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# Gulf Migration and the Family

ANDREW M. GARDNER

**Abstract:** For many decades the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have served as primary migratory destinations for tens of millions of individuals from South Asia, West Asia, and other points in the Indian Ocean world. While both historic and substantial in scale, these migration flows remain some of the most understudied movements in the contemporary world. This paper begins with an overview of the current state of scholarship concerned with Gulf migration. The remainder of the paper frames Gulf migration through the lens of family. The paper first considers the impact of Gulf migration upon the families and households that remain in the sending countries. Next, the paper explores the particular dilemmas faced by those migrants whose families accompany them to the Gulf States. Finally, the paper concludes with an analysis of the impact of these migration flows upon local families in the Gulf States.

**Keywords:** migration; laborers; Gulf; GCC; Arabian Peninsula; Kuwait; Bahrain; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates; UAE; South Asia

## 1. Introduction

For tens of millions of families in South Asia, the Middle East, and portions of East and North Africa, the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula present the most significant migratory waypoint in the spectrum of possibilities they face. While the migratory conduits with one end-point in the Gulf States share many characteristics with those in other parts of the world, they also differ from other migration flows in noteworthy ways. One particularly notable difference concerns academic scholarship: analysis focused upon these particular migration flows is strikingly impoverished. Compared to those migratory conduits with one end-point in North America or Europe, for example, very little is known about these migrants, their experiences in the Gulf States, the processes that lie behind their decisions to migrate, or the way this migration reshapes family and community life in the places from which they come.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, quantitative

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<sup>1</sup> The notable exception to this state of affairs concerns the literature exploring remittances and remittance flows, as there is an abundance of work focused on this particular topic. Examples include: Azeez and Begum, "Gulf Migration, Remittances and Economic Impact", *Journal of Social Sciences: Interdisciplinary Reflection of Contemporary Society* 20 (2009), pp. 55–60; Labaki, "The Role of Transnational

data has been a particular blind spot in the analysis of these migration flows: while ethnographers and other qualitatively focused social scientists can tell us about the types of problems and challenges migrants encounter in the Gulf, scholars and policy makers continue to lack the ability to discuss the scope and frequency with which those problems and challenges occur. This dearth of scholarly attention is due to a confluence of factors, including the fact that only recently have the Gulf States developed the capacity to gather these sorts of data; the fact that through the dominant Orientalist discourse the Gulf States were, for many years, portrayed as a strange and anomalous component in the Middle East; and the fact that many of the Gulf States are perceived, perhaps correctly at times, as reticent to encourage research that might tarnish their emergent global reputations.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these hurdles, a slow but steady trickle of research has accumulated over the last fifteen years. Furthermore, with Qatar and several other Gulf States now actively encouraging migration research, it seems a particularly appropriate moment to cull a set of basic themes and findings from the existing literature. To that end, this paper seeks to accomplish two basic tasks. First, the paper provides a general overview of migration in the Gulf States. This overview includes a brief history of migration to the Arabian Peninsula and a more in-depth discussion of the commonalities the various migratory destinations of that peninsula share. Overall, this section comprises a broad introduction to migration to the Gulf, and is intended to provide a basic framework for comparison to migration flows in other parts of the world. In the latter half of the article, I examine the impact of Gulf migration upon the family, a task that I have divided into three distinct components. First, I explore the impact of Gulf migration upon the families that remain behind in the countries from which these migrants come. Second, I turn to the experiences of those migrants who arrive in the Gulf States as an intact familial unit. Finally, I consider the impact of these proportionally vast migrations upon the families in the Gulf societies that host these foreigners. In doing so, I draw on ethnographic data gathered by the author through a series of ethnographic projects conducted in Saudi Arabia (1999), the UAE (2002), Bahrain (2002–03), and Qatar (2008–10), and conclude that the twin foci of migrant remittances and

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Communities in Fostering Development in Countries of Origin”, Working Paper, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Beirut, Lebanon (2006); Zachariah and Rajan, “Migration, Remittances and Employment: Short-term Trends and Long-term Implications”, *Working Paper* 395 (2007); Prakash, “Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 33 (1998), pp. 3209–13; Mallick, “Do Remittances Impact the Economy? Some Empirical Evidences From a Developing Economy”, Working Paper 407, Center for Development Studies, Kerala (2008). For further support, please see almost all the references located here: ESCWA, *International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities*, UN Population and Development Report, 3rd Issue (2007).

<sup>2</sup> These points are broadly reinforced in the literature. For example, see: ESCWA, *International Migration and Development*, pp. 43–4; Labaki, *Transnational Communities*, p. 16; Willoughby, “Segmented Feminization and the Decline of Neopatriarchy in the GCC Countries of the Persian Gulf”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (2008), p. 193; Kapiszewski, *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf Cooperation Council States* (2001), pp. 26–7; Nair, “Return of Overseas Contract Workers and Their Rehabilitation and Development in Kerala (India): A Critical Account of Policies, Performance and Prospects”, *International Migration* 37 (1999), pp. 209–42; Demery, “Asian Labor Migration: An Empirical Assessment”, in *Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East*, eds. Arnold and Shah (1986), p. 19; Winckler, “The Challenge of Foreign Workers in the Persian/Arabian Gulf: The Case of Oman”, *Immigrants and Minorities* 19 (2000), pp. 23–52; Leonard, “South Asian Women in the Gulf: Families and Futures Reconfigured”, in *Trans-status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Sarker and De (2002), pp. 213–31; Shah, “Restrictive Labour Immigration Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Effectiveness and Implications for Sending Asian Countries”, Working Paper, ESCWA, Beirut, Lebanon (2006), p. 3.

migrants' human rights have eclipsed a sustained analysis of the broader sociological implications of Gulf migration and, more specifically, the role this migration has played in reshaping family structure and family dynamics in both sending and receiving states.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Migration to the Gulf States

Migration and movement have been key features of the Arabian Peninsula for the entirety of its populated history. Indeed, for the pastoral nomads of the Peninsula's interior, as well as the seafaring merchant peoples of its coastal regions, movements and interconnections were intricately intertwined in the livelihoods configured to survive in the harsh environments characteristic of the region. In considering the more recent history of the Arabian Peninsula and its peoples, migration in the region can be divided into three distinct historical periods. The first of these periods stretches back into the eras that predate accurate historical records, a period in which the cities of the Arabian littoral functioned as minor — and occasionally major — ports in the greater Indian Ocean world. The trans-regional interconnections established during this period were a product of the coastal cities' twin functions as, first, producers and exporters of the finest quality pearls, and second, as trans-shipment points for the caravans that carried on trade with the peoples of the Peninsula's interior regions. The travel journals from European visitors and colonial agents of this era portray these port cities as demographically heterogeneous urban centers where peoples from many distant ports had established a foothold as merchants, traders, laborers, and businessmen.<sup>4</sup> Banyan traders from South Asia were particularly prosperous members of these coastal communities. They built their economic position by importing cloth, rice, and other foodstuffs, and assorted sundry items from the Indian subcontinent, and sent the region's pearls back along those same trade routes. These prosperous South Asian merchants also served as bankers and advisors to the powerful indigenous families of the region, and simultaneously filled many key positions in the quasi-colonial British bureaucracy in the region.

The second distinct period in the migration history of the region was a direct product of this colonial era. While the colonial footprint on the region was varied, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Britain became increasingly enmeshed in the governance of regions that, in retrospect, consisted the fledgling Gulf States. The details of this history are beyond the scope of this paper and are explored at length elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Of note, however, is the fact that Britain's relations with Arabia were directed through the colonial apparatus of British India, a connection that forged a bureaucratic conduit through which increasing numbers of South Asian accountants, clerks, and others were drawn to the region. Through chain migration, an entrepreneurial class of South Asians soon followed this administrative colonial population. Amidst this second period of migration to the region, petroleum was discovered, and the industry to exploit that resource

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<sup>3</sup> The series of projects underlying this paper were funded by a variety of institutions. Fieldwork in Saudi Arabia was funded and supported by the Kingdom's Meteorological and Environmental Protection Agency in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Fieldwork in the United Arab Emirates was supported with funding from the US Foreign Language Area Studies Program; Fieldwork in Bahrain was supported by a Fulbright Fellowship and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, with sponsorship from the Bahrain Training Institute; fieldwork in Qatar was supported by a research grant from the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, by the Qatar National Research Fund's Undergraduate Research Experience Program, and by Qatar University.

<sup>4</sup> Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia, 1862–1863* (1865); Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* (1908 and 1915).

<sup>5</sup> Onley, *The Arabian Frontier Of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (2007).

slowly developed. This development drew even more foreigners to the region, including both skilled and unskilled expatriate Arabs and Persians.

The present (and ongoing) period in the migration history of the region commenced with the development of the region's petroleum industry, exponentially expanded in the 1970s, and continues uninterrupted to the present day. With the florescence of global demand for oil, the extraction industry grew rapidly in the region, and eventually yielded extraordinary dividends to the GCC states. Each of the states configured modernization and economic diversification plans to make use of this wealth, and those plans required heavy infrastructural development: cities would grow; highways would be constructed; electricity would be produced; new industries would prosper; universities, mosques, stadiums, hospitals, and federal buildings would be constructed and staffed. With the OPEC embargo of the early 1970s, the profits from petroleum sales multiplied, and thereby increased both the scale and pace of this infrastructural development. Faced with small and mostly unskilled indigenous labor forces, the GCC states began to draw increasing numbers of laborers from relatively inexpensive South Asian sources. By the mid-1980s, this trickle had turned into a massive flow as vast contingents of unskilled South Asian labor began to cross the Arabian Sea for the opportunities found in the Gulf States. By the conclusion of the twentieth century, the "typical" Gulf migrant had indelibly changed: for much of history, the typical Gulf migrant had been a merchant, entrepreneur, or skilled worker. Although foreigners continue to occupy all strata of the workforce, the great majority of contemporary migrants are unskilled laborers. This change corresponded with a shift in the ethnic composition of the labor force, as the growing need for inexpensive and unskilled labor diminished demand for expatriate Arab labor and further opened the transnational migratory conduits to the vast South Asian labor supply that now predominates in the Gulf States.

Over much of this history, the port towns that served as migratory destinations functioned as city-states in undelineated areas, as the central nodes in geographical sheikdoms, or later as quasi-colonial British Protected States. Today, all six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (or GCC) — that is, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman — are modern states with increasingly prominent global profiles. In English, this collection of states is referred to as the Gulf States, while in Arabic, it is referred to by the singular nomenclature of *al-Khaleej* (the Gulf), a moniker that yields a clear indication that these states are viewed both by themselves and by others as a singular socio-cultural area. Notably excluded from this community is Yemen, which is part of the Arabian Peninsula but lacks petroleum resources, and Iraq and Iran, neighbors on the Persian Gulf. In 1950, the Khaleeji states contained just over four million people; today, estimates place the current population at approximately thirty-nine million.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, while natural growth rates in the region are some of the highest in the developed world, much of this exponential population growth is the direct result of migration, and particularly these states' ongoing accommodation of transnational contingents of unskilled South Asian labor, the scale of which is quite significant: the Khaleeji states today form the third largest migratory destination after North America and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

In North America and Europe, even the most significant migration flows are accommodated as minorities in the host societies. In the Gulf States, however, the proportion of migrants to citizens

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<sup>6</sup> "The GCC in 2020: Outlook for the Gulf and the Global Economy", *The Economist*, Economics Intelligence Unit, 2009; Kapiszewski, "Arab Versus Asian Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries", Working Paper, ESCWA, Beirut, Lebanon (2006).

<sup>7</sup> ESCWA, *International Migration*, p. 4.

is much greater, yielding a demographic concoction quite different from other parts of the world. In all the Khaleeji states, the foreign population make up significant portions of the total population, while in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, citizens are vastly outnumbered by the foreign population. Moreover, in all the Gulf States, foreigners make up a majority of the total workforce. Ethnicity and nationality also structure this foreign workforce. White “westerners”, expatriate Arabs, and smaller numbers of Persians and South Asians are typically found in those lucrative positions not occupied by citizens, while the lower reaches of the migrant labor force are primarily South Asian, although smaller numbers of Egyptians, sub-Saharan Africans, and, more recently, Southeast Asians also fill these unskilled positions. Over time, the solidification of this stratified labor force has produced durable cultural conceptions about ethnicity and labor: migrants from the Philippines, for example, are seen as particularly well suited for positions in the service industries, while the relatively new sub-Saharan African migrant labor force is routed to jobs as security guards.

The Gulf States attempt to consign much of this unskilled population to enclaves, particular neighborhoods, planned “bachelor cities”, and peripheral industrial areas off the front stage of the Gulf cities. However, this “foreign matter” — a term Paul Dresch uses to describe these foreigners and the culture they bring with them — is so proportionally vast that it cannot be easily swept out of sight.<sup>8</sup> In practice, these foreign unskilled populations are a constant presence in the urban spaces of the Gulf: crowds of men overtake some public spaces during the weekend, and neighborhoods accommodating informal labor camps (in villas, for example) increasingly proliferate. This segregation, both organic and planned, is a key feature of the Gulf City.<sup>9</sup> Where the segregation between unskilled labor and the citizenry breaks down, consternation and conflict often result.<sup>10</sup> Many citizens in the Khaleeji states conceive of themselves as a besieged minority.<sup>11</sup> Asked about the experience and anxieties of living amongst such a large population of foreigners, one Qatari woman noted to me,

You see these foreigners everywhere, and it’s changing everything. Now there are so few women in the markets and stores. In Al Khor, my home, the stores are filled with [South Asian] workers, and they’re not respectful. They stare, and they won’t let you pass when the spaces are tight. So we women can’t complete our basic tasks! It’s like our country has been invaded, but we invited the invaders here.

These sentiments are widespread in the Khaleej, and they drive the very real (but never entirely successful) social and spatial segregation of this foreign matter. This segregation is often portrayed as both strategic and necessary for the preservation of a cohesive cultural identity in the midst of such a massive foreign presence, and the sentiments driving this segregation are further reflected in the popular attitudes about assimilation and the policies concerning naturalization. In general, the ethnocratic nature of the contemporary Khaleeji states discourages assimilation, particularly because citizenship is conceived in genealogical terms and, in some parts of the Khaleej, through a tribal framework.<sup>12</sup> Naturalization policies reflect these ideas of belonging.

<sup>8</sup> Dresch, “The Place of Strangers in Gulf Society”, in *Globalization and the Gulf*, eds. Fox, et al. (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Khalaf, “The Evolution of the Gulf City Type, Oil, and Globalization” in *Globalization and the Gulf*, eds. Fox, et al. (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Gardner, *City of Strangers: The Transnational Indian Community in Manama, Bahrain*, PhD dissertation (2005); Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (1997); Louër, “The Political Impact of Labor Migration in Bahrain”, *City and Society* 20 (2008), pp. 32–53; Gardner, *City of Strangers* (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Longva, “Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy: Citizens, Expatriates and the Socio-Political Regime in Kuwait”, in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, eds. Dresch and Piscatori (2005).

While some cosmopolitan elites, some Arabs, and small numbers from other select groups have received passports from the various Gulf States, in general Khaleeji policies actively discourage naturalization and reinforce the temporary nature of the foreign workforce's status in the region.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more to the point, strict naturalization policies guard the gateway to the significant entitlements associated with citizenship in the GCC States.

Throughout the Gulf States, the disproportionate size of these foreign populations is widely regarded as the driving force behind the modern version of the *kafala* (sponsorship system). Historically, the *kafala* described a relationship that functioned as a mechanism for hosting foreigners in the close and genealogically framed societies typical of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>14</sup> Through the *kafala*, members of these societies vouched for the foreign visitor, essentially assuming responsibility for that foreigner's presence and behavior during his stay. In addition to temporarily placing that individual in the local social matrix, the *kafala* relationship also implied the sponsor's responsibility for the safety and protection of that individual. As migration to the region increased, however, this traditional mechanism for temporarily incorporating foreigners into local society was extrapolated to a comprehensive (if piecemeal) legal and state-based system for governing foreign labor in the Gulf.<sup>15</sup> In its most distilled form, the contemporary *kafala* implies that the sponsor has vouched for the presence of the foreign worker, and thereby has assumed legal and economic responsibility for the individual during a period established by contract. The *kafeel* (sponsor) also assumes responsibility for repatriating that individual upon the conclusion of the aforementioned contract. In return for assuming these responsibilities, the *kafeel* is granted the sole right to employ that foreign individual.<sup>16</sup> In practice, the foreign worker may not depart the country or change employers without the express permission of his or her sponsor. Although the responsibilities of the *kafeel* are often portrayed as balanced with the rights conferred to the sponsor, many have noted that this system structures a highly imbalanced relationship in which the foreign worker is almost entirely dependent on the goodwill of the sponsor — the very person who profits from her or his labor in the Gulf. In another sense, the contemporary sponsorship system redistributes much of the responsibility of managing and governing foreign labor from the state to individual citizen-sponsors.

The sponsorship system that governs foreign labor in the Gulf States is coupled with the system that locates and arranges the foreign workforce. Skilled professional workers arrive in the Gulf through the same cosmopolitan system that functions worldwide: personal networks, internet-based advertising, and advertisements in relevant publications connect foreigners with opportunities in the Gulf States. This system needs no elaboration here. The majority of the Gulf workforce, however, consists of unskilled laborers, and most of those men and women arrive by

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<sup>13</sup> Abdulla, "The Impact of Globalization on Arab Gulf States", in *Globalization and the Gulf*, eds. Fox, et al. (2006), p. 185; Longva, "Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice", in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, ed. Butenschon et al. (2000); Longva, "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy", pp. 114–35.

<sup>14</sup> Khalaf, "Gulf Societies and the Image of Unlimited Good", *Dialectical Anthropology* 17 (1992), pp. 53–84. Khalaf suggests that the *kafala* system was designed to insulate Gulf merchants from foreign competition.

<sup>15</sup> Longva, "Keeping Migrant Workers In Check: The *Kafala* System in the Gulf", *Middle East Report* 211 (1999), p. 20; also see Frantz, "Of Maids and Madams: Sri Lankan Domestic Workers and Their Employers in Jordan", *Critical Asian Studies* 40 (2008), pp. 609–38.

<sup>16</sup> Within the parameters of this system, some foreigners are able to negotiate other relationships with sponsors. The most common form is often referred to as the "free visa". In the "free visa" scenario, the foreigner is sponsored for a particular job. However, in reality that job does not exist, and the foreigner has the freedom to seek work as he or she sees fit. Oftentimes the foreigner diverts some portion of his or her profits to the sponsor as payment for this freedom.

processes and procedures somewhat unique to the Gulf States. Chain migration through personal contacts, often arranged by other family members or acquaintances already in the Gulf, remains a significant force in the Gulf. In recent decades, however, most men and women have arrived in the Gulf through a vast and expanding transnational labor brokerage system.<sup>17</sup> Employers and manpower agencies in the Gulf States work directly with labor brokers located in the sending countries. These labor brokers — in Kathmandu, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, Bombay, Colombo, and other large cities in South Asia — work with a constellation of satellite offices in smaller cities and towns. The main offices negotiate with Gulf-based employers; the satellite offices locate the workers, and often employ sub-agents who reach into even more peripheral villages and towns for potential migrants.

Existing research suggests that these brokers, agents, and sub-agents play a key role in the coordinated deception of potential transnational migrants.<sup>18</sup> Unlike elite and skilled migrants to the region, men and women seeking unskilled or semi-skilled positions in the Gulf States — as office boys, domestic workers, custodians, or construction workers — typically pay substantial fees for the right to a two- or three-year employment contract. Unskilled and semi-skilled migrants incur significant debts to pay these fees: productive land is mortgaged, savings are depleted, and high-interest loans are taken. These debts remain in the sending country, although significant portions of the fees paid to the South Asian brokers and agents make their way across the transnational divide to agents and sponsors in the host country. While no comprehensive data have been gathered about the average amount of these fees, and although researchers have noted extremely broad variations in the prices paid for these contracts, evidence suggests the typical payment amounts to several thousand US dollars.<sup>19</sup> To put these incurred debts into perspective, one must also grasp the salaries typical to semi-skilled and unskilled positions in the Gulf States. Again, while no comprehensive data about salary levels are available, the sixty-six laborers I interviewed in Bahrain in 2002 and 2003 worked for monthly wages varying from BD 120 (\$318) to as low as BD 40 (\$106). In Qatar, where I have conducted fieldwork more recently, I recorded similar figures — QR 500 (\$137) at the low end, QR 900 (\$247) at the high end for unskilled positions.<sup>20</sup> Considering that these men almost always work under two-year contracts, the range of these monthly salary figures is particularly noteworthy. At the high end, migrants may depart their two-year contract with several thousand dollars in savings. Alternatively, at the low end of these salary figures, migrants may conclude two years of work with as little as a few hundred dollars of possible savings.<sup>21</sup>

A variety of forces conspire to undermine the tenuous logic of these numbers, and the possibility of concluding two years of service with even the smaller of these figures in hand is far

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed examination of this system, see Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids* (2000).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; Silvey, "Transnational Domestication: State Power and Indonesian Migrant Women in Saudi Arabia", *Political Geography* 23 (2004), pp. 245–64.

<sup>19</sup> A recent International Labor Organization (ILO) report noted average payments of \$1,000 in Pakistan and \$1,400 in Bangladesh, while Nasra Shah mentions the specific figures of \$4,084 for an Indian migrant. As this suggests, there is no clear logic underlying the differences in these numbers, and while the particular sending country is certainly an important variable in the cost of migration, men from the same country often pay significantly different amounts for essentially the same visa. See: Plant, "Temporary Contract Labour in the Gulf States: Perspectives from Two Countries of Origin", paper presented at the *Gulf Forum on Temporary Contractual Labor*, 23–24 January 2008; Shah, *Immigration Policies*.

<sup>20</sup> Based upon his research in the United Arab Emirates, Khalaf mentions the numbers \$130 to \$200 per month as a standard wage bracket for unskilled positions. See Khalaf, "Gulf City Type", p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> More importantly, however, these distant debts combine with the regulation of the *kafala* to build a highly dependent workforce.



from assured for the semi-skilled and unskilled migrant. Systematic research clearly suggests that these transnational migrants face a common set of interrelated problems, challenges, and hurdles throughout the Gulf.<sup>22</sup> Laborers frequently report that employers withhold wages.<sup>23</sup> Migrants are often forced to work longer hours than those indicated in the contract they signed in the sending country, and many report not receiving additional wages for these additional (overtime) hours. Throughout the Gulf, it remains commonplace for employers to retain possession of the passports of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers they employ, despite the fact that this is expressly forbidden by law in most of the Gulf States.<sup>24</sup> Many migrants report that they arrive in the Gulf to discover they will be required to work a job different from the one they were contractually promised in the sending country: men who were promised jobs as supervisors, for example, find themselves working as supervised “tea boys”, or men who were promised jobs as drivers are sent to work on a construction site. Fees and other costs that contractually belong to the employer are often deducted from the migrant’s wages — examples include visa renewal fees, the costs of return tickets, room and board, or the costs of a driving course.<sup>25</sup> Research throughout the region also clearly demonstrates that foreign migrants have difficulty asserting their legal rights in the courts and other venues charged with adjudicating labor and contractual issues.<sup>26</sup> Overall, the frequency with which the components of this constellation of issues recur in the lower echelons of the foreign workforce plays a key role in the production of an undocumented (or “illegal”) population of migrants. Amidst some subset of these problems, unskilled and semi-skilled migrants typically abscond from untenable positions with their sponsors, and thereby depart from the sole position in which they can legally work. These migrants often find work on the black market. Should they find a new sponsor who wishes to legally employ them, the migrant must then negotiate

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Najjar, “Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Bahrain”, *International Migration Paper* 47 (2002); Longva, *Walls Built on Sand* (1997); Gardner, *City of Strangers* (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), pp. 305–349; Pessoa, *et al.*, “Migrant Workers in Qatar: Documenting Their Current Situation”, Final Report, QNRF Undergraduate Research Experience Program, #05-09-71 (2009); Silvia Pessoa, *et al.*, “The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar: The Workers’ Perspective”, Final Report, QNRF Undergraduate Research Experience Program, #07-12-03, 2008; US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2007); 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); ESCWA, *International Migration*, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> For one of many examples, see al-Jandaly, “1,600 Workers March from Ajman to Sharjah over Unpaid Wages”, *Gulf News*, 31 August 2006.

<sup>24</sup> In a recent study using a street-intercept method to survey low-income workers in Qatar, Pessoa and her research team found that 88% of the 169 participants in her study had relinquished their passports to their sponsor. See Pessoa, *et al.*, *The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar* (2008), p. 6. In my fieldwork in Bahrain, all but one of the low-income workers I interviewed were not in possession of their passport. Other research has produced similar findings — e.g. Longva, *Walls*; Strobl, “Policing Housemaids: The Criminalization of Domestic Workers in Bahrain”, *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (2009), pp. 165–83. In short, the first portion of this sentence, as well as the previous sentence, is supported by most systematic research conducted in the region. Those teams or individuals who ask large numbers of transnational laborers about these issues, or teams or individuals who spend longer periods of time studying smaller groups of men and women in the Gulf clearly corroborate these conclusions. See: Human Rights Watch, *Building Towers*; Human Rights Watch, *The Island of Happiness*; US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2007*; Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle*.

<sup>25</sup> Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Gardner, “Engulfed”; Longva, *Walls*; Longva, “Keeping Migrant Workers”; Human Rights Watch, “Building Towers”; Human Rights Watch, *The Island of Happiness*.

<sup>26</sup> Strobl, “Policing Housemaids”; Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Longva, *Walls Built on Sand*.

with the previous sponsor for release. Overall, this “illegal” labor force presents a substantial challenge to the Gulf States.<sup>27</sup>

Class, ethnicity, and nationality shape the distribution of people in the city, and overall the pattern is highly segregated. Members of what I have elsewhere called the “diasporic elite” dwell in accommodations that are generally luxurious.<sup>28</sup> Villas or apartments in walled compounds are common, as are high-rise apartment buildings. Dwellings are typically spacious. The frequency with which these walled compounds have proliferated in the cities of the GCC is significant and somewhat unique to the region. These compounds are essentially gated communities, marked by the high surrounding wall and a single entrance loosely monitored by security guards.<sup>29</sup> While many gated communities in other parts of the world purport to insulate the wealthy denizens inside from the undesirable — and often foreign — element outside, in the Gulf only foreigners live in compounds. In essence, these gated communities insulate Gulf citizens outside from the foreigners inside.

Except for the substantial number of foreign workers employed as domestic servants, most semi-skilled and unskilled migrants dwell in “labor camps.” This singular term refers to a variety of different forms of accommodation common to the region.<sup>30</sup> In the best possible circumstances, transnational migrants arrive to find themselves in large and well-organized camps that include all the basic amenities: the rooms are air conditioned, both cold and hot water are in ample supply, meals are provided by a central cafeteria, and transportation to and from urban areas is provided on the weekly day off. Many migrants face less desirable conditions. Camps may consist of decrepit buildings, ad hoc structures, or aging villas in older suburban neighborhoods. Men often live eight or more to a room. Many of these camps have itinerant supplies of electricity or water. The camps themselves are frequently found in the peri-urban and industrial hinterlands of the city, which prevents the migrants from obtaining groceries, from socializing, and, more generally, from moving about the city during the few periods of time they are not working or sleeping (Figure 1).<sup>31</sup> Most of the Gulf States are currently amidst the construction of “bachelor cities” that are intended to simultaneously improve the living conditions of these laborers and to segregate them more distinctly from the public spaces in the city.

The system by which migration to the Gulf is organized and governed has been a lightning rod for international critique. All six of the GCC states have occupied the lower tiers of the US Department of State’s Human Trafficking Report for much of the last decade. The lowest tier of that ranking system is reserved for states which, by the US Department of State’s estimation, prove unable or unwilling to make significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons. The International Labor Organization’s evaluations generally concur with those of the US Department of State.<sup>32</sup> A handful of non-governmental organizations continue to produce scathing reports detailing problems seemingly endemic to Gulf migration. Over the past decade, the Gulf States have responded to these criticisms

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<sup>27</sup> Estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of workers in the GCC States are currently undocumented. See Kapiszewski, *Nationals and Expatriates*, pp. 92–4; Crystal, “Public Order and Authority: Policing Kuwait”, in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, eds. Dresch and Piscatori (2005).

<sup>28</sup> Gardner, “Strategic Transnationalism: The Indian Diasporic Elite in Contemporary Bahrain”, *City and Society* 20 (2008), pp. 54–78.

<sup>29</sup> In other parts of the world, gated communities often cater to the anxieties of the wealthy by insulating them from the undesirable classes and foreign populations. In the Gulf, however, foreigners live in the gated communities that, in some sense, insulate the wealthy citizens outside from their cultural presence.

<sup>30</sup> Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Gardner, “Labor Camps in the Gulf States. Viewpoints: Migration and the Gulf”, *The Middle East Institute* (2010), pp. 55–7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Plant, “Temporary Contract Labour”.



**Figure 1:** Dormitory-style labor camp in the Industrial Area, Qatar (photograph by Kristin Giordano).

by challenging the methodological underpinnings of these reports, by directing attention and blame to the labor brokers in the sending countries, by portraying the reports as part of an ongoing Orientalist rhetoric, or by foregrounding the extraordinary logistical and bureaucratic challenges posed by the rapid pace of development in the region.<sup>33</sup> More recently, a plethora of signs suggest the battle lines, once sketched as vociferous western human rights activists versus a recalcitrant or indifferent population, no longer characterize the situation in the Gulf States. Local scholars now play an increasingly central role in the development of a critical understanding of migration to the region and, overall, scholarly conversations once perceived as threatening are now welcome in the public sphere.<sup>34</sup> The Qatar Foundation, for example, has sponsored a series of research projects and forums that critically examine the migration experience on the Peninsula.<sup>35</sup> The internationally televised Doha Debates recently included an extended discussion on the

<sup>33</sup> E.g. “Chamber in Job Switch Rules Row”, *Gulf Daily News*, 26 May 2009; “Fishermen’s Fury Over Labor Laws”, *Gulf Daily News*, 27 May 2009; “Bahrain Business Community Blasts Al Alawi Over Scrapping Sponsorship System”, *Gulf News*, 8 May 2009; “UAE Rebuffs Human Rights Watch Report on Saadiyat Island”, *Gulf News*, 19 May 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the most telling scenario has emerged in Bahrain. In the past, resistance to the international human rights discourse and the changes it recommended were framed in cultural terms, in the sense that outsiders were portrayed as meddling in the political and cultural affairs of Bahrain and the other Gulf States. As the impending changes to the sponsorship system approached, however, the public debate in Bahrain shifted from a cultural one to an economic one: opponents of the proposed changes have now framed these rights-related changes as an economically debilitating shift that will slow profits and hamper development on the island.

<sup>35</sup> A partial list includes: Pessoa, *et al.*, *Migrant Workers in Qatar*; Pessoa, *et al.*, *The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar*; Gardner and Watts, *Constructing Qatar: Narratives from the Margins of the Global System*, QNRF UREP Grant #05-018-5-002, 2009; *The Human Rights Youth Conference, Migrant Labor Forum*, Qatar Foundation (18 April 2009); *Should Qatar Abolish the Kafala System? A Student Debate*, Qatar University, 25 May 2009; The Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar’s *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf Research Grant Program* (active as of 2009); Carnegie-Mellon University in Qatar’s *Panel on Immigrant Labor*, 24 August 2008; “Sixth Annual Report on Human Rights”, *National Human Rights Committee*, Qatar (2008).

topic, and a recent report from the State of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee pointed directly to the very same problems described by the critical reports from the international governments and non-governmental organizations noted above.<sup>36</sup> Several Gulf States are amidst discussions concerning strategies for potentially abandoning the sponsorship system. Kuwait and Qatar have announced their intentions of abolishing the sponsorship system, and Bahrain has embarked on a series of significant policy experiments aimed at directly addressing the most pressing problems associated with the migrant labor market. Bahrain's Minister of Labor Affairs, Dr Majeed bin Mohsen Al Alawi, is at the vanguard of change in the region. As he noted,

The prime challenge facing authorities in the Gulf is the elimination of the traditional sponsorship system and creation of an effective governmental body to assume the responsibility of importing manpower needed for development . . . We also need to improve working conditions of those workers. Governments must guarantee their rights and that they receive the benefits they were promised when they were recruited.<sup>37</sup>

These sentiments are new to public discourse in the Gulf, and while they do not necessarily reflect a public consensus, they do suggest a significant reorientation in the states' attitudes about the appropriate governance of foreign workers in the region.

With that context as a backdrop, the remainder of this paper is directly concerned with the impact of Gulf migration upon the family. It is widely understood that migration is a key factor in the reshaping of families throughout the contemporary world. By focusing on some of the particularities of the GCC States, the remainder of this paper approaches the relationship between Gulf migration and the family through three distinct arenas of inquiry. First, the paper explores the impact of labor migration to the Gulf States upon families that remain behind in the sending countries. Second, the paper explores the experiences of those families that migrate as a unit to the Gulf. Finally, the paper discusses how the substantial flow of migrants to the Gulf region has impacted families in the host societies.

### 3. Families in sending countries

In 2003, I welcomed two Tamilian laborers to the small living room of my flat in Manama, Bahrain. Having just survived an intense building fire, both men had been left with nothing but the clothes in which they had rapidly departed their room in the aging urban villa near Bahrain's historic souk. Ten years before that night, Ramana, one of those two men, had been a young entrepreneur in a large village in southern India. He owned a small bicycle shop in the central area of the town, and through his efforts he was able to make a profit of \$10 or \$12 a day. He also paid wages to two other employees. Ramana had no particular interest in leaving India, but his parents thought he could earn more money abroad. One day his father informed him that arrangements were under way, and soon he would depart for the Gulf. Recollecting that day, Ramana noted that even if you do not earn better wages in the Gulf, you earn more respect. When you return from the Gulf, people at the tea shop will get up and give you their seat. Gulf migrants are respected.<sup>38</sup> And, Ramana added, that

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<sup>36</sup> "Sixth Annual Report on Human Rights", *National Human Rights Committee*, Qatar (2008).

<sup>37</sup> Al-Baik, "Six-Year Cap on Foreign Workers", *Gulf News*, 1 October 2007.

<sup>38</sup> These sentiments about the Gulf migrant, while widespread in South Asia, are not static or ubiquitous. As Osella and Osella have noted, increasing opportunities in India and the more accurate assessments of the Gulf produced by generations of return migrants have lowered the status of Gulf migration in particular regions of South Asia. See: Osella and Osella, "The State, Civil and Uncivil Society, and Networks Among Indian Gulf Migrants", paper presented at the *Migrant Labor in the Gulf* workshop, Doha, Qatar, 10 October 2010.



**Figure 2:** Labor migrant's extended family outside their home in Nepal (photograph by Kristin Giordano).

helps explain why his family pressured him into going to the Gulf. His parents wanted to confer that respect upon the family.

The family paid BD 1,300 (\$3,488) for his visa and ticket. This money was not at hand: his family mortgaged the productive paddy land they owned, they borrowed some from a moneylender, and they then borrowed even more from a friend of the family who was already in Bahrain. Upon arrival, however, the job contractually promised to Ramana disappeared. He scrambled for employment and continued to scramble for many years. He worked as a carpenter, then as an electrician, and then as a manual laborer. Over the ten years in Bahrain, he paid another BD 1,700 (\$4,509) in various attempts to renew or regularize his status on the island, but never met with success. Ramana spent most of the previous decade as an illegal worker. When the work was steady, Ramana sent all of his savings home to his parents. Just a few months before the fire, his parents secured another loan in his name to pay for his sister's dowry. He figured he would need another eighteen months to pay that loan off. Then, he hoped to go home. At that point he would have been gone twelve years. When he does return home, he intends to reopen his bicycle shop and pick up where he left off.

Several salient points can be culled from Ramana's story. First, it should be clear that the decision to migrate to the Gulf States was a decision produced at the familial level. For many migrants — and this is particularly true of South Asian migrants — a sojourn to the Gulf is a strategic component of an extended family's economic strategy. The individual migrant's interests are clearly subordinate to the needs of the family: as Ramana describes, remittances are often sent to parents, and the decision to migrate is a decision that often does not belong to the migrant. While the literature often frames migrants, in the tradition of *homo economicus*, as rational individual agents, migration research in the Gulf States clearly suggests that most Gulf migrants should be considered emissaries of extended families.<sup>39</sup> Remittances generated by this migration are used to buoy families' basic consumption, as the seed money for entrepreneurial activities, to fund the education of migrants' siblings or children, and in South Asian society, for the dowries of migrants' sisters or daughters (Figure 2).

<sup>39</sup> Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*; Gardner, "Engulfed"; Gardner, *City of Strangers*.

Ramana's story reveals a second important and related point: while these migrants often represent an entire extended family, migration to the Gulf also typically risks the productive assets and savings of that extended household. Because potential migrants face charges of \$1,500 to \$3,000 for the right to work in the Gulf, poor families often mortgage agricultural land, redirect income from siblings' wages, pawn the gold jewelry that stores familial (and, more typically, maternal) wealth, and so forth. In the Gulf States, South Asian labor is often portrayed as more docile than other sources of labor (and, particularly, other Middle Eastern sources of labor).<sup>40</sup> A better understanding of the organization of these migration flows, however, reveals that what is often portrayed as a cultural trait is more clearly the result of a structural arrangement: poor (and mostly South Asian) migrants risk the well-being of their extended family to simply arrive in the Gulf States. Their reticence to assert their perceived rights is directly related to the fact that they risk their families' well-being with these potential actions.

Although many migrants encounter significant problems in the Gulf States, remittances from the Gulf are undeniably central to the economic activities of countless communities in the Indian Ocean world. Billions of dollars in remittances annually flow from the Gulf, and much of this money finds its way to some of the more impoverished regions of Africa and Asia.<sup>41</sup> Somewhat recent data suggest that over \$26 billion is remitted every year from the Gulf States, a figure which places the region ahead of the United States in total migrant remittances.<sup>42</sup> Particular regions of Asia and the Middle East are highly dependent on Gulf remittances: in the interlinked Kerala communities in which Filippo and Caroline Osella worked, migrants (mostly to the Gulf) made up 27% of Kerala's total male working population.<sup>43</sup> Overall, remittances contribute 22% to Kerala's state income, and the impact of these remittances can be seen at both the family and community level.<sup>44</sup> Remittances, mostly from the Gulf, also make up the single largest source of Pakistan's export earnings.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in the Sri Lankan village in which she worked, Michele Gamburd noted the paramount role these remittances played in the local economy, although she indicated that the "villagers also note with resignation the high proportion of foreign earnings channeled to daily consumption".<sup>46</sup> While beyond the scope of this paper, the villagers' comment points directly to a much larger argument among development economists: do these remittances drive development (i.e. production) in the sending states, or are those remittances merely consumed?<sup>47</sup>

Finally, migration to the Gulf States has a gender dynamic that directly relates to the function of families in the sending states. Through both chain migration and the emergence of dense nodes in the labor brokerage system, many regions and communities in South and Southeast Asia are intensely connected to the Gulf States. In some regions of South Asia, large portions of the young male population are absent.<sup>48</sup> This was particularly apparent in one of my village visits in the Terai of southern Nepal. Arkesh, the migrant I had been following in Qatar, came from

<sup>40</sup> Nakhleh, *Bahrain* (1976), p. 77; Weiner, "Labor Migrations as Incipient Diasporas", in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. Sheffer (1986), pp. 53–4.

<sup>41</sup> Jureidini, "Migrant Workers and Xenophobia in the Middle East", Working Paper, Identities, Conflict and Cohesion Programme, UN Research Institute for Social Development (2003), p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> ESCWA, *International Migration*, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Osella and Osella, "Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2000), p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> Azeez and Begum, "Gulf Migration" pp. 55–60; Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (2002), p. 765.

<sup>45</sup> Leonard, "South Asian Workers in the Gulf: Jockeying for Places", in *Globalization Under Construction: Governmentality, Law and Identity*, eds. Perry and Maurer (2003), p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Mallick, "Remittances"; Zachariah and Rajan, "Migration".

<sup>48</sup> Osella and Osella, "Migration", pp. 75–9.



**Figure 3:** Arkesh's parents and eldest son outside their new home in Southern Nepal (photograph by Kristin Giordano).

a small agricultural village an hour's drive north of the Indian border. In Qatar, Arkesh had an arrangement with his sponsor that allowed him to operate as an independent contractor. He employed three Bangladeshi masons and, through a network of contacts, was able to bid on a wide variety of small jobs around the country. His financial success as a migrant fueled his family's land purchases in the small village, and his father had recently assumed a leadership role on the village council. I interviewed his father and son in the late afternoon, and while we spoke, four masons scrambled up and down the scaffolding of their reconstructed home. Arkesh's remittances had allowed the family to significantly expand the house, and Arkesh's design for the essentially new home included a variety of arabesque features that starkly contrasted to the surrounding thatch homes (Figure 3). I asked about the construction crew, and Arkesh's father noted that it has become increasingly difficult to find masons in the region. These men, he noted, were from an area four hours away, and they were expensive. He added what was already apparent: most local masons were in the Gulf.

Perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the impact of the increasing feminization of international migration. Demand for domestic workers in the Gulf States, combined with other

positions in the service industry, has created a large and stable flow of female migrants to the Arabian Peninsula. These women come from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Ethiopia, and several other countries. As these absent sisters, mothers, and daughters often function as the primary breadwinner for the households from which they come, gender roles in the sending communities have been reconfigured around the contemporary realities. In some analyses, this female migration has been connected to a crisis in masculinity in the sending countries, with the effects of increased alcoholism and violence.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Families that accompany migrants to the Gulf

Although the majority of Gulf migrants arrive as the single emissaries of their extended families, millions of nuclear families also migrate intact to the Gulf States. The dividing line between single migrants, or “bachelors”, and migrant families is almost entirely attributable to economic class, for the Gulf States require minimum incomes for family visas. Kuwait’s monthly minimum salary for the family visa, for example, is set at KD 250 (\$888), while the UAE recently raised the monthly minimum salary requirement for the family visa from AED 6,000 (\$1,634) to 10,000 (\$2,723).<sup>50</sup> These state-mandated minimums, however, often prove insufficient, for the costs of living, and particularly the costs of educating children in private schools required for transnational life, push the true cost of maintaining a family in the Gulf much higher than the state-mandated minimums. These family visas, however, must also be understood for the significant changes they render in the shape of the family. As Neha Vora observed in the United Arab Emirates, “most foreign families living in the UAE are nuclear and patriarchal”, and this is no coincidence, for the family visa policies of the Gulf States directly contribute to the nucleation of the family.<sup>51</sup> As noted above, many of the transnational migrants arriving in the Gulf States come from areas in which extended families are the predominant familial form. The Gulf States’ migration policies, however, allow only spouses and children to accompany migrants. As a result, the nuclear family can remain intact through the migration process, while the extended family can only be maintained across the transnational divide. The policies and procedures in place in the Gulf States, then, can be seen as one force contributing to the reorganization of the family around its nuclear core.

Perhaps due to issues of access, these nuclear migrant families have been the subject of relatively more ethnographic attention than the much larger bachelor population.<sup>52</sup> Collectively, this research suggests migrant families find themselves in a series of complex and ambivalent positions in the Gulf states. With naturalization almost impossible, many foreign families are in the precarious position of making a life and a home in a country to which, in the final accounting, they can never belong.<sup>53</sup> And while this is true in the long-term, there is a more direct anxiety produced by the unpredictability of their relations with their sponsors and with the various

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<sup>49</sup> Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle*.

<sup>50</sup> Sambidge, “UAE Raises Minimum Salary Limits for Expats with Family”, *Arabian Business*, 2 July 2009. For a good description of this system, also see Leonard, “South Asian Workers”, pp. 138–9.

<sup>51</sup> Vora, “Producing Diasporas and Globalization: Indian Middle-Class Migrants in Dubai”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 81 (2008), p. 381.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., Leonard, “South Asian Workers”; Leonard, “South Asian Women”; Vora, “Producing Diasporas”. In an opposite take on the existing scholarship, Vora suggests that it is the middle class that has been largely omitted from the scholarly analysis. See: Vora, “The Precarious Existence of Dubai’s Indian Middle Class”, *Middle East Report* 252 (2009).

<sup>53</sup> In her sustained analysis of belonging and the Indian community in Dubai, Vora argues that citizenship alone is a poor gauge of belonging. She details a constellation of “unexpected forms of belonging” that



localization campaigns, for the duration of their stay is never ensured.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, research also suggests that these families struggle to replicate the cultural setting of home, to protect children from the perceived negative impact of cosmopolitan westernization, and to instill a sense of belonging to a distant home.<sup>55</sup> Children in these diasporic families often lose this connection to the homeland. As Karen Leonard describes it, the Gulf unsettled these middle-class migrant children's "knowledge of and commitment to their parents' home nations".<sup>56</sup> As a result, the Gulf States have emerged as a stepping stone to further diasporization, with Canada, England, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States as typical destinations.<sup>57</sup>

These issues are often framed in terms of identity. In the author's ethnographic study in Bahrain, the children of foreign workers spoke at length about their struggles with their placelessness in the contemporary world.<sup>58</sup> A young South Indian man, for example, noted that as a student at the Indian School, he and his classmates were primarily educated as Indian nationals. Hindi and English were the primary languages of instruction, and his overarching notion of being Indian — and Indian first — was further reinforced by interactions with Bahrainis and Bahraini society, as well as the other national communities on the island. When the young man returned to India for higher education, however, he found himself out of place. He was stunned by the poverty of his homeland. As he noted,

In 1984 when I went, it shocked me. It really shocked me. You come down in the airplane, and there are people bathing in the road — entire generations living there. I remember women and families taking a bath on the road through the hydrant. I asked my friends, I remember, "What is this?" And they said, "It's okay, you'll get used to it." And I said, "I don't want to get used to it! This is not something you want to get used to. This is not a rule. This is an exception." But they used to find this quite weird about me, that I was getting educated about these issues. So that's one aspect that really bothered me.

Like many of the children raised in the Gulf, he was disconcerted by the lack of opportunities in his homeland — in the place to which he was supposed to belong. For others, however, the disconnection from the homeland is best framed in cultural terms. Upon her return to India, Veena realized how she lacked the experience to navigate the practical and everyday activities of life in India. As she noted, "I didn't even know how to sit in a rickshaw. And I didn't even want to talk, because the rickshaw driver would know I wasn't from there, and he would just take me anywhere. So, I used to just give him a piece of paper with the name of the place I wanted to go!" Arvind, meanwhile, framed the same issue in terms of identity, and reconnected his return experience to the problem of "being Indian" in diaspora. In returning to India for university, he struggled to find his place amongst the other students. By his own estimation, a life abroad had left him without a "local" Indian identity. His regional language skills were poorly developed, and without the cultural imponderabilia accrued by a life in India, he was considered an oddity by

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hinge on racial consciousness and consumer practices. See Vora, "Producing Diasporas and Globalization: Indian Middle-Class Migrants in Dubai".

<sup>54</sup> Gardner, "Strategic Transnationalism"; Leonard, "South Asian Workers", p. 139.

<sup>55</sup> Leonard "South Asian Women"; Leonard, "South Asian Workers"; Gardner "Strategic Transnationalism"; Vora, "Producing Diasporas".

<sup>56</sup> Leonard, "South Asian Workers", pp. 153–4.

<sup>57</sup> Leonard "South Asian Workers", p. 131; also see Gardner "Strategic Transnationalism"; Vora "Producing Diasporas".

<sup>58</sup> Also see Vora "Producing Diasporas"; Salih, "Shifting Meanings of 'Home': Consumptions and Identity in Moroccan Women's Transnational Practices Between Italy and Morocco", in *New Approaches to Migration?: Transnational Communities and the Transformations of Home*, eds. al-Ali and Khoser (2002).

the other students. Upon his graduation, he returned to the Gulf, and has now made a home in a country that will most likely never welcome him as a citizen.

As this suggests, the nucleation of the family is only one aspect of the impact of family migration to the GCC states. A life in diaspora is also producing tectonic changes in the identities and subjectivities observed by scholarship focused on families in the GCC region.

## 5. Impact upon families in the host countries

In this final section, I describe the impact of these vast migration flows upon the families indigenous to the Khaleeji states. This topic remains one of the most unexplored facets of the migration literature concerning the Gulf States, and certainly the most important conclusion one could reach is that more research on this topic is desperately needed. Nonetheless, we can tentatively point to three basic issues that might potentially guide future research. First, the presence of large numbers of foreigners has produced a widespread insecurity about safety in the region. This insecurity is often expressed around concerns for the integrity of the local family, but also in terms of a social form of safety, as well as the perceived vulnerability to the erosion or loss of a cohesive local cultural tradition. Second, the presence of foreigners in the Gulf States, and more specifically, their presence in the homes of the citizenry, has reshaped Khaleeji family life and the responsibilities of the individuals who comprise those families. While the presence of these migrant populations has reshaped both men and women's roles in Gulf society, it has played a particularly important role in altering women's roles in the family. Finally, in these traditionally insular societies transnational migration has fostered a high degree of personal interaction with foreigners and foreign culture. In a sense, the world beyond Arabia has come to the Gulf. Each of these three aspects will be dealt with in turn.

One of Qatar's leading newspapers recently paraphrased the sentiments of a "prominent Qatari woman", who noted that, "the menace of single workers is such that many Qatari families avoid venturing out on weekends. She suggests the government build a large city complete with all the needed infrastructure where single workers be accommodated." She further added that the city should "be located far away from Doha."<sup>59</sup> These sentiments echo those heard in other parts of the Gulf. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, for example, recently embarked on the construction of a pair of complexes to house some 12,000 foreign male laborers in the country, and was explicit about its mission to eventually "relocate all bachelors from the residential areas of Kuwait to their very own city to limit opportunities for crime and to appease residents."<sup>60</sup> Similar proposals have been publicly discussed in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. While the Qatari woman's sentiments were framed as a proposal, tens of thousands of laborers already dwell in the vast "industrial area" on the outskirts of Doha — an ad hoc bachelor city (Figure 4). Indeed, significant proportions of the "bachelor" population in the Gulf already dwell in segregated neighborhoods and labor camps that consign their presence to the off-stage spaces of the supermodern cities of contemporary Arabia.

The sentiment that male laborers unaccompanied by their families — "bachelors" in the Gulf parlance — are a menace to local society is widespread in the Gulf States, and while this topic remains one of the least explored in the scholarly literature, it is clear that in all parts of the Gulf many citizens envision the legion of migrants in their midst as a threat to their family, to their personal security, and to the integrity of their culture.<sup>61</sup> In my fieldwork in Bahrain, for example, I was able to track multiple cases of threats and violence levied against foreign laborers.

<sup>59</sup> "Concern over Widening Gender Gap", *The Peninsula*, Qatar, 16 September 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Meehan, "The Bachelor City", *The Muslim Observer*, 11 December 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Shah, *Immigration Policies*, pp. 5–6.



**Figure 4:** Crowds of South Asian labor migrants visiting the central commercial district of the Industrial Area in Qatar (photograph by Deepin Giri).

Shortly after my fieldwork concluded, a Manama Municipal Council member declared the intent of the Segaiya neighborhood's Bahraini population to burn down a building occupied by Asian laborers. Public consternation concerning sewage and overcrowding gave way to what Councilor Ibrahim Hassan Ismail called the "moral aspect" of the problem: "The tenants, who are usually Asian, roam around in their underwear with disregard to the social and Islamic laws of the country".<sup>62</sup> These issues continue to this day. In a similar incident in Bahrain, a group of Isa Town residents reported their plan to break into labor camps and force the expatriate bachelors out. Residents reported that there are nearly two dozen villas in the neighborhood that, together, house hundreds of laborers. As the neighborhood representatives reported, while they are concerned about the mounds of dead rats the laborers pile next to their domicile, the (male) citizens' primary concern is with the safety of their women and children, as they fear those women and children will be harassed by the bachelors. The laborers told the Bahraini area councilor "that they can't sleep or walk around without rats bothering them, so they strangle them and throw them on the street." The councilor also noted that, "The problem is that these labourers are not under the sponsorship of the landlord, who just buys houses and rents them out." The city councilor visiting the area confirmed that the residents are angry, and he warned the bachelors to beware as the residents plan to break into their camps soon if nothing is done.<sup>63</sup>

Much of the friction between citizens and the population of foreign laborers I have observed in the Gulf occurs in neighborhoods where large numbers of "bachelors" are forced to coexist with local citizens, and as these two descriptions suggest, much of the proposed violence was justified

<sup>62</sup> *Gulf Daily News*, 9 November 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Al-A'ali, "Vigilantes Threat to Labour Camps", *Gulf Daily News*, 14 March 2008.

by the citizenry in terms of the vague threats to the security of family and children. In Qatar, many large shopping malls and public parks now enforce “Family Day” policies on Fridays, the only day that most foreign laborers have free. Asian men and other “low class” male migrants are prevented from entering these public places, ostensibly to safeguard these spaces for family use.<sup>64</sup>

As Sulayman Khalaf has clearly argued, the attempt to spatially segregate the global flow of labor to the Arabian Peninsula is a central feature of the Gulf city.<sup>65</sup> The sorts of policies and practices that structure this segregation are, however, also connected to the overarching sentiment that an imagined past has been lost.<sup>66</sup> As one Kuwaiti citizen related to the anthropologist Anh Longva,

Imagine seeing strangers everywhere around you, including in your own homes. We used to know all the Kuwaitis, and to trust each other. In the old days, when someone made a promise, you knew he would keep it. We are like a big family. Now, everyone is a stranger. You don't know whom to trust anymore.<sup>67</sup>

The largely male and South Asian population present in all the Gulf States is framed as the agent of this change, the cause of the citizenries' collective anxiety, and evidence of the detrimental results of these states' development plans. Perhaps even more to the point, all the Gulf States are quietly spending large sums on internal security. Much of this spending can be seen as a reaction to the size of the foreign populations in these respective countries and, more specifically, as a reaction to recent labor unrest in Bahrain and the UAE. Essentially, the reinforcement of internal security will help ensure the GCC States are able to manage and control potential uprisings by the large foreign workforces.<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, while there seems to be a widespread trepidation and fear about the impact of such a large foreign presence, foreigners are also deeply intergrated in the private lives of most Gulf nationals, and without a doubt the presense of this large foreign labor force has reshaped family life and members' individual responsibilities. In the Gulf States, even lower-middle-class households typically employ domestic workers. In Sharon Nagy's fieldwork in Qatar, for example, all forty-three families she interviewed had servants, and most of them had multiple servants.<sup>69</sup> In her research in Kuwait, Nasra Shah noted that 87% of Kuwaiti households employ at least one foreign domestic worker.<sup>70</sup> Put another way, Jureidini noted that domestic workers made up 7% of the total population in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>71</sup> Overall, the presence of this large domestic workforce has allowed Gulf families to remain some of the largest in the developed world: while modernity elsewhere exerts its pressures upon family size through the heavy investment required in children, the combination of an imported domestic workforce,

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<sup>64</sup> “Malls Can Enforce Their Own Policies: Official”, *The Peninsula*, Qatar, 13 October 2008; “Shopping Malls Determine Family Day Rules”, *Gulf Times*, 27 July 2008; Qazi, “Shopping Centres Stick to ‘Family-Day’ Policy”, *Gulf Times*, 12 October 2008. For a discussion, see Maruska, “Seeing Security Differently: The Securitization of Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf”, presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Political Studies Association*, Manchester, England, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Khalaf, “Gulf City Type”.

<sup>66</sup> Nagy, “Keeping Families Together: Housing Policy, Social Strategies and Family in Qatar”, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (2005), p. 48.

<sup>67</sup> Longva, *Walls Built on Sand*, pp. 124–5.

<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of this process in Qatar, see: Maruska, *Seeing Security Differently*; Surk, “Foreign Construction Workers Go On Strike in Dubai”, *The New York Times*, 28 October 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Sharon Nagy, “‘This Time I Think I’ll Try a Filipina’: Global and Local Influences on Relations Between Foreign Household Workers and Their Employers in Doha, Qatar”, *City and Society* 10 (1998), pp. 83–103.

<sup>70</sup> Shah, *et al.*, “Foreign Domestic Workers in Kuwait: Who Employees How Many?”, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 11 (2002), pp. 247–69.

<sup>71</sup> Jureidini, “Xenophobia”, p. 6.

along with the substantial social welfare provided by the state, has in the Gulf states preserved some of the highest natural population growth rates in the developed world. In a somewhat recent study, Nasra Shah found a strong correlation between the number of domestic workers in a household and the number of children in a household.<sup>72</sup> Local women have been largely freed from much of the labor of maintaining the household, and if not in the workforce itself, have assumed positions of managing the large household.<sup>73</sup> Sharon Nagy's analysis also points to the freedoms rendered by this domestic workforce, particularly in terms of women's presence in the public sphere. She notes that in conservative Khaleeji societies, it is not customary for women to move about alone and unsupervised, but also that the constellation of drivers and housemaids available to contemporary Khaleeji women expands their capacity to move about and thereby establish a more public social presence.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, the widespread presence of foreigners in the GCC States, and particularly their presence in GCC households, has brought the traditionally insular families of Arabian society into close contact with individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. As Sharon Nagy noted in her study of domestic workers in Qatar, "The presence of foreign workers in the house is, for some Qataris, their most direct and intimate source of knowledge about Qatar's foreign residents."<sup>75</sup> While domestic workers' place in the family varies significantly, it is clear that many domestic workers are intimately involved in raising the children in the Gulf household.<sup>76</sup> This is perceived as both a threat and a benefit: children in Gulf households often learn Hindi, Malayalam, or English from their caretakers; at the same time, parents express fear that their children are not immersed in the cultural traditions indigenous to the region.<sup>77</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Migration to the Gulf States makes up the third largest migration flow in the contemporary world. In spite of the scale of these movements, both scholarship and baseline data about the fundamental aspects of these migration flows remain in their infancy. At the current juncture, analysis of Gulf migration is largely dominated by discussions of remittances and human rights. In this paper, I have sought to expand the discussion to consider the sociological and cultural aspects of Gulf migration, with a particular focus on the family. While it is certainly true that migrant remittances from the Gulf States have significantly buoyed millions of families in the Middle East, South Asia, and other migrant-sending regions, these remittance flows should not eclipse the other significant changes wrought upon the families that send migrants, that migrate as a unit, and that host

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<sup>72</sup> Shah, *et al.*, "Domestic Workers".

<sup>73</sup> Mai Yamani provides a fine example of this. While the work in question is ostensibly about the resurgence (or imagining) of a local Saudi cuisine by the Saudi women of Mecca, it becomes clear only at the end of the article that the women of Mecca are not cooking themselves, but rather directing the cooks in their household in the development (or rediscovery) of this cuisine. Note that the appropriate role of "managing" the household and its labor force echoes the management roles that remain respectable vocations for males as well. Yamani, "You Are What You Cook: Cuisine and Class in Mecca", in *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, eds. Zubaida and Tapper (1994).

<sup>74</sup> Nagy, "Global and Local Influences", p. 95.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*.

<sup>77</sup> Or, in the case of the recent move to promote the use of Saudi nationals as domestic servants in Saudi Arabia, citizen-servants were portrayed as a safe choice because they did not practice magic. See: Sambidge, "First Group of Saudi Housemaids Start Work", *Arabian Business*, 3 August 2009; also see Frantz, "Maids and Madams".

migrants in their communities and in their homes. The portrait emerging from this paper suggests a much more nuanced and careful articulation of the migration's impact upon the family: it is readily apparent that these migration flows are significantly reshaping family structures and dynamics on both ends of the conduits that lead to the Gulf.

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