

# Treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East: Modern-day slavery?

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## Abstract

This article aims to establish that the treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East is a form of modern-day slavery. This area of research has not been written about extensively in academia, thus it is important to address this gap by writing about these lived experiences. Research in this area predominantly focuses on ill-treatment without acknowledging that maltreatment fulfills the criteria of slavery. This essay used a top to bottom societal analysis of academic, social media, and entertainment sources in order to ascertain its findings. This article found empirical and conceptual validity to the claim that treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East is akin to modern-day slavery. This was established through determining that abuse, exploitative working conditions, and denial of freedom are the prevalent forms of maltreatment, which correlate with the criteria that is used to establish slavery. This essay also found that legal and economic vulnerability, as well as racial bias, allow slavery-like practices to continue with impunity in the Middle East. These findings are valuable for the field of social science as they widen the scope of academic discourse on this issue, and shed light on marginalised groups like migrant workers that do not often have their experiences studied.

## Introduction

‘Throw them in the desert’—Hayat Al-Fahad<sup>1</sup>

More slaves exist now than at any other time in history—this fact is startlingly evident when looking at the ill-treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East. The oil boom of the 1970s in the Middle East transformed economies of oil-rich states, increasing the infrastructural demands of the burgeoning economy.<sup>2</sup> The need for a larger labour workforce led to the Middle East relying on foreign migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> As the wealth of these countries increased, this trend for labourers shifted to a demand for luxury domestic services.<sup>4</sup> The globalised world replied to this demand with a huge supply, numbering 54 million foreign domestic workers, entrenching the export of low-paid and unskilled migrant workers into the global economy.<sup>5</sup> While maltreatment of migrant workers is not specific to the Middle East, this exploitation is normalised, institutionalised, and extremely widespread.

This essay argues the treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East is a form of modern-day slavery. While the label ‘slavery’ has a sensationalist element to attract publicity to the issue, it does have conceptual and empirical validity. Firstly, this essay will define slavery and explore its application to migrant workers in the Middle East. Then, it will outline what forms maltreatment takes that warrant the label ‘slavery’. Thirdly, it will show the legal conditions that institutionalise the mistreatment. Finally, it will lay out the economic and, more importantly, racial factors that amplify and enable slavery-adjacent practices to be widespread in society. It will demonstrate this through a top-down

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Day, “‘Put them in the desert’: Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al Fahad under fire for telling expatriates to go home”, *The National*, 2 April 2020, [www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/film/put-them-in-the-desert-kuwaiti-actress-hayat-al-fahad-under-fire-for-telling-expatriates-to-go-home-1.1000595](http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/film/put-them-in-the-desert-kuwaiti-actress-hayat-al-fahad-under-fire-for-telling-expatriates-to-go-home-1.1000595).

<sup>2</sup> Maryam Ali Al Beshri, ‘Legalizing intersectionality: Class, race and female migrant workers in Qatar’. Master's thesis, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, 2019, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Al Beshri, ‘Legalising intersectionality’.

<sup>4</sup> Yara Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 7, no. 1 (2009): 3–15.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Connor, ‘Middle East’s migrant population more than doubles since 2005’, *Pew Research Center*, 18 October 2016.

societal analysis of this issue, through academic sources, social media, and entertainment mediums in the Middle East.

## Slavery

### Definition

The institution of slavery is not a relic harmlessly consigned to history. It has evolved with the needs and demands of modernity and globalisation, entrapping over 27 million people worldwide, more than at any point in history.<sup>6</sup> Modern slavery is present in every facet of our lives; new slavery focuses on vast profits at the cost of cheapening human life. The *1956 United Nations Convention on the Abolition of Slavery* defined slaves as, ‘persons’ whom ... powers attaching the rights of ownerships are exercised’, in such that the ‘slave has no legal rights or freedoms’.<sup>7</sup> The conditions used in identifying slavery consisted of three major aspects, ‘abuse ... threat of violence, restriction of freedom of movement and economic exploitation or exploitative working conditions’.<sup>8</sup> In the Middle East, migrant workers are often working under all three conditions, which is enough to establish their positionality as slaves. The disproportionately poor treatment of migrant workers is exemplified in the Gulf Cooperation Council states, containing 27.7 million people of which migrant workers constitute 10.6 million.<sup>9</sup> In the following paragraphs the elements of abuse, restriction of freedom of movement, and economic and workplace exploitation will be used to establish the empirical validity of the existence of slavery in this context.

While this essay seeks to establish that the label of slavery applies to maltreatment of migrants, it is important to note there have been critiques against the labelling of migrant workers as slaves, due to it enabling the problematic ‘good worker or poor slave’ dichotomy. The label of slavery is said to dominate the public debate in a way that can obscure the actual source of the infringement of workers’ rights.<sup>10</sup> The focus of discourse on ‘the evils of slavery ... victims and villains’ can in actuality ‘hide the ... role that immigration controls and the state’ play in perpetuating slavery.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the establishment of slavery in a Middle Eastern context can easily channel latent orientalist narratives of employers as the uncivilised ‘barbaric foreign’ other.<sup>12</sup> Additionally the slavery narrative relies often on the existence of extreme cases of human rights abuses, rather than giving credence to the indignities of more mundane abuses and exploitative work conditions migrant workers are subject to.<sup>13</sup> While this essay acknowledges that the label of slavery can obfuscate these realities and perpetuate orientalist discourse, this essay will attempt to establish the existence of slavery with a focus on institutional issues rather than singular instances of human rights abuses. It will utilise indignities like workplace exploitation and cultural sensitivity in reframing what slavery has the potential to look like.

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Degorge, ‘Modern day slavery in the United Arab Emirates’, in ‘Modern perspectives on slavery’, ed. Barbara Degorge, special issue, *The European Legacy* 11, no. 6 (2006): 657–66.

<sup>7</sup> Degorge, ‘Modern day slavery’.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Jureidini, ‘Trafficking and contract migrant workers in the Middle East: Trafficking contract migrants’, *International Migration* 48, no. 4 (2010): 142–63; Ray Jureidini and Nayla Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon: A case of “contract slavery”?’ *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 4 (2004): 581–607.

<sup>9</sup> Nasra Shah, ‘Gender and labour migration to the Gulf countries’, *Feminist Review* 77, no. 77 (2004): 183–85.

<sup>10</sup> Bridget Anderson, ‘Migrant domestic workers: Good workers, poor slaves, new connections’, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 22, no. 4, (2015): 636–52.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, ‘Migrant domestic workers’, 644.

<sup>12</sup> Bridget Anderson, *Us and them? The dangerous politics of immigration control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, ‘Migrant domestic workers’.

# Maltreatment

## Abuse

The forms of maltreatment affecting migrant workers in the Middle East are varied, depending on race, gender, age, and societal position. Widespread abuse migrants encounter entail violence, rape, beating, and starvation. Between 2001 and 2002, physical beatings, verbal abuse, and food and sleep deprivation experienced by migrant workers rose by 194 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Terms like *Hmara* ('ass') are commonly used to refer to workers.<sup>15</sup> It is reported that one in three do not have enough food, have to ask for permission to eat, and are only fed once a day.<sup>16</sup> Employers install 'locks and alarms on refrigerators that further symbolise the slave-like' living conditions.<sup>17</sup> Although sexual abuse of migrant workers is hard to quantify due to stigma, press coverage purports extensive sexual harassment, groping, rape, and trafficking of housemaids into the sex trade.<sup>18</sup> Perpetrators were predominately male employers, older children, and relatives.<sup>19</sup> In one insidious case, Filipino domestic worker Angelica<sup>20</sup> reportedly,

Hid in the bathroom to escape sexual assault by her male Qatari employer, eventually jumping out ... the window and fracturing her spine. The employer called for help, only after committing a violent sexual assault on her as she lay on the floor bleeding.<sup>21</sup>

## Exploitative conditions

The imposition of exploitative workplace conditions is another aspect of maltreatment, in the form of excessive working hours, wage theft, and inadequate living conditions for live-in workers. On average, workers were subject to no food breaks and disproportionate work duties, with the expectation of 'being on call at all times' and denial of leave.<sup>22</sup> As seminal academic Bales astutely put it, 'the value of slaves lies ... in the volume of work squeezed out of them ... all their waking hours may be turned into working hours'.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, 56 per cent of live-in workers did not have their own quarters, sometimes sleeping on the balcony,<sup>24</sup> and those who did, were seen no different to furniture and permitted no privacy.<sup>25</sup> The issue of economic exploitation runs rampant; 93 per cent of workers were deceived regarding 'salary, hours of work, nature of job, and overtime pay'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, 60 per cent reported employers withholding or stealing wages, for as long as 'three years', and were often forced to sign false statements about receiving wages to retrieve their passport.<sup>27</sup> This illustrates the utilisation of workplace exploitation as a mechanism for maintaining control over migrant workers.

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<sup>14</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf countries'.

<sup>15</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon'.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 600.

<sup>18</sup> Fassil Demissie, 'Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states: An introduction', in 'Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states', ed. Fassil Demissie and Sandra Jackson, special issue, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–5.

<sup>19</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon'.

<sup>20</sup> Given that the perpetrators of slavery were mentioned by name this author feels it is only fair that the victims do not remain nameless.

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, *Qatar: 'My sleep is my break': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Qatar* (Amnesty International, 2014), 47–49.

<sup>22</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf Countries'; Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon'.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Bales, *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy*, 3rd ed (California: University of California Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Samantha McCormack, Hacqueline Joudo Larsen and Jana Abul Husn, *The other migrant crisis: Protecting migrant workers against exploitation in the Middle East and North Africa. Protecting Migrant Workers against Exploitation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Geneva: International Organisation For Migration, 2015), 33.

<sup>25</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon'.

<sup>26</sup> Bassina Farbenblum and Justine Nolan, 'The business of migrant worker recruitment: Who has the responsibility and leverage to protect rights?' *Texas International Law Journal* 52, no. 1 (2017): 1.

<sup>27</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon', 602.

## Deprivation of freedom

The final aspect of maltreatment is the abject denial of freedom of movement, using strategies like confiscation of passports and identification documents, deprivation of socialisation, and entrapment in the house, often leading to suicide and death. Most migrant workers are confined to the household, with half being locked in and forbidden to go anywhere without express permission.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, 84 per cent of workers are barred from visiting friends, resulting in limited social support networks and heightened psychological isolation.<sup>29</sup> Exemplifying this, 72 per cent were prohibited from using a telephone unless ‘supervised’.<sup>30</sup> The phenomenon ‘Balcony Talk’ was devised as a sidestep strategy, with workers taking to balconies of apartments, to glean socialisation with other workers. However, employers locking doors and windows leading to balconies to prevent this is not uncommon.<sup>31</sup> Fasika Sorssa, an Ethiopian worker, highlights the reality of confinement asserting,

I worked like a slave ... and was treated like one. They beat me regularly. The son of Madame tried to rape me several times. They always kept me locked inside. I couldn’t go out for three years.<sup>32</sup>

Her story perfectly illustrates the intersecting backdrop of abuse and isolation workers experience, as well as the insidious alliances between employers and agencies who cultivate these practices. Employers restrict movement through illegal practices of withholding passports and identity documents of employees.<sup>33</sup> More than two thirds of workers have their documents taken.<sup>34</sup> Oftentimes agencies encourage employers, one employer stating, ‘the agency gives us instructions ... lock her in, take her passport’.<sup>35</sup> Agencies often inflict serious abuse on workers sent back: one maid recalled an agent telling her she would die if, ‘[she did] not go back to madame’.<sup>36</sup> Without identity documents, workers cannot escape their employers for fear of arrest, deportation, or beatings by agents. Respite from maltreatment is found only in seeking shelter at embassies or committing suicide. The embassies in Saudi manage thousands of complaints yearly; similarly, Kuwaiti embassies recorded ‘four-hundred Sri-Lankan, eighty Indian and Filipino’, workers seeking refuge from employers.<sup>37</sup>

An illustration of workers seeking refuge in an embassy is the brutal case of 33-year-old Ethiopian female domestic worker Alem, who sought refuge outside the Ethiopian consulate in Beirut.<sup>38</sup> A group of men silently watched and filmed as she was ‘savagely beaten and dragged into a BMW’; this video went viral in 2012.<sup>39</sup> After the incident, Alem’s tormentors were not arrested; instead Alem was admitted into a psychiatric facility, where she ‘committed suicide by hanging herself using ... bedsheets’.<sup>40</sup> Sadly, Alem’s case is just one of many, an estimated suicide occurring every four days<sup>41</sup> and migrant workers recording 12 times higher suicide rates than the national average.<sup>42</sup> This trend is illustrated by ‘jumping syndrome’, a phenomenon where workers attempt escape or suicide

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid; McCormack, Larsen and Husn, ‘The other migrant crisis’.

<sup>29</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’; Shah, ‘Gender and labour migration’.

<sup>30</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Demissie, ‘Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states’, 4.

<sup>33</sup> McCormack, Larsen and Husn, ‘The other migrant crisis’.

<sup>34</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 601.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 15; McCormack, Larsen and Husn, ‘The other migrant crisis’, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’; Shah, ‘Gender and labour migration’, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Demissie, ‘Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states’.

<sup>39</sup> FitsFit, ‘Alem Dechasa kidnapped and dragged into a car’, April 16 2012, YouTube video, 2:30, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AqY1tjGllk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AqY1tjGllk); Demissie, ‘Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states’, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Demissie, ‘Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states’, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Padam Simkhada, Edwin van Teijlingen, Manju Gurung and Sharada P Wasti. ‘A survey of health problems of Nepalese female migrants workers in the Middle-East and Malaysia’, *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 18, no. 1 (2018): 4–7.

<sup>42</sup> Ziad Kronfol, Marwa Saleh and Maha Al-Ghafry, ‘Mental health issues among migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Literature review and case illustrations’, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 10 (2014): 109–13; Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’; Shah, ‘Gender and labour migration’.

by jumping from balconies.<sup>43</sup> Three serious fractures and 95 deaths a week are attributed to jumping syndrome: 40 of these ruled suicides and 24 considered bids to escape.<sup>44</sup>

Overall, widespread maltreatment affecting migrant workers that fulfills the conceptual requirements of slavery has been established. Migrant workers endure flagrant and widespread abuse in the forms of violence, rape, beating, and starvation. Additionally, migrants face exploitative workplace conditions that subject them to wage theft, excessive workplace hours, and inadequate living conditions. Lastly, deprivation of migrant workers' basic freedom of movement is a pervasive phenomenon. Thus, it is clear the criteria of slavery does apply to the plight of migrant workers.

## Institutionalisation

### Law

Underlying legal instruments and structures, like the Kafala system and illegitimate workers contracts, institutionalise the mistreatment and societal injustice towards migrant workers. The majority population of Gulf states is constituted by migrants, totalling numbers as high as 87 per cent of Qatar, and the lowest totalling 70 per cent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait.<sup>45</sup> Yet there has been a refusal by legal institutions and labour laws in these countries to reflect and acknowledge this population's existence, due to prevailing 'othering' of migrants, excluding them from adequate protective labour law and thus rendering them susceptible to institutionalised inequity, exploitation, and marginalisation.

A key structure which perpetuates the modalities of injustice is the widespread Kafala (الكفالة) sponsorship system. This system operates in several Middle Eastern countries, namely, 'the Gulf, Jordan, and Lebanon'.<sup>46</sup> Under the Kafala system, the house visa, distributed for domestic jobs, enables a high degree of abuse by the *Kafeel* (sponsor), who assumes control over the worker's physical freedom, labour, and rights as a legal person to authorities.<sup>47</sup> This sponsorship dynamic empowers practices of servitude and slavery. The system ensures that natives have leverage over 'migrant workers to the detriment of their human rights'.<sup>48</sup> These policies create, and in turn exploit, migrants' dependent and volatile immigration status. This system creates 'hidden populations';<sup>49</sup> migrant workers are relegated to the privacy and four walls of their employer's house. Accordingly, the state becomes reluctant to intervene in the private domain, and domestic work becomes excluded from the public domain, remaining unregulated in the labour laws of these countries.<sup>50</sup> Kafala enforces a systemic structural set of circumstances that force migrant workers to accept unfair slave-like working conditions and treatment, and give up their right to 'withdraw their labour from employers without being rendered illegal, liable to arrest or deportation'.<sup>51</sup>

Kafala has come under fervent international criticism. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Labor Organization proposed the Kafala system be changed so that 'the state of Kuwait sponsored ... all foreign workers as opposed to individual sponsors',<sup>52</sup> identifying the vulnerability to exploitation that workers currently face. Similarly, the United Nations Human Rights

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<sup>43</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf countries'.

<sup>44</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf countries'; Demissie, 'Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf states'.

<sup>45</sup> David Weissbrodt and Justin Rhodes, 'United Nations treaty body monitoring of migrant workers in the Middle East', *Middle East Law and Governance* 5, no. 1–2 (2013): 71–111.

<sup>46</sup> Weissbrodt and Rhodes, 'United Nations treaty body monitoring of migrant workers in the Middle East'.

<sup>47</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf countries'.

<sup>48</sup> Rooja Bajracharya and Bandita Sijapati, 'The Kafala system and its implications for Nepali domestic workers', Policy Brief 1, Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, 2012: 1–16.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Nady Sigmon, 'Combating modern-day slavery: Issues in identifying and assisting victims of human trafficking worldwide', *Victims & Offenders: Controversial and Critical Issues with Crime Victims* 3, no. 2–3 (2008): 248.

<sup>50</sup> Sigmon, 'Combating modern-day slavery'.

<sup>51</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon', 596.

<sup>52</sup> Jarallah, 'Domestic labor in the Gulf countries', 12.

Council has expressed concern, after Qatar was to host the 2022 Football World Cup, that the ‘tournament would be built on the blood of innocents’.<sup>53</sup> The poor publicity associated with the Kafala system led to acceleration of migrant workers’ rights in Qatar,<sup>54</sup> which has kickstarted the recent trend of increasing legal protections throughout the Gulf. Bahrain is the first country to purportedly abolish the Kafala system altogether.<sup>55</sup> Qatar and Kuwait respectively blacklisted hundreds of agencies and four thousand sponsors for ‘severely violating labor laws and abusing workers’.<sup>56</sup>

However, while these changes seem promising, the reality is that these legal measures often do not translate into the execution of justice and often employ tokenistic approaches not comprehensive enough to instil fundamental change in society. Despite these reforms to labour laws, there is a distinct lack of enforcement mechanisms to implement laws, or ensure adherence.<sup>57</sup> It is unclear whether blacklistings result in permanent law-enforced closure of agents and sponsors, as many were reinstated previously.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, there remains judicial reluctance to charge employers and agents, authorities instead preferring to deport migrant workers.<sup>59</sup>

To illustrate the failure of legal reform, in the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, wage and rights protections were introduced to create better living and health conditions for workers.<sup>60</sup> In reality, however, the reform has not challenged intrinsic societal inequity; rather, it has been used as a tool to quell international rage and improve public relations.<sup>61</sup> In Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for example, reforms have been criticised for leaving out millions of the most vulnerable workers.<sup>62</sup> For example, in Saudi Arabia, ‘domestic workers, farmers, gardeners and guards’, have all been excluded intentionally in new labour reforms.<sup>63</sup> Gulf society favours the current status quo of exploiting workers due to economic interests, which in turn restricts genuine reforms.<sup>64</sup> The reforms have acted as a distraction from overwhelming policy change, promoting workforce nationalisation with ‘employer subsidy programs, quotas and fees’.<sup>65</sup> These faux reforms do not represent genuine change to migrant workers’ regulations.

Another issue which exemplifies difficulties in legitimating legal protections is the lack of legitimate legal contracts between employer and migrant workers. Although required by law, 71 per cent of workers do not sign a contract.<sup>66</sup> The other 29 per cent sign contracts that are nothing more than ‘legal fictions rather than [being] legally binding’, containing inaccessible language that is only in Arabic.<sup>67</sup> Hence, most are unaware of the terms they sign up to and are easily deceived. Moreover these contracts rarely specify the responsibilities of the employer but instead explicitly outline employee obligations.<sup>68</sup> Once again, the enforceability of these contracts is questionable, and breaches seldom translate into an avenue facilitating legal recourse. Deception regarding the legality of faulty contracts entrenches workers firmly within the category of being trafficked.

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Rumsby, ‘Qatar 2022 World Cup chief claims national government is committed to tackling abuse of migrant workers’, *The Telegraph*, 3 October 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Farbenblum and Nolan, ‘The business of migrant worker recruitment’.

<sup>55</sup> Azfar Khan and Hélène Harroff-Tavel, ‘Reforming the *Kafala*: Challenges and opportunities in moving forward’, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 20, no. 3–4 (2011): 293–313.

<sup>56</sup> Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Al Beshri, ‘Legalising intersectionality’.

<sup>58</sup> Jureidini, ‘Trafficking and contract migrant workers in the Middle East’.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Abdoulaye Diop, Trevor Johnston and Kien Trung Le, ‘Reform of the *Kafāla* system: A survey experiment from Qatar’, *Journal of Arabian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2015): 116–37.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> ‘Qatar: Reform efforts fail to remedy rights abuses’, *Human Rights Watch*, 14 January 2020, [www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/14/qatar-reform-efforts-fail-remedy-rights-abuses](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/14/qatar-reform-efforts-fail-remedy-rights-abuses).

<sup>63</sup> Tom Allinson, ‘Saudi “Kafala” labor reforms leave devil in the detail’, *DW*, 7 November 2020, [www.dw.com/en/saudi-kafala-labor-reforms-leave-devil-in-the-detail/a-55511689](http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-kafala-labor-reforms-leave-devil-in-the-detail/a-55511689).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Diop, Johnston and Trung Le, ‘Reform of the *Kafāla* system’, 120.

<sup>66</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

<sup>68</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’; Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’.

## Amplification in society

### Economic

Sadly, there is no economic motivation for countries to change their market practices and enact permanent legal changes. There is a collective economic interest to not threaten market demand for migrant workers for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. Labour-sending countries are confronted with a paradoxical stance between ‘promotion’ and ‘protection’ of their citizens in the face of human rights abuses, as these migrants represent a major source of income that these countries depend on. For example, the remittances of Nepalese and Ethiopian domestic workers make up a quarter to 20 per cent of each country’s total GDP.<sup>69</sup> Economic vulnerability is the decisive factor in enabling slavery to flourish: ‘in the new slavery ... the common denominator is poverty ... adapting an ancient practice to the new global economy ... focusing on weakness, gullibility and deprivation’.<sup>70</sup> The economic vulnerability and poverty domestic workers work to avoid is often the reason they migrate to the Gulf, as they can earn ‘ten times the income level available at home’.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, the neoliberal economic policies and deregulated privatisation that characterise global labour markets means that the exploitative conditions in domestic work are something countries are not economically incentivised to change, due to fear of stopping market demand. To illustrate this reluctance, the Nepalese ambassador to Qatar was quoted describing the Gulf states as ‘open jails [for migrants]’, yet shortly afterwards backtracked and insisted that ‘Nepalese workers were safe and fully respected [in the Gulf]’.<sup>72</sup> The sending country’s enablement of abusive practices depends on the degree to which states are economically dependent on the stream of income domestic workers bring in. This is evident when looking at countries with stronger approaches to campaigning for rights of their workers, like the Philippines, who have passed explicit regulation such as the *Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act (1995)*, which states, ‘the state does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development’.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that in order to galvanise labour-sending and -receiving countries to truly campaign for the rights of their workers in stopping the perpetuation of slavery-like practices, the allure of profitable market economics must stop having precedence over the sanctity of human life.

### Race

The explosion of topical cases of immense maltreatment heralding from the Middle East and Gulf is not an anomaly, but a manifestation of structural racism. Racial societal stratification and the open espousal of racism by high-profile celebrities towards migrant workers normalise and desensitise maltreatment. Racism is instrumental in generating widespread and pervasive maltreatment of migrant workers in the Middle East. Migrant workers make up an enormous percentage of the labour force of these countries, constituting numbers as high as 90 per cent in Qatar, to the lowest—yet still substantial—56 per cent in Saudi Arabia.<sup>74</sup> This astronomically unbalanced proportion of low-skilled migrant workers to generally high-skilled, white-collar naturalised citizens in the Gulf states has led to an extremely prevalent dependence on migrant workers, yet has also solidified a societal racial hierarchy wherein foreign migrant workers are relegated to positions of subservient slaves.

Indeed, the constructed racialised otherness that instils dehumanising attitudes towards migrant workers can be illustrated through the construction of words like ‘*Sirilankeyeh*’ and ‘*Sri Lanky*’ coming to mean

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<sup>69</sup> Shah, ‘Gender and labour migration’; ‘And still they come: The abuse of migrants’, *The Economist* 411, no. 8883, 19 April 2014, 54; Weissbrodt and Rhodes, ‘United Nations treaty body monitoring of migrant workers in the Middle East’.

<sup>70</sup> Bales, *Disposable people*, 10–11.

<sup>71</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’.

<sup>72</sup> ‘And still they come’, 54.

<sup>73</sup> Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Weissbrodt and Rhodes, ‘United Nations treaty body monitoring of migrant workers in the Middle East’.

‘servant’ in colloquial Arabic.<sup>75</sup> Mistreatment stems from normalised racism and xenophobia manifest in entertainment, news, contemporary discourse, and social media content being produced in the region, which reproduces racist beliefs about the perceived inferiority of workers. Often there is an overt racist fear of ‘contamination from the bodies of these others’: workers are asked to wash their clothes separately, they are fed only ‘left overs’, and are told to ‘scrub the whole bathroom down with anti-bacterial products if they dare using shower or toilet amenities at their employers’ house’.<sup>76</sup> The racist fear of ‘contamination’ by migrant workers often extends beyond the physicality of their bodies to the realm of their religion, language, and customs.<sup>77</sup>

This phenomenon is illustrated in the rap song by Saudi entertainment network Telfaz11, titled ‘Sponsor’ (كفيل).<sup>78</sup> The song puts a comedic spin on the abuse migrant workers face in Saudi. The video focuses on South Asian workers in a construction site passionately rapping about the racialised slave status imposed on them by society. The lyrics point out the ironic co-dependent relationship shared by Gulf society and the migrant workers they dearly need yet detest: ‘If I leave you won’t survive ... who does everything in Saudi ... who built the infrastructure? ... then you say “bengalis are low-class”’.<sup>79</sup> The video ends with a worker exclaiming, ‘I do my sponsor’s work ... then ... get deported, I’m not afraid of my sponsor! The Saudis keep making me more of a slave!’<sup>80</sup> This paradoxical reliance yet racialised detestation migrant workers face is succinctly explored in the music video, amassing over 13 million views and garnering mass support.

Conversely, however, dehumanised racialised mistreatment of migrant workers is so normalised that Gulf celebrities openly publish their disapproval of policies preventing the abuse of workers. A popular Kuwaiti Instagram influencer, Sondos Al-Qattan, in an infamous viral video espoused her disapproval of new Kuwaiti laws that ensured better working conditions for Filipino domestic workers, ranting:

How can ... a servant ... keeps their own passport? What’s worse is they have one day off every week! If they run away and go back to their country, who will refund me? I disagree with this law. I don’t want a Filipino maid any more.<sup>81</sup>

Migrante International, an advocacy group for workers, compared Al-Qattan’s words to, ‘a slave owner clinging to [an] outlook which ... belong[ed] to the dark ages’.<sup>82</sup> Al-Qattan confidently claimed ‘criticism of her position was akin to an attack on Kuwaiti society itself’.<sup>83</sup> Al-Qattan’s comments underline and illustrate the existence of a preferential racial hierarchy for migrant workers, with Filipino workers often commanding the highest monthly salary at ‘\$350’ in comparison to the market rate of US\$100–150 for Ethiopians and Sri Lankans, as racist beliefs deem Filipinos have superior levels of ‘cleanliness, trustworthiness and are more civilised than the other races’.<sup>84</sup>

The disposable nature of migrant workers was similarly illustrated in the wake of the COVID pandemic when Hayat Al-Fahad, the supposed ‘Meryl Streep of the Gulf’,<sup>85</sup> declared in a television interview that Kuwait was fed up with the foreign workers who comprise two thirds of the population and advocated for ‘throwing them in the desert’.<sup>86</sup> These videos caused an international media storm, with talk shows,

<sup>75</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’; Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’.

<sup>76</sup> Jureidini and Moukarbel, ‘Female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon’, 586.

<sup>77</sup> Jarallah, ‘Domestic labor in the Gulf countries’.

<sup>78</sup> Telfaz11, ‘الجسر | عبدالخالق - كفيل’, 24 February 2015, YouTube video, 3:05, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7MHRRcHah0&feature=emb\\_title](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7MHRRcHah0&feature=emb_title).

<sup>79</sup> Telfaz11, ‘الجسر | عبدالخالق - كفيل’.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Guardian News, ‘Kuwaiti Instagram influencer causes uproar with comments on Filipino “servants”’, 23 July 2018, YouTube video, 0:18, [youtu.be/SjPwAiG0rJY](http://youtu.be/SjPwAiG0rJY).

<sup>82</sup> ‘Kuwaiti star faces backlash over Filipino worker comments’, *Yerepouni Daily News*, 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Punna Munyal, ‘Sondos Al Qattan says criticism of her is akin to attack on Kuwait and the hijab in latest video’, *The National*, 26 July 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Patrick Ireland, ‘The limits of sending-state power: The Philippines, Sri Lanka, and female migrant domestic workers’, *International Political Science Review* 39, no. 3 (2018): 344.

<sup>85</sup> Tamara Abu'eish, ‘Coronavirus: The fall of the Gulf’s own Meryl Streep who called for a ban on expats’, *Al Arabiya News*, 1 April 2020.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Covid in the camps’, *The Economist* 435, no. 9191, 25 April 2020: 41–42.



press, and news outlets covering the incident, and many Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis taking to the internet to denounce both celebrities and criticise their stances. However, contrary to these efforts, some defended their position. One popular Emirati YouTuber in particular posited:

Did [al-Hayat] mean Egyptians? Of course not. Do you expect in Saudi, Kuwait or UAE, we would equate ... an Indian worker with [one] from any ... Arab country? God Forbid!<sup>87</sup>

The intrinsic security in the Gulf's systematic structural racism is evidently what empowers these celebrities to publicly advocate for the mistreatment of migrant workers.

In contrast, *The Joe Show*, a topical Egyptian talk show, exemplified the wider and more complex positionality of non-Gulf states on the treatment of migrant workers. The host ironically thanked the YouTuber for the shoutout to Egypt, but implied his specified hatred towards non-Arabs was worse than al-Hayat's own more generalised hatred of foreign migrants.<sup>88</sup> Sadly, maltreatment of migrant workers rooted in systemic racism ultimately remains characteristic of Gulf society. The flagrant racism responsible for normalisation of slave-like treatment of migrant workers is an attitude that pervades deep into Gulf society, as evidenced from the wide range of media examined above.

## Conclusion

In summary, this essay has argued that the treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East meets the requirements of abuse, exploitative work conditions, and denial of freedom. This establishes their treatment as warranting the label of modern-day slavery. Lack of legal recourse, economic vulnerability, and racial bias foster dehumanisation and set the stage for slavery-like treatment and practices to proliferate. This issue is mammoth and continues to operate with relative impunity in many countries. This essay recommends governments, advocacy groups, and civil society work to end these practices through heightened legal and economic protections. There should be increased international pressure from multinational corporations, organisations, and countries which profit from immigrant labour in the Middle East. International awareness and public outcry would help to dismantle the Kafala system which institutionalises the systematic exploitation of migrant workers in the Middle East, in turn ending this form of modern-day slavery.

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<sup>87</sup> Middle East Eye, 'UAE vlogger arrested for "racist remarks" against Indian, Bengali migrants', 17 April 2020, YouTube video, 2:23, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IUZCUBUhtM&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IUZCUBUhtM&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>88</sup> Best of *The Joe Show*, 'جو شو - حياة الفهد', 12 April 2020, YouTube video, 13:04, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnAh7zwJrCc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnAh7zwJrCc) [video unavailable].

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