

Middle East: Race and exploitation in the Gulf - The Kafala system (migrant workers)

Thursday 12 July 2018, by [AL-SAUD Madawi](#) (Date first published: 24 August 2017).

It is time for the issue of race to become central to any discussion on the continued exploitation of workers in the Gulf.

The Kafala (sponsorship) system [1] emerged in the period between the 1950s and 1960s following the abolition of slavery in the region.

It is a mechanism used in the GCC, and countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, to regulate a guest worker program whereby a migrant workers status is bound to his or her employer or 'kafeel' for the duration of their contract.

This system was utilized and solidified in the GCC after an influx of workers after the discovery of oil. Kafala has been discussed in the context of modern slavery and exploitation [2], and its misuse has also allowed for the facilitation of sex trafficking.

Yet the wider social, economic, and political background through which this sponsorship system operates is not given adequate attention in the literature. The issue of race and racism in the Gulf need to be addressed in order to tackle the problem of modern day slavery.

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Whilst gender is certainly a contributing factor to abuse, certain evidence suggests that problems such as racism can be just as important [3], if not more important in the harsh treatment of women, dispelling the claim that gender attitudes alone fuel abuse.

Xenophobia in the Gulf manifests itself in an 'attitude of disdain' towards women from other backgrounds, particularly towards those from Asia and Africa. The UN has identified a general global trend that ties the presence of migrants, refugees and non-nationals with an increase in discrimination and racist attitudes [4].

Although academic attention focuses predominately on male abuse of women, it is important to acknowledge the role that matriarchs and women in general have in abusing migrant domestic workers [5]. Women domestic workers are observed by some of their employers, who happen to be Arab women, as inferior. Violence can be seen a way for Arab women to regain control of their agency, something they have lost in the traditional conservative norms of the societies they live in.

Even though the constitution of countries such as Qatar prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, religion, according to this report "legal, cultural, and institutional discrimination existed against women, non-citizens, and foreign workers" [6]. For instance, in Qatar spousal rape is not considered illegal [7] and there is no specific law concerning domestic violence.

There are intertwining political, economic, and cultural factors that have contributed to migrant workers taking on an alien identity. Culturally, as domestic workers work near families and households, there is a deep reluctance on the part of employers for intervention by the state [8], especially if they believe that their domestic help has gained access to sensitive information about the family.

It is also partly due to these suspicions that unjustifiable mistreatment of workers by their employers take place. For example, employers can sometimes harbor resentment about the motivations of workers, especially those that appear too close to male members of the family.

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This 'silence' on the part of the state can be viewed as the continuation of a larger political strategy to keep large swathes of Arab migrants at bay because of the socio-political ramifications this may have.

Indeed, it can be argued that the reluctance has been shown today with the hesitancy of the Gulf region in taking in Syrian refugees for fear that radical and populist ideas may incite instability in the region.

The Kafala system cannot be divorced from the wider arena in which it is host to. The Gulf still lacks a robust and independent civil society to pressure and hold the government accountable for its civil rights violations.

It has not helped that most of these countries lack vigorous anti-discrimination laws that could go some way in changing attitudes towards migrant workers in the region. Even though there are swaths of evidence where workers document the dehumanising treatment they receive from their employers [9], governments fail to act.

Governments usually opt to target those not educated or literate, according to NGOs in Bahrain [10]. The Bahraini labour market prefers Bangladeshi unskilled workers because they are exploitable – they require low pay and can withstand harsh working conditions and, in addition, some of these workers are illiterate.

It is time for the issue of race and racist attitudes to become central to any discussion on the continued exploitation of workers in places like the Gulf.

When it comes to tackling modern day slavery in all its forms, there is no room for political correctness.

MADAWI AL-SAUD

P.S.

* OPEN DEMOCRACY 24 August 2017:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/madawi-al-saud/race-exploitation-gulf-migrant-domestic-workers-uae-bahrain-qatar>

Footnotes

- [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafala_system
- [2] http://www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ADHRB_Commodities_Web.pdf
- [3] http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@gender/documents/publication/wcms_101118.pdf
- [4] http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/international_migration_racism.pdf
- [5] <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1104&context=thes>
- [6] <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265728.pdf>
- [7] <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265728.pdf>
- [8] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306237433_Domestic_Work_Legislation_in_the_Gulf_Countries_A_Comparative_Policy_Review
- [9] <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/22/i-already-bought-you/abuse-and-exploitation-female-migrant-domestic-workers-united>
- [10] http://www.unodc.org/documents/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf