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## Exploitation and Low Wages of Labor Migrants in Gulf Countries

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**Abstract** *Migration towards the countries for economic reasons has different diverse outcomes for individuals. The present articles discuss the situation of those who migrated for economic stability of their left behind families. The issues faced by the laborers in middle east were explored through case study method from those who visited back home after expiry of visa-permits. The migrants were selected from District Dera Ghazi Khan which has thousands of left behind families. Findings show that the Kafala system provides the migrants an opportunity to work and earn but lots of issues have been faced by such migrants in the countries of destination. They are bound to do as per the requirement of the sponsors because disobedience cause their departure from earning opportunity and the country as well. They have been exposed to harsh treatment and payed irregularly and withholding of payments is used as a tool to control.*

**Key Words:** Unskilled Laborer, Low Wage, Technical Skills

### Introduction

Number of countries around the world hosts millions of migrants, they worked there and served the country and in return earnings made left behind families economically stable. Why people moved from their birth country to the country of destination? Pushing and pulling factors plays an important role in such movement. Economic deprivation, less job opportunities, less opportunities for stable economic life, less options for developing ourselves are the general answers why a man or women migrated from his/her country of origin. This movement has different motives but the major and foremost is economic development.

Humans like animals, care about their belongings but they think how to make their families happy and provision of necessitates of life through different means made them superior from Mammals. Naturally, people always try to find a way to make their families better especially more than existing conditions. But this search made them sick; provision of money for unhindered development of family (economic stability) left no options for them to being sufferer. When we talk about UAE and its development the living standards it looks like a dream world high rise building, big and expensive shopping malls, availability of certain things and huge varieties made it more attractive and expensive for visitors. Foreigners are major source of development in Gulf region particularly in UAE. Some of them visit and number of them serves in different national as well as multinational companies.

The working environment in UAE is particularly different around the world from those countries that have emigrants. In oil providing Gulf Countries Corporation no country even spending whole life in services given nationality or citizenship to the migrants, they remain migrants from day one to end of their careers. The story is identical in all spheres of services e.g. from a businessman to the laborer. They entered through a work permit usually for 2 years, but in some exceptional cases it is 5 years. After spending the length of work permit you have to request for work permit again, this process goes on. People are on temporary work permit but they work more than half of the day, 6-7 days in a week. Another distinguish feature of the UAE workers is they worked hard like other migrants around the world but they separated from their families. They are literally bused to work; work all day, bused back to their living compounds for sleeping and then start the cycle all over again next day.

They worked hard, because they get work permit to support their families, but the problem starts when they are not being paid according to their hard work and commitment. Low wages, variation in payment times are the general issues everyone know about it. They are being exploited

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by the employers and agents (visa/work permit agents) but the number of Pakistani emigrants increased every year. Below is the record of Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment from 1981 to April 2015.

Registered Workers of Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment 1981-2015 (Up-to April) Province Wise

Year	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Baluchistan	AJK	N/Areas	Tribal Areas	Total
1981	75529	22800	38485	1755	12094	4	2414	153081
1991	74693	13628	37219	945	8706	5	7622	142818
2001	61291	9447	42521	1867	6421	213	6169	127929
2010	190547	31814	98222	3130	22535	458	16198	362904
2011	228707	40171	130119	5262	33133	732	18769	456893
2012	341874	46607	176349	5122	38833	780	29022	638587
2013	333121	55608	150418	9293	40038	1190	33046	622714
2014	392476	89703	167424	7258	52120	2073	41412	752466
2015	156381	36715	71260	2975	20914	731	15229	304205

*Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment*

The increasing number of emigrants, showed the interest of Pakistani nationals seeking work permit overseas. This workers' movement majorly result of less economic opportunities in country of origin.

People know about problems of destination countries e.g. low wage, delay in wages etc. but they are motivated to work overseas. The pull factors are catchier than problems along with them. They have their own choices to work in GCC countries and suffer a lot; complaining of problems is suitable when someone force anyone to work in hazardous work environment. But non-availability of economic opportunities pushes people to migrate in those countries that have economic stability and provide them an opportunity to move forward but the price of this family development is commendable. One man invests his all efforts for comfort of his belongings; it is the normal tradition as well as moral character of the South Asian societies. Number of un-skilled workers increasing day by day because people wanted to go abroad in very little time, they are not even thinking about what they do there. Unskilled laborers use different means to get work permit, it is evident some of them used illegal way to go abroad.

Such large number of unskilled laborers affects the market price and destroys the rule of supply and demand; more available laborers less wages which provide an opportunity to investors/employers earn more profit. In UAE the number of unskilled migrants increasing, existing migrants take 2 years averagely to stable their economic condition. It is evident, people from Pakistan wished to emigrate without getting any technical expertise. Such unskilled laborers remain low paid because they have not any specific knowledge or technical advancement in work environment. Huge number of migrant laborers is available so the wages become down and, in many cases, employer discontinue their wages for vague period.

### Relevant Literature Review

According to the [Forstenlechner and Rutledge \(2011\)](#), migrant workers are the 96% of the total workforce in UAE. Most of the complaints, received by the Ministry of Labour and Dubai Labour Agencies about the construction workers' disputes with the employers [Invalid source specified.](#), regarding their wages and withholding of wages by the companies. This is very common phenomenon in UAE in construction and even in lower-prestige jobs e.g. sanitary workers, carpenters, technicians and waters in different food courts. The impact of this pending amount is very devastating on the labourer and their left behind families. If we talking about the migrants who are working in UAE and made this visit on credit which will be paid off by into the monthly installments, most of the time money lend from the relatives and friends in some cases recruiting agencies bear all the expenses. This pending of money pushed them into debt arrears. And the worst case is the shortage of money for the left behind family who spend all their resources on the migrant in the hope to get good survival opportunities. Now come back to the situation of the labourers in the country of destination, this non-payment forced them to lend more money from social setups for daily affairs and eatables for their survival.

This withholding is technically known as the *security* and it could be the wages of one and half month wages or in some cases two months' wages. This tactic is used to prevent workers' running from the existing work environment even it is hazardous they must worked because there is no way out (Watch, November 2006, p. 30). According to some construction companies' managing directors and the labourers, this sort of happening usually done when companies running out of cash flow and faced some capital problems, this type of issues happened all over the world but in the given

situation these are not well credible. Back days from 2000-2009, the annual GDP of the UAE grew 6.62 percent with inclusion of oil prices and the foreign direct investment in the construction sector, this unprecedented average growth systematically emerged violation of human rights which led towards health disparities. Around 35 million people living in the six GCC (KSA, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman) countries and 17 percent from them were migrants. UAE, Kuwait and Qatar had highest number of foreigners. In booming construction industry of UAE, these monetary follow problems showing another side of the coin.

Another issue is the abandoning of the workers. The owner of the small-scale construction companies which owned very limited cash and have less than 20 working workforces, flee without paying even the agreed amount to the workers. If, anyone go to the court or some of the Labour department, they faced serious allegations from the employer and lost their jobs and forcefully moved back to the countries of origin. Generally, there is huge variation in the construction as well as petty job markets in UAE. A small number of high skilled workers i.e. computer professionals, managers earned handsome amount and get more perks and privileges but the numbers are very limited. Majority of the workforce working on low-wages, they are low-skilled workers; making average one-sixth of the salaries the former migrants have ([Qingxia, 2010: 4](#)) across age, gender, education and working sector there is variation among perks and salaries.

Variety among the workforce and inequalities in the salaries existed in various business sectors ([Gomez-Mejia and Palich, 1997](#); [International Labor Organization \(ILO\), 2008](#); [Milanovic, 2011](#)) but limited places have gone as far as the GCC countries ([AlSahalawi and Gardener, 2004](#); [Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006](#); Bibi and ElLahga, 2011). Private sector of construction and other business sector composed of foreign workers, they came from cultural backgrounds, have different personal and technical skills and there is wide wage difference in their earnings. Nationals only prefer to work in the government sector which provides them security and higher perks and privileges. The UAE is the example that how Gulf model of labour migrants encompassed, that private business owned 98 percent foreigners in their workforce (UAE Ministry of Culture, 2009).

Majority of the foreigner visited UAE for earning purposes rather than permanent settlement (permanent settlements were not common). The UAE government, has clear stance regarding the immigration standards. They rarely grant citizenship or PR (permanent residence) to foreigner living in UAE. Migrants have to re-new their visas before the expiry date, the visas (TR 'temporary residence) provided to the migrants for one year, two year, and three years. Everyone has to go through the process of re-newel even they are serving there from generations. Even in private sectors the imbalance and the perks and privileges given to the national and the migrant workers are shoddier which was given in public sector ([Qingxia & Mouawiya, 2014](#)).

Back days from 2000-2009, the annual GDP of the UAE grew 6.62 percent with inclusion of oil prices and the foreign direct investment in the construction sector, this unprecedented average growth systematically emerged violation of human rights which led towards health disparities. Around 35 million people living in the six GCC (KSA, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman) countries and 17 percent from them were migrants. UAE, Kuwait and Qatar had highest number of foreigners. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and International Labor Organization (ILO) stated that 95 percent of the workforce in UAE was foreigners (HRW, 2010). Large number of expatriates pulled by the UAE economy where tax free salaries, perks and privileges, wealthy Emiratis with large number of staffs further fueled the influx of cheap labour.

During the first decade of new millennium, the UAE had 1300 construction projects which worth \$418 billion in two states of UAE e.g. Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Work proceeds rapidly, round clockwork which permits 12-hour shift by labour laws (Sambidge, 2010). The construction boom required a number of benefits which promote the construction industry e.g. low wages and long working hours. Heat, exhaustion and inadequate safety requirements come up with serious health issues and working safety measures. The labourers were subjected to sub-standard vicious living and working conditions which systematically violate the human rights. In 2007 the Ministry of Labour (UAE) released their first annual report titled, 'The Protection of the Rights of Workers in the UAE', which clearly acknowledged the need for 'expansion of labour laws, enforcement and capacity development to protect the rights of the workers in the country.' But a number of studies stated that there was a little improvement in labour laws (Smith, 2008).

## Research Question

Study deals with the exploitation of migrant workers ranging from all socio-economic spheres but particularly from economic aspects. The short-term effects on the migrants and their wages are quite devastating, which majorly depends upon the skilled labourer and the existing type of workforce in country of destination. In all the cases, majority of the labourers who migrated from

countries of origin belonged to poor-skilled working class. New commoner and the existing labourers to some extent have equal type of skills but later have some advantages on former due to social capital. This type of more unskilled labourers established competition among the workers and they in some cases agreed on very low wages to opt the opportunity. Declining wages increases unemployment or dormancy among the workers and depends on their willingness to accept the lower wages. Keeping in mind the situation, it is the only way to improve lives even the lowest wages are more superior to what they earn in countries of origin.

## Methodology

The present research article is purely based on narratives which shared by laborers. To make the research more appropriate eight migrants were in-depth interviewed. All were on their vocations and purposively selected. Case study method was used for data collection.

## Locale of the Study

District Dera Ghazi Khan has a special significance about the migration, for the research initiative, a prominent village of the district having characteristics of migration and its related aspects *Yaroo Khosa* was selected for the study after making intensive deliberations with the prominent and educated people of the area.

List of Workers registered for Overseas Employment by Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment During 1981-2015 (Up-to October)

Name of The District	1981-2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Dera Ghazi Khan	56955	2986	3344	5835	4339	12497	11920	14115	19471	17987	19362	25936	194747
Layyah	5081	537	754	1215	11279	2544	1809	1467	2700	2766	3595	6848	40595
Muzaffargarh	21096	1282	1106	2090	2659	3412	3327	3844	5762	6398	9009	7382	67367
Rajan Pur	10309	592	886	1997	2820	2561	2116	3338	4442	5575	8037	6026	48699
Multan	55122	2048	2307	2778	3039	6195	5463	6200	10786	10231	10967	14801	130937

Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment

## Field Findings

The collected information discussed below after analyzing through thematic analysis. A number of these were emerged and discussed as under;

## Migration Policy and Implications

The foremost policy regarding the migrant workers was the invitation and approval by the nationals. The policy is known as *Kafala* system. In this system anyone who wanted to visit UAE or any of the Gulf Countries they must have the invitation from the nationalist or any of the company owned by the nationalists or by the government. He worked as the granter and assured the monitoring and traveling as well as jobs/working of the migrant to the government. If granter refused or withdraws the sponsorship, the foreigner has no legal right to stay or work in the foreign soil and he/she must have to aboard. Some of the reasons like disputes on the working condition, wages, low-profile residence, and working hours sometimes prompt conflict which may cause the withdrawn of sponsorship, but most of the time migrant compensate with the existing situation and try to adjust their selves rather going back to the country of origin. Sometimes, *Kafeels* do not bothered the work environment, wages and residential conditions, but majorly, they provide equal help in search of work and earn their own profit. According to an interviewer, 'we must give 30 percent of the work to our Kafeel and remaining 70 percent distributed among us.'

Exchange of payments, recruitments and wages were done through sponsors. It is not mandatory that every migrant may physically meet with their sponsors. As stated earlier, visa agents with the help of local sponsors developed a chain of migrant import to fill the local market need. Some of the sponsors only deal through the owners of the construction companies who are intermediaries and maintain the monitory and working conditions of the labourers. Keeping passport of the migrants with the sponsors is very commonly practiced phenomenon in Gulf countries. Migrants from developing countries willingly paid more money to their sponsors; and local citizens earned profit by sponsoring them they do not intend to employ.

## Job Permit

*Eqama* or job permit is required when you get the visa legally and reached in GCC countries. It is a form of permission which gives to laborer by their *Kafeels*. One of the key issues faced by the labor migrants is the issuing and renewal of *Eqama*. Some *Kafeels* and the middle man heavily charged from laborers. If someone is not able to pay all amount at same time there is a provision to pay remaining amount in installments. Installments again has two to three types, cut wages on monthly basis, work without getting wage under the supervision of sponsor (*Kafeels*) or middle man etc. If the *Kafeel* do not issued the work permit for laborers, they are not permitted to work.

For work permit migrant experienced exploitation by their *Kafeels* or owners. Respondents shared their experience about *Eqama*/job permit and how they are being exploited by the *Kafeels*, they demand more money. The *Eqama* was not issuing by the *Kafeel* on time create serious issues for new job because without the work permit no one are allowed to work and no one wanted to give them work. Though the case was not the same for all migrants, during fieldwork it was observed that some were not being the part of such exploitation. Respondent shared, 'the prime problem is *Eqama*, if you buy a visa, when you reached the destination people will tell you, you are not on list OR your *Eqama* is not active. I waited 8 months to get activation of my *Eqama*, it is a work permit without that you are not allowed in the market to work, and if police found you without *Eqama* they will arrest you'. Usually *kefeels* charge maximum amount usually 5,000 to 7,000 thousand Darhms per annum from one laborer which is too much for a daily wage labor, but they paid (get credit from social networks e.g. friends, family members working over there etc.) they do not have any other choice to maintain their livelihood back in country of origin.

## Kafala Sponsor System

For the recruiting of labors, the GCC countries developed migration management system or mechanism known as *Kafala* or Sponsorship system (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011), in which the laborer bound to work under his *Kafeel*. Respondent shared, '*The Kafala system is very evil, Kafeels of Saudi Arabia charge 8000 riyals per year, but in UAE it is less 5000-7000 AED for the renewal of Eqama. Under such Eqama the salary of a laborer in KSA is starts from 1000 to 1500 riyals in UAE it is 700 to 1000 AED. It is not possible for a laborer to pay such a huge amount to the kafeels*'. Work overtime work on weekends, taking credit from friends are the major copying strategies. Another respondent share, '*I have spent fifteen years of my life in UAE, but come back to Pakistan without a single penny. I thought my family will utilize remittances in a good manner; which may helpful to sustain our economic status after my departure but they consume all of it, so I sent my elder son three months ago to make our livelihoods smooth.*

## Payment of Wages

It is understood that labor migrants leave their countries of origin for the sake of economic opportunities, if the owners or contractors did not pay them daily wage or monthly salary it is not less than to kill the migrant and his left behind family. According to respondents, the *Kafeels*/Contractors (contractors in all cases nor nationals) did not pay the wage on time, accommodations and meals are the responsibility of contractors but they cut wages in provision of such services as well. Contractors/Supervisors break wages (paid wages after two or three months a half portion of the whole amount).

## Case Study

Respondent was Shakir Ali aged 38 and his profession was laborer. The monthly wage was different from other members working in same Construction Company, because he was doing labor work. Because of huge available number of unskilled laborers now it is not easy for him to maintain his family livelihood and send them same amount which he sends them one year before. He shared, '*it is not easy to make money on daily base, because it depends upon the availability of materials, no construction material no work so automatically we go back to the living compounds. I have spent 6 years here and three times in this whole 6 years I faced same problem a cheated behavior of the contractors. One has 500 AED, other have 750 AED and the last one which is recent 1000 AED, but they still not willing to pay me make different excuses that when supervisor gave me the money, I will pay your wages etc. but till today there is a hope. That was happened to me when I was new here, contractors more exploit the new one because they are not aware about the problems and they do not have any social networks which were sometimes used to create a pressure on the contractor in case of non-national. On legal help in such regard he narrates 'outsiders especially laborers are not taking risks because, the legal philosophy never favors the migrants in front of their own man (citizen, Arab), they hold the same language and the rules and justice favors them. There*

*is no sympathy for foreigners; they just showed forgiveness to the locals. There is no law for the outsiders all privileges are for the own people and the court or the police will favor their citizens on outsiders. I have tried many times but not able to get my money back. We (outsiders) are not in the situation to start fighting with natives or the supervisor the sword of being terminated still hanging upon us, if Kafeel or the Employer stated any negative about us the UAE is banned for us almost 5-10 years. This termination made us more naïve to act according to the will of employer and kafeels. If we terminated once our finger prints and eye prints forwarded to all airports of UAE to avoid our entry in UAE soil.*

### Case Study

Respondent is working as laborer from last five years with a construction company working in Abbu Dhabi premises and get monthly wage was 1200 AED per month. The monthly wages were starts from 700 AED and now a day he is getting 1200 AED per month which is not enough but more than that. Overtime and work in weekends made the life smooth in UAE and he send all amounts to the left behind family because they are dependent on him. According to him, *'I get a contract from Skhikh and he did not pay me wage of 18000 AED which is a huge sum includes some wages of other workers as well. I told him I will complaint to (Shurta) police man about your unkindness, he said you are free whenever you want to go against me; this is not a big deal for me. Arabic language is another way of exploitation, if you talk and read Arabic you have better change to convey your message to others and understand their point of view.*

### Case Study

Another respondent who is new in UAE and come back home on his first vocations he shared, *'I have AZAD visa, I am not working under any supervision. I do work whenever I needed or what I wanted to do. During days of work I go to Dera Dubai there is market of used furniture, natives when change their apartments they threw all furniture and other items in streets, we collect them and after some furnishing sold out to the migrants or Pakistani and Indian natives because they want cheap goods. There is a place we come together, like in Pakistan a famous place in Dera Dubai there laborers are available, and contractors go there and get the number of laborers according to their need. Workers who are here they do not have any moral character; they fight with each other to get the chance to work. Bargain with employer and go on very low wages. The number of unskilled laborers from Pakistan is increasing in last three years; young people come to Dubai for earning, they work hard and earn low wages. Supervisors and most of the time contractors who have links with Sheikhs they bargain with laborers on very cheap wage and earn their interest/profit. High wages are charged from employers and low paid to the workers middle man (contractor) get more benefits.*

### Case Study

Another respondent shares the same story that, *'Contractors and supervisors made Sheikhs more intelligent, now they bargain with laborers the translators are available and some laborers who are working here from for 3 years they easily understand 'Arabic' which is the only communication tool among employer and laborers. Big contractors hire huge number of laborers on cheap wage and after completing the work for which they acquired wages paid to them in installments. During work if anyone get injured no medical allowance and only one vocation in fever is allowed without daily wage to the laborer if sickness prolong, replacement must be takes place after third day. In some camps where we work, we cocked our meal, contractor only provide place for rest or sleep. But he received all allowances from employer; one of my elder cousins shared this whole situation with me he is working in Dubai from 2009.*

He again narrated, *'my three cousins were come to Dubai for earing last early in 2000, with the help of local agent in Pakistan they get a visa of watchman in Rasul-khur and two as laborer in Fajera. One who get the visa of watchman arrived at Rasul-khur the employer gave him the contract of 400 AED per month accommodation and provision of food is the employer's responsibility. After spending three years he gets nothing. Except, cheap food (each week one or two days without food) and accommodation under camels' shelter. He comes to know after one month that he was recruited as camels' protector not for building or house protection. He demanded every month for his wage and the answers always lame excuses. After spending the whole time, he resigned and asked Kafeel to give back his passport but forcefully he suffers one more year. When I have asked him why you were not quitting during the whole years, he just said one thing 'What I can do there?'*

### Case Study

A respondent who is working as Meson in Dubai narrated that, *'Your hard work, dedication and*



*commitment with work is nothing in front of them 'Sheikhs'. I made a floor in a house after spending 6 days and investing labor by own. After completion when I meet with Employer about the payment he said, 'If my wife approved the work, I'll pay you wages otherwise you have to re-construct the floor'. I was surprised when I come to know she was not happy with our work and Sheikh demanded for re-construction. When I asked 'it is not the way you treated us, I will not re-construct till you pay the previous wages. He called the police and registered a complaint that I call him names.' After negotiation through a third party (a famous contractor) he withdrawal his complaint and we spend other 7 days and only get the wage of 7 days and amount of expenses. Previous all amount was not being paid, because according to them that was my fault to not making them happy with my work.*

## Conclusion

The study concluded that less economic opportunities are the pushing factors and more job opportunities with good earnings are the dragging reasons which motivated people for migration from Pakistan to UAE. After arriving at destination, the real picture of working abroad and earning mechanism show the cruel reality of human commodity according to its utilization. Those who have some skill they earn sufficient but those who do not have any technical skills they exploited by the contractors, employers and middle mans because the supply of unskilled laborers is more than demand. It was evident through interviews with the migrants that *Kafala* system in UAE is the core starting point of laborers' exploitation. Uneven wage payments create serious problems for migrants and ultimately their left behind families. Illiteracy is another major problem which indirectly exploits their capabilities. There is some suggestion which may be helpful for relief.

## Recommendations

- Solidarity among migrant labourers is necessary for their development. They become tool of exploitation when they bargain over their fellows.
- Acquire of some skills before going abroad made them more confident and less exploited, which increase their chances of good earnings.
- General understanding of 'Arabic Language' will be helpful during bargain and highlighting their point of view in courts against the employer or contractor.

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