrant laborers to profit from their work.

6.1.3 Tourism

Tradition and modernity in Dubai interact and blend with one another in a unique way that is hard to find elsewhere in the world. The city is full of paradoxes, dualities, and juxtapositions that speak to the simultaneous presence of innovation and tradition, globalization and localization, and modernity and antiquity. The tourism sector of Dubai's economy is an interesting illustration of how entities that are seemingly dichotomous interact and blend with one another.

The innovation of the free trade zones beginning in the 1980s initiated an influx of Westerners and Western-based companies to Dubai. Through the success of free trade zones, Dubai saw that it could benefit from the diversification of its economy and through opening up access to those beyond the region. Another mechanism of attracting foreigners to Dubai is through the development of the tourism industry. Tourism in Dubai has evolved as an artificially constructed industry through development efforts as Dubai has no natural attraction for tourists. There are no significant historical landmarks or environmental landscapes unique to the country. The lack of natural attraction combined with the unbearable heat does not place Dubai on the top of the list of travel destinations. In order to attract travelers, Dubai has had to construct and create attractions. The list of these attractions grew rapidly throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and today all the marvels of Dubai combined together have worked to craft a uniquely iconic city that tops lists of places to visit.

Before the innovation of the free trade zone and the emergence of the tourism industry in Dubai, Westerners had little reason to travel to the United Arab Emirates. As Dubai erected unique and interesting attractions and as the tourism sector developed, more and more Westerners began travelling to Dubai. By the late 1990s, 200,000 British tourists were travelling to Dubai annually. During the early 2000s, wealthy South Asians and other Gulf Arabs were travelling in significant numbers to the country (Ali 2010, 25-6).

However, the development of the tourism industry did not come easily. Because there is nothing organic about the tourist attractions in Dubai, the development required significant financial investment, time, and labor. Dubai had the homegrown resources to supply the financial investment from oil wealth; however, Dubai could not supply its own labor for these expansive development projects (Ali 2010, 6). Dubai transformed its landscape from sprawling stretches of desert to a cosmopolitan city within a matter of decades. During the 1960s, Dubai was still a stretch of desert and was still home to Bedouins living in palm frond huts. The United Arab Emirates gained independence in 1971, and by this time much of Dubai's population was sedentary living in housing blocks. By the 1980s, the United Arab Emirates had developed and profited enough from oil to begin providing welfare benefits to its citizens (Ali 2010, 27). Within two decades, the citizenry of the country saw a dramatic shift from a truly traditional way of life to new lifestyles which supported and consumerism. As of 2010, the tourism industry accounted for 30% of Dubai's GDP, and Dubai received roughly 7 million tourists each year (Ali 2010, 43).

During this period of development, projects to support the tourism industry took priority. Beginning with Sheikh Rashid's dredging of the Dubai Creek, the focus had become creating effective

and reliable ways for foreigners to easily travel through the city (Ali 2010, 6). After the dredging of the Creek, two massive ports were constructed, and the development of an immense international airport was initiated (Ali 2010, 6). Today, the Dubai International Airport is central to the country's importance in the global sphere. The airport serves as a link between Europe and South Asia to the Middle East and Africa (Ali 2010, 6). The International Airport was the seventh most travelled airport in the world in 2013, and had the highest growth rate among the top ten most travelled airports (15.2% growth from 2012). Further, the Dubai International Airport ranked fifth in the world based on revenue freight plus mail (The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey 2013, 58).

The development of Dubai's International Airport goes hand-in-hand with the business enterprise of the Emirates Airline. Emirates Airline was launched in 1985, and has since been notorious for its luxurious flights (Ali 2010, 21). Dubai's flagship airline allows the country to further profit from flights to and from its international airport, and serves as an example of the luxury that Dubai has to offer throughout the world. The airline's expansion to new cities has grown steadily since its inception, and this growth mirrors the increasing role of Dubai as both a tourist destination and a central hub linking Europe with the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.

The international airport and Emirates Airline provided the necessary foundations on which the tourism industry could grow. In the words of Sayed Ali, the tourism industry is built upon the two pillars of shopping and hedonism (Ali 2010, 43). The development of the city as a global shopping center was also central in crafting Dubai as a travel destination (Ali 2010, 43). It does not take much time in the country to recognize the importance and centrality of shopping in society. Malls serve a social importance in Gulf society, extending beyond their basic function of providing a place to consume goods. Dubai has worked to cultivate the centrality of shopping in society, and shopping and consumerism have therefore become significant aspects of culture in Dubai and across the Gulf.

Today, Dubai is home to over forty malls, many of which have a unique theme that differentiates them from any other shopping center (Ali 2010, 44). The Dubai Mall is the biggest in the world, the Mall of the Emirates has an indoor ski slope, and Mercato Mall is designed to look like a Venetian city. In 1996, the Dubai government established the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), an extravagant shopping and entertainment event which features coordinated shopping sales across the city, discounts, and no sales tax. The Festival not only encourages consumerism among the local population, but also attracts tourists from around the world. The Festival drew 1.6 million visitors in its first year, and has continued to attract tourists since (Ali 2010, 23). The Festival is a brilliant marketing strategy that promotes consumption among locals and attracts tourists, which ultimately achieves the goal of stimulating the economy.

Another man-made attraction in Dubai has been the plethora of luxurious nightclubs, hotels and fine dining restaurants. Nearly all of the hotels constructed in the recent past are four and five star hotels, setting a precedent for the luxury which Dubai has to offer. Topping the list of these luxury hotels is the Burj al-Arab, the sail-shaped hotel built on an artificial island in 1999 (Ali 2010, 52). The hotel is often called the "only seven star hotel" in the world, though the technicalities of the star rating are disputed. Rooms begin at \$1,000 a night, which reserves the space for the extremely wealthy and famous passing through Dubai. The hotel serves as one of the most iconic structures in the Dubai skyline, and though the quality of the hotel exceeds the means of the average person, the sail-shaped silhouette in the sky means something to everyone in Dubai. The hotel is rumored to lose money due staggering

prices, however the value of the hotel is in its ability to brand Dubai as a luxurious travel destination (Ali 2010, 52).

The unparalleled nightlife serves the same purpose as the luxurious hotels in Dubai. As one club owner put it, “We’re like the Miami of the Middle East. It’s all about showing up in the best car, getting the best table and sharing the biggest bottle of Cristal with the best-looking girls,” (Ali 2010, 45-6). The unique clubbing experience in Dubai is supported by the wide range of themes and locations. The nightlife in Dubai will never leave you bored; from the circus themed nightclub, to the dance club on the beach, to the exclusive pyramid-shaped club atop a high-rise tower, the nightlife experience in Dubai is truly unique.

Though not everyone in Dubai consumes the services of the ultra-luxurious hotels and restaurants, they still play a significant role and create the ability to say “Dubai has the only seven star hotel in the world,” or “Dubai has the tallest building in the world.” The overarching strategy used to market Dubai as a top travel destination has been to create the biggest, the best, and to set records signaling luxury throughout the world. Through creating a luxurious haven contrasting with the rest of the Middle East, Dubai has achieved its goal of attracting Western tourists and professional expatriates. Sayed Ali argues that without the nightlife scene geared toward a Western audience, it would have been unlikely that so many Westerners would have travelled to Dubai in the first place because of the strict laws based on Islamic principles throughout the country (Ali 2010, 45).¹⁷

6.1.4 Development, Construction Boom and its Effects on Migrant Labor

The last section gives an idea of just how rapid, systematic, and expansive Dubai’s development efforts were. Within a matter of decades, Dubai emerged from a sprawling stretch of desert to a cosmopolitan city featuring some of the most distinct structures in the world. Today, Dubai is home to the tallest building in the world, the biggest mall, two sets of man-made islands shaped like palm trees, an artificial archipelago resembling the world map, one of the most travelled airports, and the only seven star hotel in the world.¹⁸

This same development trajectory has taken centuries for other countries to achieve. It is clear that oil wealth has assisted in this speed of light expansion, however Dubai does not have the homegrown resources to support this growth without the help from its neighboring countries. Though the government provided the financial resources necessary for these development projects, Dubai has historically hosted a small population size, which has produced a labor deficit. Because neighboring countries such as India and the Philippines have the opposite problem of hosting a labor surplus, the countries create a compatible conduit of labor migration.

Within two years after the discovery of oil, Emirati national citizens in Dubai were already slightly in the minority (Ali 2010, 26). Indians have made up the largest national group in Dubai since the beginning of the development era. Though Indians were present in Dubai as merchants before the 20th century, Dubai’s demand for labor significantly increased the density of the India-UAE migration conduit. By the 1970s, Indians accounted for the third largest group in the UAE, with a population of 102,000 of a

¹⁷ It is important to note that Islam bans the consumption of alcohol. Though it is not rare to find a Muslim enjoying the nightlife scene, the comprehensive effort to create an established club scene in Dubai was geared exclusively toward Westerners.

¹⁸ Again, this accolade is rooted in hearsay.

total 656,000 population (Ali 2010, 28). Today, Indians account for almost 40 percent of the population of Dubai (Ali 2010, 29).

Development efforts and the demand for import labor created a massive construction boom in Dubai. During the early 2000s, the construction sector was a leading contributor to the economic growth of the country (Human Rights Watch 2006). Between 2000 and 2004, the construction sector's contribution to GDP grew by 23%, with an annual growth rate of 5%.

Today, construction workers account for one-fourth of the population of Dubai and experience many of the injustices discussed in the "Treatment of Workers" section (Ali 2010, 83). They are paid extremely low wages that are often withheld, their passports are confiscated, they arrive to the country with preexisting debt to recruitment agencies, they are forced to live in unsanitary labor camps located on the periphery of the city, labor unions are prohibited, and the workers suffer financial and health ramifications due to the cyclical nature of labor migration that the *kafala* system instills. In the next section, I will discuss how these injustices play out on the ground in Dubai with the example of the construction of the Burj Khalifa.

6.2 SPOTLIGHT ON THE BURJ KHALIFA

Emaar, one of the largest real estate companies in Dubai, announced in 2003 its plan to construct the tallest building in the world. By 2004, construction of what was then called the Burj Dubai began in the heart of the city at a staggering pace. However, the needle-shaped building dominating Dubai's skyline was not finished until 2010 due to the economic crisis that struck in 2009 (Malik 2011).

The plan to build the tallest building in the world was not an absurd proposal. In fact, the project fit in quite neatly with other development plans in Dubai. At the same time, extravagant plans to build Palm Jumeirah, Dubai World, and Dubailand were already underway.¹⁹ The proposal and execution of these projects all contributed to the construction boom in the early 2000s, and ultimately placed a great demand for an import labor supply.

The Burj Khalifa serves a greater purpose than standing as the tallest building in the world. The building is symbolic of Dubai's emerging prowess in the world on many different levels. The official website of the Burj Khalifa states:

[The Burj Khalifa is] more than just the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa is an unprecedented example of international cooperation, symbolic beacon of progress, and an emblem of the new, dynamic and prosperous Middle East. It is tangible proof of Dubai's growing role in a changing world. In fewer than 30 years, this city has transformed itself from a regional centre to a global one. This success was not based on oil reserves, but on reserves of human talent, ingenuity and initiative. Burj Khalifa embodies that vision (Emaar Properties PJSC)

However, behind the façade of the symbolic presence of the Burj Khalifa exists the lives of an overlooked sub-population. The Burj Khalifa aims to represent luxury, cosmopolitanism, and modernism. However, the story of its construction represents capitalism at its finest, exploitation of an import labor population, and the deep-seated racist mindset that is ever-present in Dubai. Luxury in Dubai has come at the expense of the lives of migrant laborers who go to great extents to send money home to their

¹⁹ Some of these projects would never come to fruition due to the economic crisis in 2009.

families. In the process, migrant laborers fall in the trap of the *kafala* system, which keeps them in a perpetual state of debt, marginalization, and inferiority in Emirati society.

6.2.1 Construction

The construction of the Burj Khalifa was truly an international collaboration, with 60 contracting and consulting companies and over 12,000 workers representing more than 100 nationalities (Construction Week 2010). At the time of its completion, 22 million man hours were expended on the construction of the building (Construction Week 2010). Arabtec, the largest construction company in the UAE, was one of the three main contractors of the project. Though there is not much information about the treatment of laborers exclusively at the site of the Burj Khalifa, we can infer the treatment and living conditions of these workers from BBC's Panorama report in April 2009. As discussed in an earlier section, the program exposed the failure of Arabtec to provide sanitary living conditions for its 60,000 workers. Heaps of feces were piled in the toilets, and raw sewage had leaked all over the camp (Ali 2010, 92).

Not only were workers forced to live in unsanitary conditions, but they were also forced worked an extraordinary amount for unlivable wages. The average worker at the Burj Khalifa site toiled 12 hours each day, 6 days a week, for \$4 per day (Migrant Rights 2010). While UAE Labor Law requires all workers to take a break between 12:30 and 3:00 PM due to the merciless heat, many testimonials claim that workers were not always given this break. At the end of each day, workers were loaded onto busses that would transport them back to the labor camps.

6.2.2 Protests and Riots

Low wages, the perilous working environment, and living conditions for construction workers at the Burj Khalifa created high tensions between the workers and their companies. Throughout the duration of the construction, worker grievances culminated in a number of riots and strikes in an attempt to voice discontent with the inhuman condition in which they were living. Discontent at this major construction site echoed throughout the city and encouraged a number of protests at other sites.

Between May and December of 2005, the UAE government reports that at least eight major strikes took place in Dubai (Human Rights Watch 2006, 24). In September 2005, around 1,000 workers from Al Hamed Development and Construction banded together and blocked Dubai's main highway in protest of their unpaid wages.²⁰ If you have ever been on Sheikh Zayed Road, the longest highway in the Emirates stretching from Abu Dhabi to the Northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, you know that there doesn't need to be a human blockage for chaos to ensue. During peak hours, the highway becomes so congested naturally that a twenty minute commute can turn into a journey lasting over an hour. Needless to say, a human blockage of the road served as an effective cry for help, and the faces that usually remained on the sidelines were now on center stage.

As a response to this protest, Minister of Labor Ali bin Abdullah Al Kaabi stepped in and demanded that Al Hamed pay the delayed wages "within the next 24 hours" (Human Rights Watch 2006, 31). The local media depicted this action as Dubai's commitment to upholding the country's labor laws. However, testimony of how the aftermath of the strike played out tells a different story. As discussed above, a Pakistani worker told Human Rights Watch that only two of the four months of delayed wages were paid, and another month of wages were withheld since the protest. The government didn't fine

²⁰ Al Hamed Development and Construction is one of the leading local construction companies in the UAE.

the company even though withholding wages is illegal in the UAE, and the government didn't follow up after demanding that the wages be paid. Further, the leaders of the strike were deported to their home countries (Human Rights Watch 2006, 31).

Though the UAE prohibits unions and strikes, the construction workers must determine the cost of remaining silent. The Al Hamed Pakistani worker told Human Rights Watch: "Among ourselves, we argued that either we will get deported because of our strike action or it will result in recovering our unpaid wages. We didn't have a choice; we were willing to risk it," (Human Rights Watch 2006, 31).

By March 2006, conditions for workers at the Burj Khalifa in a large scale protest at the construction site. In accordance with previous protests, the discontent voiced in 2006 cited inhumane working and living conditions and low wages (Human Rights Watch 2006, 37).

On March 21, 2006, workers had been waiting for their bus to transport them back to their camps as they did every day. After the busses were delayed for several hours, the aggravation quickly escalated to a violent protest. Nearly 2,500 workers rioted that day, and after hours of waiting to be taken home some of the protesters began assaulting security officers, breaking into offices, smashing computers, and destroying cars and construction machines (Whitaker 2006). An Indian worker present at the protests told Human Rights Watch:

On March 21, it was mostly the new workers who rioted. They were stressed because after we finish our shift, it takes over an hour to punch out. On that day, the busses were delayed for hours. The workers started to complain. The company's security forces started to harass them and abuse them verbally. This provoked the rioting. The new workers were demanding pay raises (Human Rights Watch 2006, 37).

In May 2006, workers employed by Besix, one of the three main contractors for the construction of the Burj Khalifa, staged a strike calling for better wages. On May 16th, Over 8,000 workers refused to work until their demands were met. In response to the protest, the government deported 50 Besix workers who refused to return to work (Human Rights Watch 2006, 38).

Another unconventional but certainly bold form of protest in Dubai has been suicide. In 2011, an Indian cleaner jumped from the heights of the Burj Khalifa 10 months after its opening after being denied his promised holiday time (Malik 2011). The Indian worker could have taken his life in a number of ways, but choosing to jump from Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa was a deliberate act of protest. Suicide in this case serves the dual purpose of escaping the harsh reality for the Indian worker and bringing the issue to the forefront of national and international dialogue. The story gained a significant amount of media coverage, attention that likely would not have followed if the worker had committed suicide elsewhere.

In the aftermath of the Burj Khalifa suicide, the Indian consulate in Dubai revealed that at least two Indians in Dubai commit suicide each week (Malik 2011). In 2005 alone, 84 Indian nationals committed suicide (Human Rights Watch 2006, 44). Human Rights Watch detailed the suicides of two other Indians in Dubai, both with similar discontents. Julfikar Korani hung himself in the bathroom of Dubai's largest labor camp, Sonapar (Human Rights Watch 2006, 46). Julfikar's monthly wage was \$190 per month, and records showed that he was only paid for one of the six months that he had been working. Julfikar had taken a loan of \$2,000 to obtain a work visa, and was required to pay back \$140

per month (Human Rights Watch 2006, 46). Because Julfikar could not possibly pay this amount back and still have enough money to live, he was falling behind on his payments, placing a significant financial burden on his shoulders.

Dr. Shiv Prakash, a psychiatrist at the New Medical Center and Hospital in Dubai, commented on the recurrence of suicide among migrant laborers in *Construction Week*:

When these workers reach here they realize what they have gotten themselves into and see that they've lost everything, they react to it. They feel trapped as they know that they can't go back either. There's no escape. They know they are in a bonded type of situation and are reacting to what they think is the biggest mistake in their life, an irreparable loss. It is the reaction to this loss which can lead to suicidal contemplation (Human Rights Watch 2006, 47).

7 CONCLUSION

The *kafala* system is the obvious culprit of the complications involving labor migration in the GCC. It provides the foundations on which states can build to exploit this sub-population, which further produces other social mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization in society. While development and modernization are still largely characterized by the exploitation of the migrant population, there have been some reform movements since the turn of the 21st century. Because of the authoritative nature of GCC governments, many of these have been social movements which are often excluded from the political sphere. However, some GCC governments have made headway on ameliorating the negative consequences of the *kafala* system.

Bahrain has been the only country to do away with the *kafala* system entirely. In August 2009, the government decided that it wanted to take control of the regulation of the migrant labor population and eliminate the middleman required by the sponsorship system. In a bold public statement, the Minister of Labor compared the system to slavery (Janardhan 2011, 117). Though there are still remnants of the *kafala* system in Bahrain, this is a positive first step and sets a good example for other GCC countries.

GCC countries have also faced some pressure from immigrant-sending countries. In 2008, several Asian countries pressed the GCC to establish a minimum wage for its migrant labor population. However, the GCC ignored this proposal (Janardhan 2011, 120).

Other movements calling for migration reform in the Gulf have existed in the sphere of social media. Though they have few followers, several groups on Facebook have voiced concern about the migrant labor situation in the Gulf and call for reform. Some of these groups are titled "Minimum Wage for Dubai Construction Workers," "GCC Human Rights," and "Dubai's Dirty Little Secret."

Others include humanitarian groups and information clearinghouses. Helping Hands UAE is a secular humanitarian group that aims to help the most underprivileged and exploited segments of society. This group was founded by British expatriates, and works to supply food and clothing to laborers

in camps and to housemaids (Helping Hands UAE). The Migrant Rights website seeks to provide a reliable source of information about migrant workers in the Middle East. Through organizing campaigns and publishing op-eds, the group hopes to advance the rights of migrant workers and to break the silence surrounding the abuses of workers' basic human rights (Migrant Rights).

Finally, the governments themselves have responded to the abundance of complaints regarding the *kafala* system. In 2005, the Dubai Police established a Human Rights Department in an attempt to address labor disputes between employees and their employers. Once the worker files a complaint, the Department contacts the employer and mediates a joint meeting between the two parties. If no agreement is reached, the case is then referred to the Ministry of Labor. The Human Rights Department has been successful in collecting unpaid wages, however it has no binding legal powers to enforce its decisions. There is no guarantee that once the case is resolved by the Department that the employer will actually respond accordingly or pay full wages in the future (Human Rights Watch 2006, 54). The phenomenon is seen in the case of Al Hamed discussed above.

Later in 2005, the Government of Dubai also established a Permanent Committee on Labor Affairs (PCLA) to mediate labor disputes. Between March and December of 2005, 19,249 workers filed complaints, and the PCLA resolved nearly 20,000 cases of unpaid wages. Committee inspectors also visited 36 labor camps during this period, 75% of which were found to be well below government standards (Human Rights Watch 2006, 54).

While these new departments are steps in the right direction, they are what David Mendicoff calls "ad hoc accommodations," (Mendicoff 2012, 194). Governments prefer informal regulation that treats the problems after they already happen over regulatory legal policies that would prevent the problems in the first place (Mendicoff 2012, 194). Through avoiding the establishment of regulatory policies, the governments allow the *kafala* system to continue regulating the migrant labor population.

Though they have not taken any real steps in reforming the regulation of migration, governments appear willing to talk. In September 2005, 11 source countries met with nine destination countries at the Abu Dhabi Dialogue to discuss a collaborative approach of managing short-term labor. Source countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. The destination countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue Group (ADDG) was officially established in 2008, and since conducts regular meetings to foster dialogue between sending and receiving countries. The focus of the Dialogue is to promote the welfare of the workers themselves through fostering inter-governmental cooperation (Martin 2012, 229).

GCC governments have also responded to the growing migrant population on other fronts. Because all six GCC countries are characterized by a demographic imbalance where local populations constitute a small minority of the total population, there has been an effort to systematically "Arabize" their cultures. Hosting large and diverse foreign populations, these countries have experienced the dilution of local culture. States fear that the enormous migrant presence poses a threat to local culture and may foster erasures of the past. Governments have established efforts to develop aspects of local culture that are purified from any foreign influence in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the migrant population. Because the Gulf States are relatively young, there is an absence of a strong sense of national identity. The governments of the GCC have worked to establish heritage projects and other displays of culture in an attempt to create ties between locals and their heritage (Vora 2013, 12-13).

The Arabian Gulf has come a long way in the matter of a few decades. Sprawling stretches of desert have been replaced with cosmopolitan cities, and the Gulf has transformed from a regional trading center to a globally important region. These transformations have come with a price, however, and we must take into account *all* aspects of the modernization story. GCC countries continue to exploit the migrant labor population through their use of the *kafala* system, which allows for exploitation and grave human rights abuses. This sub-population often remains on the periphery of Gulf societies in many ways. Not only are they physically marginalized from Gulf cities, but they are also socially and politically excluded from society. GCC governments should work to reform the system of regulation of the migrant population, to provide forms of inclusion, and to ameliorate the appalling conditions under which migrant laborers are living. Further, immigrant-sending countries should play a more dominant role in ensuring the rights of their citizens in Gulf countries.

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