The kafala system regulating labor migration in the Arabian Gulf, best described as a sponsorship system, has played a central role in the rapid economic development of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. Though it has allowed GCC States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmopolitanly, the system has significant 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 tax 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 grave 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 dynamics 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.

**Objectives**

The main objective is to contextualize labor migration in the GCC and illustrate how the components of the kafala system affect each tier of society. It is often perceived that migrant workers in the Gulf have a sense of mobility and self-determination. However, the sponsorship system, which ties all migrants to a national sponsor, places the migrant in a subjugated position and excludes them from the legal framework of the country. By classifying migrants as “guests” or “temporary workers,” GCC governments have created a legal system that limits migrant workers from any form of protection or benefits from the state. One of the aims is to determine how GCC states justify and perpetuate the exclusion of migrants from the legal framework, and how this encourages human rights abuses and the marginalization of the import labor population.

**Methods**

Using primary sources such as newspapers, secondary sources on the Gulf region, and data on the labor force from the Dubai government, I have explored the effects of the kafala system on the migrant population and the legality of its operation. I also used reports of firsthand testimonials from migrant laborers in Dubai to supplement my findings.

**Findings and Discussion**

The kafala system emerged as a way for GCC governments to monitor migrant laborers through national sponsors.

**Components of the kafala system:**
- Each migrant must be tied to a national sponsor, who is required to oversee the process of employing a visa and arranging employment. The kafeel, or sponsor, is usually the migrant’s employer (Ali 2010).
- Migrant workers must operate through contracts. This system situates migrant workers as temporary or ‘guest’ workers of GCC countries for 2 to 3 years at a time, which becomes nearly impossible for laborers to interact with the population in the core of the city.

**Effects of the kafala system on migrants:**
- Nationals profit from their role as sponsors and as business owners. Because the kafala system requires nationals to comprise a majority of ownership for all companies, a significant number of nationals profit as business partners in exchange for carrying little weight in the company (Ali 2010).
- The welfare state – Through providing exclusive benefits to citizens, governments create rigid boundaries and classifications between citizens and non-citizens; nationals and non-nationals; and Western expatriates and Asian and African migrant laborers.
- Neighboring nations dedicated to certain nationalities insitil a sense of exclusivity.
- Free trade zones promote the segregation between companies owned by nationals and Western multinational companies. 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.
- High prices in central areas of the city, such as in malls, systematically inhibits migrants from feeling a sense of inclusion in these areas.

**Other mechanisms of social and spatial exclusion:**
- The language barrier – 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 presents a significant barrier to societal immersion (Gardner 2010).
- The welfare state – Through providing exclusive benefits to citizens, governments create rigid boundaries and classifications between citizens and non-citizens; nationals and non-nationals; and Western expatriates and African migrant laborers.
- Neighboring nations dedicated to certain nationalities insitil a sense of exclusivity.
- Free trade zones promote the segregation between companies owned by nationals and Western multinational companies. 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.
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**References**


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**Case Study: Dubai, UAE**

The discovery of oil is often seen as the driving catalyst that carried Dubai from its mercantile history to its new role as a global player in the realm of tourism, finance, and real estate. However, the lived experiences during periods of rapid transformation are often left out of modernization narratives of Gulf societies. Though the 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 a 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 South Asia and the Indian subcontinent. They provide the backbone of society and labor to the Gulf with its iconic infrastructure.

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 divisions between various populations in Dubai are perpetuated by the government through rigid distinctions between citizens and residents; non-citizens; nationals and non-nationals; locals and expatriates, as well as temporary workers 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.
Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf

The Case of Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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This research explores the topic of labor migration in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- and seeks to determine how the subjugation of migrant laborers are initiated and perpetuated. The *kafala* (sponsorship) system has placed a central role in the rapid economic development in the GCC states. Though it has allowed the Gulf States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmically, the system has had an array of undesirable byproducts that have significantly altered the texture of Gulf societies. 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 grave human rights abuses against migrant laborers. Today, the effects of the kafala system are visible in every aspect of Gulf society. A case study of Dubai, United Arab Emirates is used to examine how legal norms produce and interact with the lived experiences of South Asian migrant laborers. The case study discusses how the *kafala* system unfolds in one of the most iconic cities in the world and seeks to articulate the lived experiences that are often omitted from modernization narratives.