

# A Portrait of Low-Income Migrants in Contemporary Qatar

ANDREW GARDNER, SILVIA PESSOA, ABDOULAYE DIOP, KALTHAM AL-GHANIM,  
KIEN LE TRUNG and LAURA HARKNESS

**Abstract:** Though transnational labor migration in the Gulf States has increasingly been of scholarly interest, that scholarship has to date relied largely on qualitative ethnographic methodologies or small non-representative sampling strategies. This paper presents the findings of a large representative sample of low-income migrant laborers in Qatar. The data describe the basic characteristics of the low-income migrant population in Qatar, the process by which migrants obtain employment, the frequency with which this population of migrants encounters the problems and challenges described by previous ethnographic work, and the role played by nationality, ethnicity, and religion in patterning that experience. While the findings generally affirm many of the claims made in earlier ethnographic studies, they provide a means by which the extent of these problems and challenges can be ascertained more directly.

**Keywords:** Qatar, migration, Gulf, Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, transnationalism, survey

## 1 Introduction

By some estimates, labor migration to the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula comprises the third-largest transnational migration flow in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup> Current estimates suggest that more than eleven million foreign workers are currently employed in the region.<sup>2</sup> Given that many migrants remain in the GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar,

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**Andrew M. Gardner** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, USA, gardner@pugetsound.edu. **Silvia Pessoa** is Associate Teaching Professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, spessoa@qatar.cmu.edu. **Abdoulaye Diop** is Head of Research at SESRI at Qatar University, adiop@qu.edu.qa. **Kaltham Al-Ghanim** is Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University, kaltham.alghanim@qu.edu.qa. **Kien Le Trung** is Research Associate at SESRI at Qatar University, kienle@qu.edu.qa. **Laura Harkness** was the Research Associate on this research project, laura.m.harkness@gmail.com.

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<sup>1</sup> See ESCWA, *International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities*, UN Population and Development Report, 3rd Issue (2007), p. 4; Gardner, "Gulf Migration and the Family", *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1 (2011), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Baldwin-Edwards for a recent estimate [Baldwin-Edwards, *Labour Immigration and Labour Markets in the GCC Countries: National Patterns and Trends* (2011)]. Andrzej Kapiszewski estimated the 2004 total to be over 12.5 million [Kapiszewski, "Arab Versus Asian Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries", United Nations Secretariat (2006), p. 3].

Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) for only one or two contract periods, and considering that many of them are best conceptualized as emissaries of large Asian and African households that are deeply dependent on Gulf-sourced remittances, it seems obvious that the millions of foreign workers currently employed in the region are only the visible component of the total social field encompassed by Gulf migration.

However, the scale of labor migration to the Arabian Peninsula stands in stark contrast to the lack of data concerning labor migration in the region. In part, this lack can be attributed to the traditional peripheralization of the GCC states in the larger field of Middle Eastern studies. However, it is also due to the longstanding anxieties of the authoritarian regimes typical of the Peninsula, since research and scholarly inquiry focused on the transnational migrant populations has often been made difficult, if not impossible, by the results of such anxieties. Yet even in Qatar — where for the last five years the state has, ostensibly, been interested in learning more about the living and working conditions facing migrants in the region — relevant publications and accessible data concerning migrant populations remain few and far between.

This paper seeks to address this dearth of material by describing a subset of the findings produced by a large, two-year project funded by the Qatar National Research Fund.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that much of the qualitative and ethnographic work concerned with labor migration in the Gulf States has been focused on the challenges, problems, and rights-based issues facing migrants in the region, this project sought specifically to develop a quantitative portrait of issues previously identified through qualitative and ethnographic analysis.<sup>4</sup> We also sought to verify, and potentially improve upon, the findings of the occasional small-scale survey projects that underpin substantial portions of contemporary analysis of migration in the Gulf.<sup>5</sup> Building on the sampling framework developed by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University for its 2010 Omnibus Survey, our research team devised a structure through which a representative sample of 1,189 low-income migrants in Qatar was surveyed during February and March 2012.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the team conducted a series of follow-up interviews with a

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<sup>4</sup> Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (1997); Longva, “Keeping Migrant Workers in Check: The Kafala System in the Gulf”, *Middle East Report* 211 (1999); Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka’s Migrant Housemaids* (2000); Kapiszewski, *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf Cooperation Council States* (2001); Jureidini, *Migrant Workers and Xenophobia in the Middle East* (2003); Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (2010); Gardner, “Engulfed: Indian Guest Workers, Bahraini Citizens and the Structural Violence of the Kafala System”, in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and Freedom of Movement*, eds De Genova and Peutz (2010); Gardner, “Gulf Migration and the Family”; Strobl, “Policing Housemaids: The Criminalization of Domestic Workers in Bahrain”, *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (2009); Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (2011).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see: Human Rights Watch, *Dubai: Migrant Workers at Risk* (2003); Human Rights Watch, *Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates* (2006); Human Rights Watch, “*The Island of Happiness*”: *Exploitation of Migrant Workers on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi* (2009); Human Rights Watch, *Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022* (2012); Human Rights Watch, *For a Better Life: Migrant Worker Abuse in Bahrain and the Government Reform Agenda* (2012); Endo and Afram, *The Qatar-Nepal Remittance Corridor*, World Bank Study (2011); ITUC, “Hidden Faces of the Gulf Miracle”, *Union View* 21 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> The first Omnibus Survey was conducted by SESRI in Qatar in 2010, and looked at “Qatari citizens, resident expatriates, and migrant laborers” [SESRI, “First Annual Omnibus Survey: A Survey of Life in Qatar” (2010), p. i]. Our project utilized portions of the SESRI team’s sampling frame, particularly that for labor camps, and significantly expanded the scope of questions included in the survey, so as to reflect

subset of the survey participants throughout 2012, to help clarify the particularly puzzling and complex issues revealed through our analysis of the survey data.

Overall, the survey administered to a random sample of these low-income migrants in Qatar was attentive to ninety-five distinct variables. This is obviously too large a number to be dealt with in any comprehensive fashion here. Instead, the analysis concentrates on the sets of variables pertaining to three distinct questions. First, what do these data reveal about the basic characteristics of the low-income population of laborers in Qatar? Second, what do these data reveal about the variations in the ways migrants obtain work in Qatar? Third, what perceptible roles do nationality, ethnicity, and religion play in determining migrants' various experiences while abroad in Qatar? Finally, the discussion and conclusion of this paper provide an opportunity to explore further what these data reveal about the labor problems typically portrayed by ethnographic and qualitative research conducted amongst this migrant population. Following a brief discussion of the methodology used, these questions and issues provide a roadmap to the remainder of the paper.

## 2 Survey data and methodology

The key to our contribution to the existing literature is the representative sample underlying these findings. Our goal was to explore the experiences of low-income workers in Qatar. Therefore, our sample was limited to foreign workers with an income of less than QR2,000 (US\$549) per month. This arbitrary delineation, based on ethnographic work conducted in Qatar and elsewhere in the GCC region, seemed to represent a viable threshold between the "unskilled" and "low-skill" underclass of foreign workers and the "semi-skilled" lower middle class.<sup>7</sup> Our respondents, framed as "low-income" migrants or laborers in the remainder of this paper, comprise the largest segment of the foreign workforce in Qatar and, indeed, in all the GCC states.

However, beyond this purposeful limitation, our sampling strategy did not allow us any access to workers in the domestic sector — the drivers, nannies, maids, gardeners, servants, and other domestic workers typically employed by Qatari and elite expatriate households. Although the domestic sector of the foreign workforce in the region has been the subject of intensive scrutiny and international rights-based criticism, social norms in Qatar make it extremely difficult for survey enumerators (and, for that matter, any outsiders) to have access to these men and women. This is a noteworthy caveat to the findings presented here, and will be further discussed in the paper's conclusion.

As noted, the sampling frame was based on a comprehensive list of migrant labor dwellings in Qatar assembled by SESRI at Qatar University for Qatar's first omnibus survey. These labor camps were divided into five strata, ranging from very small (those with less than seven inhabitants) to very large (those with 200 or more inhabitants). Based on these five categories, we employed proportionate stratified sampling to randomly select larger numbers of subjects from

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the substantial ethnographic findings that had explored the experiences of transnational migrants over the past decade. The list of labor camps comprising this sampling frame was assembled by SESRI, in cooperation with the government ministries that administer utilities to these camps. As discussed in the conclusion of this paper, while this sampling frame allowed us to derive a representative sample of low-income migrants in Qatar, it does not include the smaller portion of migrants who live and work in the domestic sector, or the small but substantial portion of migrants who do not dwell in "labor camps".

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the ethnographic project *A Longitudinal Analysis of Low-Income Laborers in Contemporary Qatar*, funded by the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, and resulting in: Gardner, "Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States", in *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*, eds Kamrava and Babar (2012).

larger camps and smaller numbers of subjects from smaller camps. Supervisors initially visited each camp to deploy this sampling procedure and identify the languages spoken by randomly selected subjects.<sup>8</sup> These subjects were then visited by a linguistically appropriate survey enumerator.

In addition to the pre-test of the survey instrument and debriefing meetings with interviewers and supervisors, all the interviewers were trained for a period of three days before the survey began. With this training, the research team was able to ensure that all the interviewing staff members had a clear understanding of the objectives of the study and a detailed understanding of the survey instrument. Overall, 1,189 interviews were completed using this procedure, yielding a maximum margin of error of  $\pm 4.4\%$ . This overall sampling strategy was to ensure the representativeness of the sample and to increase the accuracy of the estimates derived from the data set.

The term “low-income migrant” requires a brief explanation, particularly as we envision this as an unfamiliar and perhaps unwelcome addition to the lexicon of terms used to describe the foreign workers on the Arabian Peninsula. In the authors’ long experience with the population of foreign workers in the region, we developed a deep skepticism about any strong correlation between skill levels and income levels in the Gulf. The term “low-income migrant” reflects this conviction and the nature of our sample. Our concern was only with the migrants’ economic class in the Gulf, and was consciously blind to the fact that many of these migrant men and women earning QR2,000 or less have extraordinary training, skills, and previous work experiences that go unremunerated in the Gulf labor force.

### 3 Basic characteristics of low-income migrants in Qatar

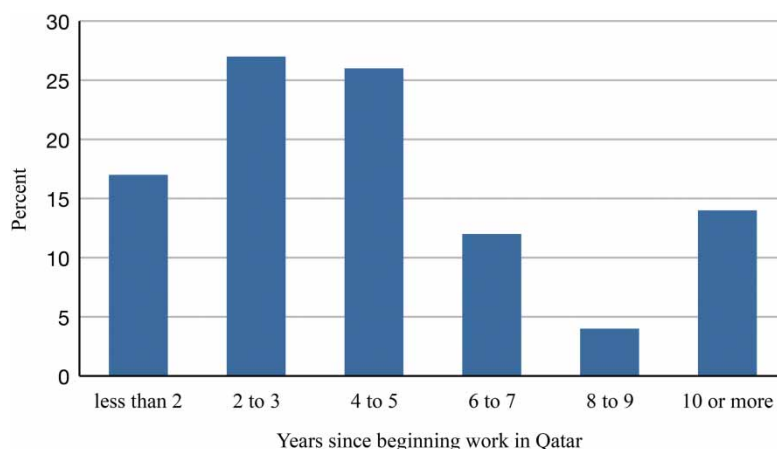
The low-income migrants in our sample came from more than twenty-five different countries. The largest contingent of low-income laborers in Qatar, comprising 39% of the total sample, came from Nepal. India (29%) Sri Lanka (9%), and Bangladesh (9%) were next, followed by the Philippines (5%), Pakistan (3%), and Egypt (3%).<sup>9</sup> The remaining nationalities made up about 2% of the total sample. Almost all the migrants surveyed were male, which is explained partly by the preponderance of male laborers in this transnational circuit and partly also by our sampling frame’s omission of the domestic sector in which many low-income female migrants are employed. In addition, the low-income labor migrant population in Qatar is relatively young, with an average and median age of thirty-two and thirty years, respectively. Overall, 72% of low-income migrants in Qatar were married at the time of the survey, and on average low-income migrants supported an average of 2.4 children.

Considering the states that send the most low-income laborers to Qatar, the religious constitution of the low-income workforce was unsurprising. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) were Hindu, and a substantial number were Muslim (37%). Smaller proportions of the workers identified themselves as Christians (9%), Buddhists (5%), or adherents to other religions (less than one percent). Education levels of low-income migrants in Qatar vary, with low-income migrants

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<sup>8</sup> Initial visits by survey supervisors provided an opportunity to update information about the labor camp (or collective household) and to inform camp managers about the research project’s official relationship and its sponsorship by the Qatar government. In the context of the GCC, such visits improve cooperation and facilitate access to the camps. In the survey, 3.76% of the labor camps (nineteen of 504) denied our team access. Two of those nineteen camps or collective households were for female labor.

<sup>9</sup> These percentages differ slightly from those previously reported in Qatar. For example, the 2010 SESRI Omnibus survey found that the Filipino migrant population made up 10% of the total migrant population. These differences are partly explained by the continually shifting sources of foreign labor throughout the GCC, but more directly by the QR2,000 screening for monthly income deployed in this survey.



**Figure 1:** Duration of low-income migrants' stay in Qatar, 2012.

having on average completed 8.7 years of education. Almost all migrants in Qatar report themselves as being literate in their native language (93%). However, regarding the languages that they used in Qatar's public sphere, only 18% of low-income migrants reported being able to speak at least some Arabic, while approximately a third (32%) could speak at least some English.

One open question in the existing literature ponders the duration of stay for transnational migrants in the GCC. While there is no question that the presence of a foreign underclass has become a perennial demographic characteristic of all the GCC States, some have suggested that individual transnational migrants are increasingly extending their stay in the region.<sup>10</sup> Our data are more indicative of the opposite — that the low-income labor force in Qatar remains a temporary and transnationally cyclical labor force. The duration of stay of low-income migrants in Qatar varied, from less than a year to forty-five years, with a mean of 5.5 years and a median of four years. Over half of the migrants we sampled (58%) had been present in Qatar four years or less. The graph in Figure 1 presents the overall distribution of the migrants' length of stay in Qatar in early 2012, the time of the survey.

Our survey also asked subjects to estimate how long they intended to remain in Qatar. While their long-range plans and aspirations are frequently scuttled by the challenging realities of life as a labor migrant in Qatar, the migrants in our survey intended to remain in Qatar for an average of 3.6 years beyond the date they were surveyed (after excluding 17% of respondents who said they did not know). However, a bit more inspection of the data revealed interesting and noteworthy patterns. First, of the 1,189 migrants surveyed, over one-fifth intended to return home after the conclusion of their current contract. Moreover, the average intended stay was much higher for migrants from some sending states, such as Pakistan (6.8 years) and Egypt (6 years), than for those from Bangladesh (4.9), India (3.7), the Philippines (3.2), and Nepal (2.6 years). Overall, we believe this quantitative portrait of low-income migrants in Qatar indicates that substantial numbers of migrants — and particularly South Asian migrants — clearly conceptualize their stay as a temporary one. This portrait of low-income migrants in Qatar generally fits descriptions of the migrant population as a temporary and transnationally cyclical population rather than a growing and imminent population of semi-permanent diasporic residents.

<sup>10</sup> For example, this was a central premise in a recent workshop convened at Oxford University, entitled *Migrations to the Gulf Countries: From Exception to Normality*, held on 18 June 2010.

Further extending this hypothesis, our survey found that low-income migrants in Qatar typically had little or no previous work experience outside their home country. The great majority of low-income foreign workers in Qatar (68%) were first-time migrants. Conversely, about one-third (32%) of the low-income migrants in Qatar had previous experience working outside their country of origin. Nearly two-thirds of those previous migrants (64%, or 21% of the total sample) had previous work experience specifically in one of the GCC states. Although previous labor migration experience was varied, low-income migrants in Qatar were employed in a constellation of different vocations. Altogether, survey participants listed more than eighty different job titles. A quarter (25%) of the participants described their job title as “laborer” or “helper”, job titles that are often (but not always) analogous to the Euro-American idea of a “construction worker”. Other common responses included driver (10%), cleaner (6%), mason (5%), carpenter (6%), electrician (4%), painter (3%), salesman (3%), and security guard (3%).

The average and median monthly salaries reported by the foreign workers in our sample were, respectively, QR1,061 (US\$291) and QR1,000 (US\$274). On average, the workers in our sample sent home an average of QR764 (US\$209) every month, with an average monthly living expense in Qatar of QR418 (US\$114). In addition to the migrants' reported basic salary, low-income migrants reported various other sources of remuneration while in Qatar: over half (56%) worked overtime and received overtime pay, with a monthly average amount of QR327 (US\$90); a third (33%) received a food allowance, with a monthly average amount of QR228 (US\$63); only 2% of the migrants surveyed had additional remunerated part-time work, with an average monthly supplemental income of QR399 (US\$110). As many researchers have noted, much of the money remitted from Qatar and the other Gulf states is typically used, first and foremost, to service debts incurred to send migrants to the Gulf states in the first place. As is discussed in Section 4 of this paper, low-income laborers in Qatar report a mean total migration cost of US\$1,031. While nearly three out of ten (29%) of our respondents reported paying nothing for migration, the amount of the average migration cost for low-income migrants is considerable, given the average of the salaries reported by respondents in our sample.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, the findings presented in this section generally align with the qualitative estimations described previously by researchers and scholars working in the GCC. Through the processes of chain migration, the composition of the low-income labor forces in other GCC states often differs significantly. Although the national proportions in these low-income migrant populations may vary between GCC countries, in the GCC states all the various migrant populations are nationally diverse. In Qatar, this low-income migrant labor force is also religiously diverse, and consists mostly of first-time migrants. Even though our sample was specifically tailored to locate and survey workers who make under QR2,000 a month, we were surprised by the variable levels of income within those parameters. In all these reported data, we saw ample evidence of a migration system that results in a transitory and temporary workforce. As reported, the vast majority of low-income migrants were relatively new arrivals in Qatar, and large numbers of our respondents wished to return home permanently at the conclusion of their current contract or after the contract following the current one. Although it is clear that foreign workers have become a perennial feature of GCC demography, we see little support for contentions that the majority of migrants in Qatar have established a more permanent life abroad or intend to do so.

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<sup>11</sup> In our data set, we utilized a “total cost of migration” estimate because we felt that the migrants themselves could provide us with a better and more reliable estimate than we could generate using any method that attempted to grapple with the diversity of costs they often face. For reliability, these costs were reported to us in the home (sending country) currency. Considering the fact that the migrants in our sample had arrived in Qatar in several different decades, we adjusted and converted these amounts to US dollars based on the appropriate exchange rates at the time the amount was paid.

#### 4 Arranging for work in Qatar

In the existing literature concerning labor migration in the Gulf states, there is little clarity about the processes and procedures by which potential migrants secure employment in Qatar or the other GCC states. With some notable exceptions, detailed qualitative portraits of the transnational labor brokerage system are not available.<sup>12</sup> In part, this is because more pressing issues (migrants' experiences while abroad, remittance flows to sending countries) have eclipsed concern for this particular and complicated juncture of the migration experience. Perhaps more importantly, the labor brokerage system in the sending states is difficult to study: labor brokers are reluctant to speak about their methods and profits, and the system itself is geographically diffuse. While it does not provide a comprehensive portrait of the mechanics of the labor brokerage system, this section of the paper does explore those parts of our data set that relate directly to the process by which employment is obtained in Qatar.

For readers unfamiliar with labor migration in Qatar and the Arab Gulf states, all migrants to the GCC submit to the sponsorship system (in Arabic, the *kafala*). This system locks the foreign worker to a particular job, and that worker's sponsor is his or her primary representative in the institutions and ministries that regulate the migrant population. He or she cannot legally obtain other employment in Qatar without that sponsor's permission. As a system, the *kafala* exists at the junction between law and custom,<sup>13</sup> reinforced by legal contracts, typically two years in length, signed by most migrants. Over the past decades, the work visas that permit men and women to enter this employment system have been commodified. Prospective migrants often pay hundreds or even thousands of dollars for the right to work in Qatar or one of the other Gulf States for two years<sup>14</sup>; in doing so they typically risk significant familial and household resources. The debts incurred to meet these migration costs remain in the sending country; migrants in Qatar often spend their first year or more attempting to pay back the debts incurred for the visa costs associated with their transnational migration.<sup>15</sup> Over the past decade, the *kafala* (sponsorship system) and the labor brokerage system have been the focal point of a global human-rights-based critique.<sup>16</sup> Qatar and many of the other GCC states have long been exploring the possibility of altering aspects of this system in response to these assessments.<sup>17</sup>

In our sample, over half of the migrants (56%) reportedly obtained their position in Qatar through a labor broker in their home country. Most of the remainder secured their position through family connections (21%) or friends (22%) already working in Qatar. This clearly suggests that the formal labor migration system (labor brokerages in sending countries, mostly connected to manpower agencies or other employers in the receiving countries) continues to

<sup>12</sup> Notable exceptions include Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle* (2000); Breeding, "India-Persian Gulf Migration: Corruption and Capacity in Regulating Recruitment Agencies", in *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*, eds Kamrava and Babar (2012).

<sup>13</sup> The historical emergence of the *kafala* is perhaps best described by Elizabeth Frantz in *Exporting Subservience: Sri Lanka Women's Migration for Domestic Work in Jordan* (2011). For an explanation of the connections between culture and the *kafala* as law, see Gardner, "Engulfed", (2010), pp. 212–13.

<sup>14</sup> See Human Rights Watch, "Building a Better World Cup", pp. 2–3; ITUC, "Hidden Faces of the Gulf Miracle", p. 17; Pessoa et al., *The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar: The Workers' Perspective* (2008), p. 10; Gardner, "Engulfed" (2010), p. 213.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; also see Gardner, "Gulf Migration and the Family" (2011); Gardner, "Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States", in *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*, eds Kamrava and Babar (2012); Breeding, "India-Persian Gulf Migration".

<sup>16</sup> For example, ITUC, "Hidden Faces of the Gulf Miracle"; Human Rights Watch, *Building a Better World Cup*.

<sup>17</sup> Anon., "Kuwait to Get Rid of Kafala System", *The Gulf Blog*, 27 Sept. 2012; Toumi, "Qatar May Allow Trade Unions, Scrap 'Sponsorships' for Foreign Workers", *Gulf News*, 1 May 2012.

co-exist with the informal, network-based system that historically characterized labor migration to the region. In addition to these variable pathways to employment in Qatar and the GCC, we found that over half (60%) of the migrants in our survey had friends or family who had previously migrated to the Gulf States. We interpret this number as notably low: despite decades of migration between the common sending states and the GCC, a vast reservoir of human capital with little or no experience with, and understanding of, the Gulf migration system continues to flow to Qatar and the other GCC states.

While there is often consternation in Qatar and the other GCC states about undocumented migrants, almost all (96%) of the low-income workers in our survey arrived under a formal work visa. Although previous qualitative analysis often portrays the associated work visa fees as a ubiquitous aspect of Gulf migration, we were surprised to find that only 71% of the migrants in our sample paid for their visa. Low-income migrants in Qatar paid an average of US\$1,031 for the right to work in Qatar for two years (with a median amount of US\$933). Since this is a substantial sum for most potential migrants and their respective households, and since a large majority of low-income migrants pay these work visa fees, our survey also explored how migrants assembled the necessary funds. The three most significant sources of funding for these trips were loans (reported by 45% of migrants surveyed), household/family savings (30%), and personal savings (26%).

Ideally, this transnational labor brokerage system provides potential migrants with an opportunity to inspect and sign a labor contract in the sending country prior to any agreement and prior to departure. However, in our survey less than half (44%) of low-income migrants signed a contract before departing for work in Qatar, and most (78%) of those who did sign a contract before departing for Qatar were required to sign another contract when they arrived in Qatar. Conversely, of the 56% of low-income migrants who did not sign a contract before departing, slightly more than two-thirds (67%) were required to sign one upon arrival. Overall, these findings point to a diversity of processes and arrangements that continue to coexist in Qatar: some migrants never sign a contract, some migrants sign one contract before departure, some migrants sign a contract only after arrival in Qatar, and some migrants sign contracts before departure and after arrival. The large number of low-income migrants who do not sign a contract before leaving for Qatar is surprising: without a signed contract prior to departure, new migrants have to rely on the verbal assurances of labor brokers, acquaintances, and friends working in Qatar.

Overall, the transnational labor brokerage system and the labor contracts in that system are portrayed as a key junction in the ongoing generation of labor problems, exploitation, and human trafficking in Qatar and the GCC.<sup>18</sup> The data presented here reinforce that analysis and more generally reinforce the role that misinformation, deception, and unrealistic expectations continue to play in the migration conduit which shuttles migrants to Qatar and the other GCC countries.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 Labor problems

Qatar and all the GCC states perennially occupy the lower rungs of the US Department of State's Human Trafficking Report and have, in the past decade, been subjected to scathing criticism for the various human rights violations systematically endured by migrants throughout the

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Building a Better World Cup*, pp. 8–9. Also see Gardner, “Gulf Migration and the Family”; Gardner, “Why Do They Keep Coming?”; Breeding, “India-Persian Gulf Migration”.

<sup>19</sup> See Gardner, “Why Do They Keep Coming?” for more detail.



region.<sup>20</sup> These reports and evaluations were preceded by a decade of ethnographic work that discerned many of the same problems and conditions amongst the population of foreign workers in the GCC states. Much of the existing work, while qualitative in nature, paints a fairly dire portrait of the living conditions and labor relations faced by migrants in the region. This section reviews our findings in relation to several of the most commonly discussed problems reported in the existing literature: passport confiscation, lack of documentation, job switching, salary withholding, and problems related to labor camps and living conditions common to low-income foreign workers in Qatar and the neighboring states.

One of the most commonly reported problems in current research amongst migrants in the Gulf states focuses on the control and possession of the migrant's passport. By law, Qatari sponsors or their delegates are allowed to possess the passports of the workers they sponsor only for the period of time required to complete residency or renewal processes.<sup>21</sup> However, as researchers and human rights activists have long noted, it is common practice for employers to maintain possession of worker passports for the entire duration of their stay abroad.<sup>22</sup> This practice is often framed by employers as means of ensuring that the workers do not flee the country or otherwise abscond from their contractual obligations. Our findings confirmed the widespread nature of passport confiscation amongst the lowest economic segment of the foreign workforce: 90% of the respondents in our survey reported that their employer possessed their passport.<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that our qualitative interviews also revealed that some migrants were content with the status quo, particularly since they felt they had no secure location at their labor camps in which to store important documents like the passport. Regardless of the migrant perspective on this issue, the high proportion of migrants who lack possession of their passport is a testament to the poor enforcement of this law.

Although possession of the passport remains a predominant issue for migrants, sponsors and their proxies also fail frequently to document, properly and legally, the workers they bring to Qatar under the sponsorship system. Small sections of the foreign workforce are partly undocumented, in the sense that they have never received a residence permit or that a previously valid residence permit was never renewed. In our survey, 7% of the foreign workers reported that they did not have a QID (residence permit). Similarly, a much larger percentage (56%) of the workers lacked a government-mandated "health card", which is needed for accessing health care in the state's expansive public health system. Failing to provide low-income migrants with a residence permit and/or a health card is generally assumed to result from employers seeking to avoid the fees and surcharges levied by the government for each of these types of official documentation.

Salary withholding is also commonly identified as a widespread problem amongst this segment of the foreign workforce in Qatar and the other GCC states. Through the imbalances

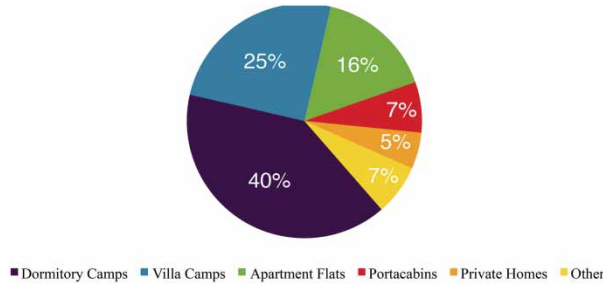
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<sup>20</sup> US Dept of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2007*; Human Rights Watch, *Building Towers, Cheating Workers*; Human Rights Watch, *"The Island of Happiness"*; Human Rights Watch, *Building a Better World Cup*; Human Rights Watch, *For a Better Life*.

<sup>21</sup> Jaffir, "Sponsorship Law: A Comparative Study of the 20th Century Sponsorship Law and the 21st Century Sponsorship Law in Qatar", *Law Update* 219 (2009).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Longva, *Walls Built on Sand*; Longva, "Keeping Migrant Workers in Check"; Human Rights Watch, *Dubai: Migrant Workers at Risk*; McGeehan, "Trafficking in Persons or State Sanctioned Exploitation? The False Narrative of Migrant Workers in the United Arab Emirates", *Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law*, 26 (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Although previous surveys in Qatar have, at times, utilized different methodologies and designs, earlier reports concerning the frequency of passport confiscation in Qatar have been strikingly similar: 91% [SESRI, "First Annual Omnibus Survey", p. 17] and 88% [Pessoa et al., *The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar*, p. 11].



**Figure 2:** Living quarters for low-income labor migrants in Qatar.

of power resulting from the sponsorship arrangement, through the lack of enforcement or regulation of employer practices, and through the inexperience of many first-time migrants to the region, unscrupulous sponsors can readily withhold months of salary from employees. In our findings, 21% of low-income workers in Qatar reported that they received their salary on time only *sometimes*, *rarely*, or *never*. This should be compared with the 79% who reported that they “usually” or “always” received their salary on time. The average amount owed to these workers was QR1,750 (US\$481) with a median amount of QR1,400 (US\$385).

Our survey also asked respondents to identify the employers’ justifications for withholding their salaries. Those justifications included deductions related to “visa fees”, absence from the workplace, perceived poor job performance, “agent fees”, insurance, and a “security deposit.” Survey respondents, quite commonly, also reported that no reason was given at all. While most low-income workers in Qatar always or usually receive their salary on time, the experience of this 21% of the low-income workforce suggests that employers and their proxies, empowered by the sponsorship relationship and the lack of oversight, can and sometimes do act with impunity with regard to their employees’ salary.

Our findings related to “job switching” — the reportedly common scenario in which migrants are promised one job in their home country but find themselves on arrival directed to work in an entirely different job — were somewhat ambivalent. In Qatar, 15% of low-income migrants found themselves put to work in a different position when they arrived. Similarly, 20% arrived in Qatar to a salary different from the one promised to them in the sending country. However, when we correlated these two sets of workers with answers to a second survey question concerning overall job satisfaction in Qatar, in both cases the number of migrants who self-reported as being “satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with their job was significantly higher than those who were “somewhat unsatisfied” or “not satisfied at all” (78% versus 47% in the case of having the same job, and 78% versus 56% in the case of receiving the promised salary). These findings suggest that while “job switching” (and alterations to the promised salary) is relatively common, those changes are not always perceived by migrants as detrimental to their overall interests.

Finally, our research team asked low-income migrants a series of questions related to the labor camps in which most of them live. A great majority of the low-income migrants in Qatar (88%) reported that their accommodation in Qatar was provided by their employer, while the rest arranged for their own accommodation. Regarding the labor camps themselves, survey enumerators recorded the type of camp for all participants in the survey. Dormitory-style camps were the most common (40%), followed by “villa camps” (single Qatari family homes now occupied by contingents of workers) (25%), apartment flats (16%), portacabins (7%), private homes (5%), and other types of accommodations (7%) (Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> As noted earlier in this paper, migrants in Qatar reported an average of just over six people per room. The survey also inquired about

the supplies of electricity, water, and the provision of air conditioning. Overall, small proportions of low-income migrants faced challenges in this area: 5% reported that they sometimes or never had sufficient water at their camp, 2% reported that they sometimes or never had a sufficient supply of electricity at their camp, and 2% reported that they sometimes or never had ample air conditioning in their rooms.

## 6 Nationality, ethnicity, religion, and migrant success

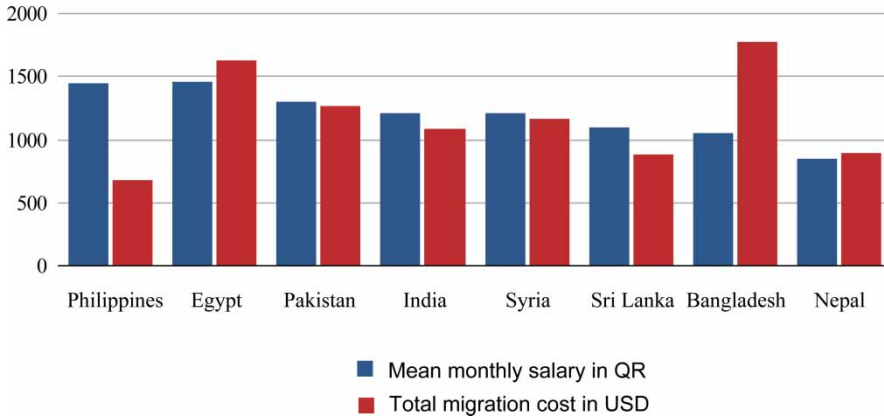
One of the open questions amenable to quantitative analysis in labor migration studies in the Arabian Gulf concerns the variability of migration experiences amongst the low-income population. So far this paper has considered the surveyed population as a homogeneous group. In this section, however, we examine and explore patterns and variations in the circumstances and experiences of low-income migrants, with particular attention to variations by nationality, ethnicity, and religion. Although the sample sizes for some of these migrant sub-populations were small, we discerned the significant role played by some of these variables in determining low-income laborers' circumstances and experiences in Qatar. Because of the limitations of our sample, these findings should be understood as suggestive rather than representative.

With the limitations of the sample in mind, the data allowed us to explore the impact of nationality on migrant experiences and outcomes. Significant differences are readily apparent in the basic salary levels received by low-income migrant laborers from different sending countries when obtaining work in Qatar. Basic monthly salaries for low-income workers from the Philippines (mean = QR1,443) and Egypt (mean = QR1,454) were, for example, substantially higher than those obtained by workers from Nepal (mean = QR853), the lowest earning nationality in Qatar's population of low-income migrants. Moreover, obvious correlations between average monthly salaries and the value of the modified Qatari work visa were not apparent (Figure 3): for instance, low-income Bangladeshi migrants paid much more for the right to work in Qatar than other nationalities, but arrived to earn some of the lowest wages (mean = QR1,050/month) amongst all low-income migrants. Conversely, Filipino workers were amongst the highest earners from our sample of low-income workers (mean = QR1,443/month), but paid the least in total migration costs to come to Qatar.

Overall, these data and variations by nationality can be partly explained by a confluence of forces and processes in the transnational migration industry that shuttles workers from sending states to Qatar and the other states of the GCC. Some sending states have established bilateral agreements or unilateral policies that insulate migrants from exploitative labor relations, that instigate minimum wages for their transnational migrants, or that help potential migrants navigate the complexities of a transnational work arrangement before they travel abroad. In the Philippines, for example, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 established a certification process for host countries, increased oversight of recruitment agencies, levied penalties for common offenses (including illegal recruitment), and much more.<sup>25</sup> Variations induced by

<sup>24</sup> For more information and detail concerning labor camps in Qatar and the GCC, see: Bruslé, "Who's in a Labour Camp? A Socio-Economic Analysis of Nepalese Migrants in Qatar", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 35–6 (2009–10); Gardner, "Labor Camps in the Gulf States", *Viewpoints: Migration and the Gulf* (2010); Marsden, "Lords of a Dubai Labour Camp: Pakistani Migrants in the Gulf", *ILAS Newsletter* 49 (2008).

<sup>25</sup> See Agunias, Aghazarm, and Battistella, *Labour Migration from Columbo Process Countries*, International Organization for Migration (2012).



**Figure 3:** Monthly basic salary and migration costs, by nationality.

**Table I:** Averages for key variables, by ethnicity.

	Basic salary (QAR)	Total migration cost (USD)	Workdays/ week	Roommates	Owed money by employer?
Arab	1,446	1,604	5.87	4.93	0.0%
South Asian	1,028	1,052	6.18	6.17	11.0%

these policies and agreements often coalesce with the organic patterning of labor migration to the region, a process through which men and women from particular sending states are perceived by GCC-based sponsors, manpower agencies, and employers as “appropriate” for particular types of work (Indonesian women as domestic servants, West African migrants as security guards, and so forth). Combined with the process of chain migration (where migrants already in Qatar arrange for friends or acquaintances to follow their migratory path) and price-based competition in the globalized labor market, numerous forces and processes collude in patterning this transnational migration flow over time.

We were also interested in the impact of ethnicity and cultural affiliation on migration experiences. To gauge the differences in the migration experiences by ethnicity, we classified all of our respondents into one of three categories: South Asian, Arab, or Other. “South Asian” included low-income migrant workers from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In our sample, “Arab” included migrant workers primarily from Egypt, along with a few migrant workers from Syria. The classification of “Other”, omitted from the tables, included migrants from Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. While many of the variables established in our survey yielded no discernible differences when examined through the lens of ethnicity, we noted significant differences in several key areas when comparing the experiences of these two ethnic groups (Table I). For example, although our sample included only small numbers of Arab migrants, those migrants’ salaries were, on average, QR418 (US\$114) higher than their South Asian counterparts. Those higher salaries, however, corresponded with higher up-front costs for migration to Qatar. On average, low-income migrants from Egypt and Syria paid almost QR552 (US\$151) more for the right to work in Qatar than the South Asians. Once in Qatar, Arab low-income migrants in our sample reported working fewer days per week and

**Table II:** Averages for key variables for South Asian migrants, by religion.

	Basic salary (QAR)	Total migration cost (USD)	Workdays/ week	Roommates	Owed money by employer?
Muslim	1,169	1,190	6.10	5.60	13.16%
Hindu	916	984	6.22	6.63	9.46%

living in slightly less-crowded conditions; unlike their South Asian counterparts, they reported no problems with salary withholding (Table I).<sup>26</sup>

The data do not allow us to ascertain some of the causal forces determining these differences, but we can at least speculate on the basis of our own observations, qualitative follow-up interviews, and other previous ethnographic work. However, from those sources we speculate that even low-income Arab migrants, with a cultural and linguistic facility in Qatari society, are better able to assert their basic rights, build and call upon social capital while abroad, navigate the bureaucratic complexities of work in Qatar, and respond appropriately to alterations in their living and working situation while abroad. While the total cost of migration to Qatar is higher for this Arab sub-population of the low-income workforce, our data reveal that their living and working conditions are substantially better than those of their South Asian counterparts.

With those findings concerning ethnicity and migration in hand, we approached the same issues again through the lens of religion. By distilling only those cases where our respondents were South Asian, we were able to examine the impact of religious affiliation on the migration experience and circumstances, while controlling for ethnicity (Table II). Our findings were much less conclusive than when driven by ethnicity alone: While low-income Muslim migrants from South Asia earn an average of QR248 more than their Hindu counterparts and live in less-crowded conditions, their workdays per week are almost equal, and Muslim low-income foreign workers from South Asia actually report a higher frequency of employers withholding their salary than their Hindu counterparts (Table II). In our interpretation, these data suggest that unlike ethnicity, cultural affiliation, and fluency in Arabic, religious affiliation alone does not play a discernibly significant role in the migrant's experience in the foreign low-income workforce in Qatar.

Overall, while our general findings suggest that low-income migrant laborers in Qatar face a similar regime of strictures, practices, and challenges, there is significant variation within the total population of low-income migrants. Of the three variables explored in this section, nationality and ethnicity seem to play the most significant role in shaping migrant experiences. In part, these differences can be explained by the historical development and subsequent differentiation of the migration apparatus in each sending state. Over time, we hypothesize, migration experiences and migration costs become established and normalized in a variety of different cultural and ethnic contexts. The large and substantial fees paid to labor brokers in Bangladesh, for example, become normalized over time in Bangladesh, while the smaller fees paid by Filipino migrants are, over time, normalized in the Philippines as the typical and appropriate costs of Gulf employment. At the same time, however, there is the striking coincidence that the Philippines, with one of the most active states in terms of its regulation and management of this transnational migration flow, is also the nation with the lowest migration costs in the constellation of countries sending low-income migrants to Qatar.

<sup>26</sup> Note that the small numbers of Arab migrants in our sample make these data speculative at best.

We also recognize that market forces most certainly play a role in this calculus. The fact that the lowest paid national contingent (the Nepali contingent) is also the largest component of Qatar's low-income labor force is what one would expect in an international market in which labor is the commodity. Our interpretation of these data is influenced by the numerous stories we heard in qualitative interviews concerning entire national contingents of low-income laborers being replaced by less-expensive migrants from Nepal or elsewhere. While we recognize the important role played by the forces implicit in this international market for labor in determining the constitution of the low-income labor force in Qatar and the other GCC states, the data presented in this section also point to the role of nationality, ethnicity, and cultural affiliation in shaping the experiences of the men and women in the low-income foreign labor force.

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

The burgeoning quantity of research, studies, and reports concerned with Qatar and its neighbors has spotlighted the junction between labor migration and human rights in the GCC. Our growing understanding of this migratory conduit has long relied on a qualitative, ethnographic foundation. That ethnographic work has explored and unpacked the complex arrangements and junctures that typify this migrant flow, and has more recently been joined by a florescence of publications from non-governmental organizations and other state-based actors and institutions. While all of this collective work has been instrumental in shifting concern with labor migration in the GCC away from the periphery of scholarly and public attention, our collective understanding remains largely limited to ethnographically produced insights and their corroboration in small-scale studies and rapid appraisals.<sup>27</sup> The data set and analysis presented in this paper are intended to address this issue, and to add a statistical foundation to our current understanding of labor migration in Qatar and the GCC as a whole. While we see no points of major disagreement with the existing canon of research concerning migrants in the Gulf states, the findings presented here help by adding to the expanding and nuanced portrait of the labor migrant in Arabia. These findings also indicate a host of more specific issues that merit further research and analysis.

From our vantage point, some of those specific issues would include the fact that low-income migrants pay extraordinarily different amounts for the right to work in Qatar for two years. These amounts certainly vary by sending nation, but they also coexist with the fact that some low-income migrants pay nothing at all. A better understanding of the brokerage system, the commodification of the work visa, and the circumstances that produce exceptions to the norm is needed. A significant percentage of low-income migrants also encounter a constellation of labor problems in Qatar, from the almost ubiquitous relinquishing of their passports to sponsors or sponsors' proxies to the non-payment of promised wages and various fees and deductions appropriated from their promised salaries. While the analysis presented here has been attentive to some of the ethnic, national, and religious patterns that may bring about these experiences, a better understanding of the legal and ministerial context that permits, condones, and/or overlooks these experiences is also needed.

Regarding the interpretation and findings presented in this paper, several important caveats are worth mentioning. First, because our sample of low-income migrants excluded all workers in the domestic sector, these findings do not incorporate the problems and challenges that

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<sup>27</sup> For example, ITUC, "Hidden Faces of the Gulf Miracle"; Human Rights Watch, *Building Towers, Cheating Workers*; Human Rights Watch, "The Island of Happiness"; Human Rights Watch, *Building a Better World Cup*; Human Rights Watch, *For a Better Life*; Gardner, *City of Strangers*.

ethnographic work portrays as commonplace (and perhaps even endemic) to that sector.<sup>28</sup> Considering the observations and findings found in previous work focused on the domestic sector, we suspect that many of the frequencies ascertained here — and particularly those concerned with labor problems — would rise if our sample had incorporated migrant workers in the domestic sector.

Furthermore, while we hope that these findings can eventually be correlated and compared with similar quantitative data describing the low-income labor migrant population in other GCC states, we recognize that a confluence of forces has, historically, patterned different demographic constitutions in those receiving states, as well as different experiences for low-income migrants. We expect that such a comparison would largely support the contention that the GCC states generally comprise a singular and fairly homogeneous experience for low-income migrants, but also that noteworthy and possibly substantial differences would be observed as a result of different policies, laws, bilateral agreements, enforcement, and labor culture specific to each GCC state.

With regard to what these findings contribute conceptually to our understanding of labor migration in Arabia, we suggest that first and foremost the data described here point to the variability of the migration experience in Qatar. As previous work has argued, by distributing the responsibility of regulating and governing foreign workers to sponsors and their proxies, the *kafala* produces highly variable experiences amongst migrants in the region.<sup>29</sup> This also seems to be the portrait resulting from our review of the data sketched in this paper. Without a proactive and established legal and regulatory system in place and in operation, the fate of a low-income migrant worker depends heavily on his or her sponsor and that sponsor's proxies. Low-income migrants in Qatar encounter all sorts of different challenges and difficulties, although in many realms of the migration experience there is extraordinary variation in the frequency and impact of these issues. We interpret this variation as the direct result of the *kafala* arrangement and the variability it structures.

Finally, although the *kafala* is paramount in framing the findings presented here, it is also important to note that few Qataris are employed in positions that directly supervise and manage low-income migrants in Qatar. Unlike Bahrain, Oman, and some other GCC states, Qatar's extraordinary per-capita wealth allows most citizens to secure public-sector employment. While citizens may be partners, silent partners, owners, or hold other positions in the business concerns that employ these low-income migrants, it is typical of Qatar that the individuals directly involved in the governance of contingents of foreign laborers are themselves migrants. As this suggests, the data presented here should not be framed as evidence of how transnational migrants are simply exploited by Qataris in Qatar. Rather, with both debt and money circulating transnationally through that migration system, with migrants themselves coming from a variety of different sending states, and with other migrants often directly responsible for some or most of the challenges and exploitation they face while abroad in Qatar, it is difficult to construe this migration system and the problems that it currently produces as a purely Qatari — or even Arab — problem. Instead, the data presented here further confirm an understanding of labor migration in the GCC states as the manifestation of a truly transnational migration industry.

<sup>28</sup> Nagy, "'This Time I Think I'll Try a Filipina': Global and Local Influences on the Relations between Foreign Household Workers and their Employers in Doha, Qatar", *City and Society* 10 (1998), pp. 83–103; Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle* (2000); Strobl, "Policing Housemaids" (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Longva, *Walls Built on Sand* (1997); Gardner, *City of Strangers* (2010).

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