



# Migrant Dubai

*Low Wage Workers  
and the Construction  
of a Global City*

LAAVANYA KATHIRAVELU

GLOBAL  
DIVERSITIES



## *Global Diversities*

In collaboration with the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

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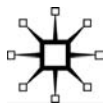
# Migrant Dubai

## Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City

Laavanya Kathiravelu

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*For Amma and Papa*

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# 1

## Introduction: Situating Dubai

The Dubai that I lived in did not look like the Dubai you think you know. Quite unlike the glitzy towers lining the main thoroughfare – Sheikh Zayed Road – that have come to be among the ubiquitous markers of the emirate, the bland tower block I lived in was one of a series surrounded by unpaved desert. One of my neighbours was a Human Resources manager for the Rotana Hotel, which was about to open next door to our building in one of the rapidly developing parts of the emirate. Himself a migrant from Lebanon, he was tasked with recruiting staff for the hotel. When he found out that I was conducting research on the emirate and its migrant population, he offered to give me a tour of the soon-to-be-opened hotel premises. One balmy afternoon, we walked in through the grand glass doors into a lush, air-conditioned lobby. It was decorated in shades of gold and brown with beautiful murals on the walls and glamorous lighting. Besides the fact that it was completely devoid of guests, and the remaining construction workers were making last-minute repairs, it looked like the lobby of any other large chain hotel. The rooms, restaurants and bar were eerily empty, and similarly characterised by a predictable luxury. As we walked through, my neighbour described the wealthy international clientele of businessmen and tourists who were expected to pass through its high-ceilinged halls.

The scene downstairs, though, was a striking contrast. It was teeming with activity, with a diverse range of men and women, of a range of ethnicities, colours and mannerisms; it was as if I had stepped into an alternate dimension. Various accents and languages swirled around me, as did a steady stream of busy people. This space, in contrast to the opulence above, was starkly lit with florescent tubes, and utilitarian. Schedules and reminders were tacked onto notice boards, the entire atmosphere charged with efficiency and energy. This was where the staff

of the hotel worked, my neighbour explained, where the laundry was washed and clothes ironed. Here was where all the invisible processes of maintenance took place, in order for the hotel to function smoothly every day. Walking through the plain white corridors, we reached the canteen, where meals were provided for hotel staff. There was a variety of food to choose from – salads, curries and mezes of humous and tzatziki. On hard plastic chairs sat groups of people eating and talking. The Filipinos, mostly waiters and butlers, clustered together. The Indians who worked as cleaners and bar staff also ate as a group. A group of Arab men, who were mostly administrators or occupied managerial positions like my neighbour, were another distinct set. They waved us over. As I sat down, I anticipated what was invariably the first question in an encounter between strangers in Dubai, “Where are *you* from?”

## **Why Dubai?**

This book examines the interacting processes of international labour migration and the construction of a post-colonial city-state within the context of neoliberal development. Here, Dubai’s mode of neoliberal globalisation acts as a frame through which low-wage migrants’ experiences are interrogated. Seen this way, Dubai reflects similar processes that are taking place across the globe and, like the hotel described above, is not exceptional. Although the city-state has rapidly gained international fame (and notoriety), this is largely as a result of its enormously accelerated processes of economic and material development. The setting of the above vignette, a hotel, is one expression of the neoliberal economic restructuring that Dubai has undertaken. The proliferation of luxury hotels in the emirate is indicative of the shift away from oil towards an economy based on new industries of hospitality, tourism, real estate and finance. The Rotana chain, of which the hotel is a part, was initiated by, and is owned by, Arab investors, an example of the regional capital that has been invested in Dubai, especially post-9/11, and the withdrawal of American investors to the Gulf. Also obvious from the vignette above is Dubai’s unusually high dependence on migrant labour. As is reflected in the hotel’s workforce of diverse nationalities, 90 per cent of the emirate’s residents are international migrants, most of whom are low-waged workers employed in the construction and hospitality sectors.

Dubai is a place where the dual processes of neoliberal development of the city-state and international migration are rapid, intense and highly visible. In this way, Dubai as a case study encapsulates themes of global

resonance. However, this does not imply that it does not have peculiarities. The unique ways in which the emirate has combined neoliberal development with an Arab autocracy generates important consequences that this work explores. This book speaks to calls for more localised and differentiated understandings of neoliberal development, and brings together discussions of globalisation and labour migration in the context of the Global South, an as-yet understudied area of immense significance.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding Dubai's present mode of development and labour migration requires first an appreciation of its geopolitical and historiographic context, which is detailed in the next section. In highlighting the significance of migrant workers in the construction of the modern emirate, the following sections describe how these groups have been systematically excluded from mainstream narratives of development, and then chart the changing trends of labour migration to the region and more specifically to Dubai. Finally, this introductory chapter ends with a short summary of the ways in which the book is framed within, and contributes to, key literatures, a discussion of the methodology employed in conducting this research and an outline of the following chapters of the book.

## **Defining the boundaries of the city-state**

Dubai is one of seven emirates within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – a federation of Arab states formed in 1971. It is flanked on either side by the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Sharjah and occupies part of the Arabian Desert. Discussing Dubai as a discrete entity is complicated. Although it does claim a unique history, geographically and politically it is difficult to divorce from the larger Gulf region and the federation of the UAE.<sup>2</sup>

It is partially a problem of geography, as the borders of the emirate were somewhat arbitrarily determined. Even today, driving through the UAE, it is difficult to tell where Dubai stops and neighbouring emirates of Sharjah or Abu Dhabi begin. Given the cheaper rents and lower cost of living in other emirates, many migrants (and especially lower-waged migrants) reside in neighbouring Sharjah and commute daily to Dubai for jobs.<sup>3</sup> Migrants housed in labour camps in Dubai often also work in other emirates.

Discussing Dubai as a separate entity goes beyond the issue of physical boundaries. Many significant political decisions are taken at the federal level of the UAE and not by the individual emirate. Foreign policy,

for example, is under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The federal Supreme Council that is responsible for passing policies and the day-to-day running of the federation is controlled largely by Abu Dhabi, which has the largest number of members on the council (Davidson 2009: 237). Dubai's ability to structure its own policies is limited and it is still subject to the authority of the federation in matters of defence, immigration and border control, amongst others. The 2008 economic crisis, for example, highlighted the extent to which the economies of separate emirates are intertwined. The rescue of Dubai's debt by Abu Dhabi demonstrated that the political and economic stability of the federation is seen holistically, rather than as the responsibility of separate emirates. Similarly, Dubai's deference to its neighbour and the ethic of solidarity amongst the emirates can be read in Dubai's decision to rename the tallest building in the world Burj Khalifa, after the ruler of Abu Dhabi. (It was previously self-referentially named Burj Dubai.) The initial policy decisions by Dubai that created a speculative property bubble are, however, indicative of its independence in making strategic economic choices and shaping its industrial base. Economically, Dubai's foundation has traditionally been trade, and is increasingly based in the industries of tourism, finance and real estate. This again differentiates it from Abu Dhabi, which relies primarily on the sale of oil, and the smaller emirates, which are dependent on federal funds.

Although it is a separate emirate, it is thus highly problematic to speak of Dubai as an autonomous state. However, in the creation of a unique global cultural identity, Dubai has been very successful in branding and distinguishing itself. In popular and media discourses, it is in fact a far better known entity than the UAE. The city-state has been extremely skilled in exploiting the cultural sphere in creating and shaping an image attractive and amenable to global consumption. Culture has thus become a resource in the globalisation project; a means of ideological dissemination and economic expansionism (Yudice 2003: 9). Dubai's cultural identity marks itself out as different to the other emirates and disassociates itself from the larger UAE. It is on this basis that the city-state of Dubai is interrogated as a separate and unique unit in this book.

### **Historical background**

In acknowledging that sociology is often criticised for being ahistorical, this book sees the need for a long-term perspective to help in understanding the rapidity and scale of change that Dubai has experienced in recent years. The following section places Dubai's liberalisation and

restructuring within longer trajectories of globalisation and migration that have taken place in the emirate and within the region.

### Early globalisation and foreign influence

The mobilities of people, goods and capital on which Dubai's recent growth has been built have pre-colonial roots. Because of its location between Europe, Africa and Asia, Dubai has for centuries been a trading post, and was initially part of traditional Oman, records of which date back to 2000 BC and mention trading activities in "Magan" as the UAE was then known (Elsheshtawy 2004: 173). This advantageous geopolitical positioning is arguably also the basis for Dubai's continuing prosperity today. The industries of trade, travel and finance on which it has built its recent economic success are heavily hedged on the fact that Dubai is placed between popular international trade and travel routes and the time zones of major financial markets.

Dubai's reputation as a centre for trade attracted not only Portuguese colonisers and transnational merchant families (Onley 2007), but also tribes from neighbouring Persia and what is now Saudi Arabia. These were the *Qawasim* and *Bani Yas* respectively. The former established control over much of what is now a significant area of the UAE, a move that the British and Ottomans came to see as a threat to their dominance of the control of trade routes in the Gulf. As a result of a British attack on, and subsequent defeat of, the *Qawasim* tribe in 1819, colonial rule was established in the region (Elsheshtawy 2004: 173). The main purpose of the British in asserting dominance in the region was to secure the trade route to India, thus allowing their ships passage without having to pay navigational taxes. The need for actual physical occupation, with all the responsibilities it entailed, was deemed unnecessary (Elsheshtawy 2004, Pacione 2005). Instead, treaties were negotiated with the tribal leaders or sheikhs of the *Bani Yas*, who now form the "indigenous" core of UAE citizenry (Zahlan 1989). This negotiation was made easier by the fact that there was no unifying state entity or "functioning civil urban society" to contend with (Elsheshtawy 2004: 174). Inhabitants of the area were largely nomadic Bedouin, with little conception of private ownership of land.<sup>4</sup> British intervention is especially significant with regard to the subsequent geographical demarcation of the region, as it laid the groundwork for the initial structure of individual emirates that became unified as the UAE in 1971, after the end of British rule. The signing of the treaties also structured the social hierarchy of individual emirates. By designating the mercantile and trade families as the treaty signatories, they and their descendents were selected as de facto rulers.



This power base, legitimised by the British, forms the basis of the hierarchical relationships that dominate the UAE's government and society today. The colonial British presence also meant, however, that the UAE stayed largely outside of conflicts in the region, as the British dealt with all foreign affairs matters. This close and dependent relationship with a colonial power continues today, with the UAE sharing strong ties with the United States of America (USA), which has maintained military bases in the country for many years.

### **Early links with India**

In charting Dubai's historic links with India, this section puts into perspective the phenomenon of Indian migration to the UAE. Understanding the unique connection that these two countries share also provides a basis on which to understand the relationship between the Dubai's largest ethnic group, Indians and the citizens, Emiratis.

While the boom of Indian migration to the Gulf occurred during the 1970s, economic migration from South Asia has roots going back at least to the British colonial era. During this period, the trade routes between India and Dubai were secured, solidifying the economic relationship between the two states, both of which were under British jurisdiction. It is significant here to note that even in the early twentieth century, when the population of Dubai was a mere 10,000, there were already Indian merchants settled in the urban area amongst Persian and other businessmen (Pacione 2005). This also suggests that a dependence on a transnational population in the commercial sector is part of Dubai's historical legacy and a result of both the relatively small size of its indigenous population and its geopolitical location. Here it is also important to note that it is Dubai, where the port was located, rather than to the UAE as a territory that initial links were established. Dubai's links with India are further evidenced by the fact that in the early decades of the twentieth century, Dubai was the key entrepôt centre for goods from India, which were then re-exported to Persia and neighbouring states. This was in part due to the imposition of trade tariffs by the government of Persia, which resulted in the movement not just of Indian trade, but also of merchants, craftsmen and their families to Dubai, where the economic climate was perceived to be more liberal. "The growing regional economic importance of Dubai was reinforced in 1904 with the introduction of a regular steamship service to Bombay" (Pacione 2005: 256). Indian currency and stamps were used within the British-administered Gulf and early Indian influences can be seen in the use

of many Urdu words in the Arabic dialects of the coastal areas (Zahlan 1989: 13). In addition, tight British control in terms of foreign policy and immigration matters, meant that

the people of the Gulf, including Dubai, were cut off from the rest of the world except India. They had little to do with fellow Arabs until the advent of oil, with the exception of a tiny group of Egyptian, Lebanese and Palestinian schoolteachers in Kuwait and Bahrain. (Zahlan 1989: 14)

This early Indian influence is still apparent in everyday life in Dubai; many older Emiratis speak Urdu fluently and have spouses from India. However, the privileged place that Indians occupied in Emirati society was lost with the shift to oil economies and the waves of low-wage labourers who came to service the development that oil enabled. The shift in allegiance towards the UAE's Arab "brothers" was quick after the discovery of oil deposits, leaving relations with India in "second place" (Zahlan 1989: 19). A range of factors could have led to this shift, including the rise of pan-Arabism promoted by President Nasser of Egypt and the need to protect territorial interests and formal citizenship – elements of sovereign power that took on a new significance with the discovery of oil. The push for maintaining a distinctly Arab Gulf can be seen in recent "Emiratisation" and "Arabisation" campaigns by various state governments aiming to reduce reliance on foreign (but mainly South Asian) labour and increase recruitment from within the region. The early Indian influence in Dubai is, however, still visible today along the banks of the Dubai Creek, where the *souks* (markets) house the shops of many Indian merchants, and the dhows that ply the river carry predominantly South Asian migrants. The two areas flanking the creek, Deira and Bur Dubai, are home to a Hindu temple and many Indian shops and restaurants. It is also where many low-waged South Asian migrants live. It is significant then, that in popular tourist imagery, it is the area around the creek that is often portrayed as distinctive to Dubai, and the heart of the old city. It is, in fact, an area of the city-state that is largely populated by South Asians.

## Dubai prior to oil

Much of the history of Dubai has been closely intertwined with that of Abu Dhabi and the larger UAE. However, in many respects, Dubai has carved out a global reputation of its own; its recent development as a

modern city-state can be charted independently, and is largely of its own making. A significant point in the development of Dubai as a separate entity occurred in 1833, when a section of the *Bani Yas* tribe broke away from the majority in Abu Dhabi and asserted themselves as rulers of Dubai. This group of about 800 effectively doubled the reported population of the settlement at that time (Elshehtawy 2004: 174). A member of the Al Maktoum family ruled this community and all subsequent leaders of Dubai have been descendants of this family, including the present leader of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.<sup>5</sup> This position, gained by force, means that Dubai has had to negotiate carefully its position between Abu Dhabi, ruled by the *Bani Yas*, from which it broke away, and Sharjah, governed by the *Qawasim*, which it usurped. Elements of this old rivalry still exist today in the way each emirate holds on to a distinctive cultural identity in attempts to differentiate itself from its neighbours. Sharjah, for instance, has chosen to emphasise its Arab and Islamic cultural heritage through the construction of numerous museums, in contrast to Dubai's focus on tourism through the development of hotels and theme parks. These divergent interests have also sometimes initiated laden discourses of morality and cultural appropriateness between the different emirates. The formation of the federated UAE however, has on the whole united interests and strengthened solidarity.

The initial physical development of Dubai as an independent emirate was slow. In 1955 the urban area was 3.2 square kilometres, most homes were still built from palm fronds and drinking water was available only from four public wells (Pacione 2005: 6). This state of under-development can be attributed partially to the relative neglect of the British administrators, as they did not introduce much-needed socio-economic reforms as part of the policy of non-interference that they adopted in the Gulf. This lack of urban infrastructure or services puts into perspective the rapidity of Dubai's development into the highly urbanised city that it is today. Much of the impetus for this development can be attributed to the ruling Al Maktoum family's enterprising nature. Their part in sustaining the liberal attitude towards commerce that has been a hallmark of Dubai's continued success as a trading post is also significant. Evidence of this can be seen in the establishment of the first Chamber of Commerce in the (now) UAE in 1965, the building of an international airport, the evolution of a modern banking system and the construction of the largest dry dock in the world at Jebel Ali (Zahlan 1989: 96). Much of this infrastructure building was enabled through revenue generated from the sale of oil, deposits of which were discovered in 1966. More

recently, however, with oil accounting for less than 3 per cent of Dubai's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Al Maktoum 2008), development has been financed through tourism, trade and foreign capital investment in real-estate projects.

This rapid growth in infrastructure was also due to the necessity to keep up with an expanding population. The UAE's population increased by almost 40 times in less than half a century, primarily because of oil-fuelled migration. The biggest leap was between 1970 and 1980, when the population grew from 223,000 to more than one million, an average annual growth of 16.4 per cent (Kapiszewski 1999: 45–8). Dubai's small indigenous population necessitated this reliance on foreign labour for its development. This is still the case, with just one in ten residents in the UAE being a national. This dependence on migrants is now built into the system of employment in the UAE, discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

In sum, we can ascertain the interplay of three interlinked factors in the early development of Dubai as a city-state. First, its strategic geopolitical location. This has undoubtedly been the predominant element that has shaped not just the early success of Dubai as a trading post, but also its continued importance today as an entrepôt point between Asia, Africa and Europe. Dubai today carries on its historical legacy enabling the movement of goods and people through trade and labour migration. Expanding its reputation, the emirate is also facilitating new mobilities of peoples and capital. This is most evident through the establishment of Dubai as a regional hub for tourism, as well as through initiatives that will secure its position as the primary financial, media and health centre in the Middle East. This can be seen most clearly in the construction of various free zones such as the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Media City, Healthcare City and Knowledge City, all attempts to draw international companies and capital to the emirate.

The second factor that has had a significant impact on Dubai's development is its involvement with British colonial powers. Its relationship with Britain served to protect Dubai from invasion and potential occupation by the Ottoman Empire and other colonial powers intent on securing access to a profitable trade route. The British presence in the region also ensured that India's links with Dubai were strengthened by virtue of them both being colonies of the Crown, and for a period of time, both being administered by the British Government of India (Zahlan 1989: 10). This unique relationship facilitated close cultural links and the movement of migrant traders. Today's exodus of large numbers of migrant workers from South Asia into Dubai can thus be

seen within the context of the movement of peoples and goods between these two regions over centuries.

The third and final factor that has had a large influence on the mode of Dubai's modernisation is the system of governance that was put in place with foreign rule. As alluded to before, the present structure of the UAE, with its division into separate emirates, is a direct outcome of the signing of General Treaties of Peace by the ruling Sheikhs of tribes who inhabited the then Trucial States. This, in effect, cemented their authority as independent rulers (Zahlan 1989: 8). With moral and political support from the British during the period in which the emirates were under colonial rule, the position of the sheikh of each emirate as leader was cemented – not as head merely of the tribe, but also of a political and territorial unit. The signing of treaties granting oil concessions to British companies only also institutionalised the power of the sheikh – he signed the treaties and was personally responsible for the implementation of all their clauses (Zahlan 1989: 19). This, in turn, formalised the relationship between rulers and their tribes, who had become citizens of the newly created states. The system of reciprocity between sheikhs and their subjects has developed into the current system of welfare and benefits that are guaranteed only by virtue of citizenship, passed on through the paternal line.<sup>6</sup> This exclusive definition of citizenship and the institution of a welfare state have also necessitated a large and long-term supply of migrant workers. Because of the national population's reliance on high-paying government jobs, and the reluctance to grant citizenship to outsiders, much of Dubai's development has been the result of migrant labour and knowledge. This is largely overlooked in analyses of Dubai's history, as the next section demonstrates.

### **An elitist history: discounting migrant contributions**

Jane Bristol-Rhys (2009), a historian of the UAE, visiting history sections of bookshops in Abu Dhabi, was struck by the Orientalist overtones in the literature, due to the numerous personal remembrances and photographic collections that celebrate the British as friends and allies in the UAE's history. Bookshops in Dubai in the late 2000s presented another narrative. The large selection of pictorial collections of Dubai and personal narratives of social mobility all expressed the same themes of success and prosperity – embodied either in the visual spectacle of Dubai's architecture or through photographs of Dubai's (and the UAE's) rulers of the preceding three decades.

In the plethora of coffee-table books and biographies, a recurrent and causal link is repeatedly emphasised – that Dubai’s (and the UAE’s) overwhelming success is due wholly to the vision, hard work and skill of its tribal leaders and ruling families. Bristol-Rhys (2009: 115) terms this discourse “Building Our Past”. It is one that is not just prominent in the popular literature of the UAE, but is also reflective of dominant Emirati understandings of a collective national past.

This is a narrative of building, of luxury, spacious homes, maids, summer travel in Europe. It is a narrative of unqualified success, no doubts, no misgivings and the promise of an even brighter future. This narration elevates Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid, the founding fathers, to extraordinary status; their like will never be seen again....Their names adorn city streets, ports, highways, housing development projects and universities. All that the nation has achieved is directly attributed to the wisdom of those two men, with Sheikh Zayed in the lead. (Bristol-Rhys 2009: 115–116)

In these narratives, Dubai’s leaders, from the Al Maktoum family, are portrayed as enterprising, capitalising on Dubai’s strategic position as a port. Their concern with maintaining an environment conducive to commercial enterprise is primary. Besides being important in the project of nation-building, this account is conveyed to a global audience in depictions of Dubai’s meteoric ascent onto the world stage. These discourses are not just embedded in books that tourists bring back but also in popular programmes such as *60 Minutes*. They repeat these nationalist narratives of development and bring them into the present through the figure of Dubai’s current ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, as the single force behind the pace of development that Dubai has achieved (Krane 2009: 183–184). Sheikh Mohammed’s visibility in the global media because of his personal wealth also means that he has come to stand as a metaphor for Dubai. It is a position that he does not refute. Dubai has sought to differentiate itself from the success of neighbouring Abu Dhabi and the larger UAE through an emphasis on its trade links, initiatives like dredging the Dubai Creek and the construction of Port Rashid, which have paved the way towards non-dependence on oil revenues. Here, there is a subtle deviation from the overarching national narrative of development. It proudly maintains that Dubai and its leaders have *actively* created its success; it has required more than the luck of oil. It is a hard-fought-for achievement.

This narrative of nation-building attempts to be largely apolitical, not alluding to the various struggles within tribes over leadership or to the negotiations of the British presence in the region (Bristol-Rhys 2009: 108–109, 114–115). This depoliticisation of Dubai’s history is coherent with the emirate’s recent attempts to assert public dominance within the cultural sphere and refrain from displays of overt political ambition. The popular historical narrative forms a clear linearity from the pre-colonial past to the twenty-first century present, of a state interested only in economic growth, without any historical precedent of upsetting the status quo or challenging “Western” power.

What is missing from these depictions of Dubai’s development into a modern city-state is the contribution of migrants. From the early days of the emirate’s establishment as a trading post, foreign traders and migrant labourers played a pivotal role in Dubai’s development. Without the knowledge, skills and manpower that foreign workers have provided over decades, Dubai’s development trajectory would have looked very different. Besides passing references to the cosmopolitan nature of Dubai’s population, however, any real acknowledgement of migrants’ contributions is neglected. This omission of migrants from Dubai’s development narrative serves the exclusionary project of national identity construction, especially in a young state such as the UAE. It has, however, contributed to the formation of institutionalised hierarchies and everyday forms of racism in the emirate, as later chapters show.

### **Trajectory of labour migration to Dubai**

An extended analysis of Dubai’s development after the discovery of oil deposits has been undertaken elsewhere (Abdullah 1978, Peck 1986, Davidson 2008, Krane 2009). Here, I will examine Dubai’s more recent history in relation to the role that the processes of labour migration have played in the construction of the modern emirate.

Dubai has had a long history of migration linked to trade and the settlement of trading families and merchants in the emirate (Onley 2007). These early links with Indian and Iranian traders are still very visible today. Many Emiratis are descended from Iranians who settled in the city-state in previous generations. “In the UAE, according to the first population census, which was conducted in 1968, foreigners constituted 36.5 per cent of the total population” (Winckler 1997: 481). This history of migration is an important part of the identity of the emirate, often cited in government-sponsored publications as the reason behind the tolerance of other cultures for which Dubai is

celebrated today (Masad 2008). Tourist advertisements of the emirate also depict it as a melting pot of peoples. Dubai is relatively tolerant of foreign cultures and practices – unusual in a region often portrayed as suspicious of Western (and other non-Arab) influences. With a traditionally small local population, the emirate has cultivated a need for imported knowledge as well as labour to sustain its position as a viable independent entity. Migration to Dubai has been, for decades, an integral part of its political and economic development, although this is not always readily recognised.

Widely known but rarely publicly acknowledged is Dubai's history of slavery. Details of this practice are difficult to verify, as no official records exist. It is common knowledge in Dubai, however, that when the emirate was still economically dependent on pearl diving and fishing, slavery was widespread, with slaves coming mainly from the African continent. They, too (like the Iranians), were an early immigrant population who have now been naturalised since slavery was abolished in the 1950s. In the past, slaves dived for pearls for their masters and did the domestic work of cleaning and other menial chores (Krane 2009: 54–55). This cultivated dependence on a slave population has been suggested as one reason for Emiratis' reluctance to take on unskilled jobs that involve manual labour. In this way, the current reliance on low-wage migrant labour for low-skilled work across the Gulf is interpreted as a continuation of practices of slavery (Kapiszewski 1999: 203). Local disdain of manual labour also suggests a basis for the discriminatory practices that are discussed later in the book, where certain types of work are devalued and an indication of low status. Most Emirati families today employ multiple "servants" for the home, including a domestic worker or two who cook and clean for the family, a driver and perhaps a gardener or handyman – a practice that has been derided by Sheikh Mohammed as overindulgent (Krane 2009: 187, Ali 2010: 169). The employment of domestic workers or "maids" has also been adopted widely by the middle-class expatriate population in Dubai and necessitates the large-scale migration of women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Sudan, India and Sri Lanka amongst others. The parallels with the dependence on a former slave population are difficult to disregard.<sup>7</sup> Although the practice of keeping African slaves has been completely eradicated, and former slaves and their descendents now have full citizenship rights, structural exploitation of populations continues in the employment of cheap low-wage labour from India and other poor sending countries. The situation of debt bondage that many low-wage migrants in Dubai find themselves in is regarded as a



form of forced labour or slavery by international agencies including the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Beyond a reluctance to take on manual duties in the domestic sphere, Emiratis have also shown a disdain for undertaking physical labour even in the formal economy. The construction boom in Dubai and the majority of infrastructure-building in the emirate has thus been peopled entirely by migrant labourers, except in certain administrative duties and management positions. Young Emiratis finishing their education today expect to land government jobs with generous salaries, resulting in an inflated civil service. The inability to absorb ever more locals into civil-service jobs has propelled moves by the state to encourage more Emiratis to join the private sector – a strategy that has been largely unsuccessful, as they are generally unwilling to accept the lower remuneration that such jobs entail (Ali 2010: 166). Private-sector jobs are then almost always undertaken by migrants (Ruhs 2002). This preference for desk-bound, white-collar jobs has also engendered a widespread and unquestioned discriminatory attitude towards the people who do low-skilled work. This lower-status position ascribed to migrants in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs forms one vector of marginalisation in Dubai.

### **Post-oil-boom migration**

With the discovery of oil deposits in 1966, Dubai's leaders embarked on large-scale infrastructure-building, which included ports, schools and the provision of municipal facilities such as piped water and electricity. These initiatives were the first large-scale efforts to modernise. For a state that had practically no contemporary buildings, sewage system or roads, such a scale of infrastructural development envisioned by then Emir of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid, was a gargantuan task. It required not only large numbers of unskilled labourers, but also skilled people such as engineers, teachers and architects. With the small Emirati population largely uneducated, and with low rates of participation in the workforce, an initial reliance on foreign, skilled workers was necessary (Winckler 1997: 480). The need for low-skilled foreigners to do the most low-paid and undesirable jobs, as well as well-remunerated skilled ones, is sustained today through large infrastructure-building projects such as the World and Palm islands as well as numerous other real-estate projects. Newly acquired oil wealth also meant that nationals did not have to undertake jobs seen as undesirable; these could be outsourced to a migrant population who did not enjoy the same benefits of the welfare state. Here we see the initial emergence of a two-tiered labour system, with locals as business owners and government employees, and foreign workers as the

primary labouring class. This trend, where economic growth is often dependent on a migrant underclass, is typical of states that are industrialising (Gardner and Osella 2003: xi), but in Dubai has remained a characteristic of the economy even decades later.

Post-oil labour migration to the Gulf states peaked between 1975 and 1985, representing what is probably the largest increase in labour migration in the world. Migration contributed to rapid population growth in the Gulf states, which have traditionally had small populations. In the UAE as a whole, for example, the population grew by 190 per cent in ten years (Winckler 1997: 481). Although holding only temporary migration status, many skilled and semi-skilled migrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s have stayed on in Dubai for decades, raising families and building homes and careers in the emirate. Skilled labour migrants often live in Dubai for longer periods, and typically have a greater investment in the city in terms of owning multiple properties or children's education. It is also common for this group to use migration to Dubai as a stepping-stone towards an eventual move to more attractive destination countries, such as Singapore, Canada or Australia. These states, with less restrictive labour regimes, allow for the possibility of permanent settlement and family reunification. In the case of low-wage migrants, more circular forms of mobility are common, with many returning to the home country for a few years between stints in the Gulf. The average length of stay for low-wage migrants is about six years, although it is common for migrants to work for much shorter or longer periods (Zachariah, Nair et al. 2001: 5).

In addition to being part of changing economic conditions, the large numbers of migrants in Dubai have had a sizable impact on the social and cultural life of the city. Migrant community organisations, places of worship, schools and restaurants specific to particular language groups or nationalities are common in Dubai. The city has thus emerged as an important space for the reproduction of transnational practices for many communities, and has taken on a significant place in the imaginary of the Indian diaspora in particular (Vora 2013). Despite the role that Dubai plays in the constructions of migrant identity, migrants do not feature in conceptualisations of Emirati identity. Although the city is regularly portrayed as wholly cosmopolitan space, there is no articulation of a multicultural or multiethnic national identity in the UAE. The nation is coherent only with a distinct Emirati identity and heritage (Khalaf 2000, Khalaf 2004). This exclusive construction is a deliberate strategy to emphasise and reiterate that all non-natives are temporary residents, "guest workers", who will never completely belong.

### **Global restructuring**

Dubai's recent shift to the industries of finance, real estate and tourism (amongst others such as education and healthcare), have resulted in changing trends of migration to the emirate. Migrants with different skill sets and from a wider range of sending regions now come to Dubai compared to when large-scale migration to the emirate first commenced in the 1970s. The Gulf was then a less-established destination, and Dubai was regarded as more "foreign and distant". Migration to the region was viewed with greater trepidation; the UAE and Gulf in general were not "well-known" places and channels of migration were not as established as they are today. Links between sending countries and the UAE were not as sophisticated as they are in the present in terms of remittance avenues, air routes and cheap phone connections. Migrant workers who first arrived in Dubai in the 1970s and 1980s describe the sense of alienation they felt for example, in being confronted on arrival by a city that was mostly desert and sand – a physical landscape most were completely unused to, coming as they did from tropical Asia and with its developed infrastructure. As expressed by a long-term Indian migrant, "At least today there are buildings here. When I first came, it was just sand and sand. I was really surprised. I thought India was a lot more developed than this!"

Today, low-wage migrants increasingly come to Dubai to work in the service and hospitality sectors as waiters, cleaners and drivers. The majority of them, however, service the construction sector as welders, crane operators, bricklayers or as "coolies" who take on a variety of manual jobs. The range of countries from which Dubai draws labour has diversified over the past four decades. Filipinos, Chinese and Koreans make up larger segments of the low-skilled and semi-skilled migrant groups than in previous years. This is partly through efforts by the government to encourage low-skilled migration from outside South Asia, particularly India. This move was a reaction to the widespread sentiment that the UAE was becoming overly dependent on migrants of one nationality – and a fear of this potential threat to the dominant position of Emiratis. Although the migrant population has diversified, Indians remain the largest group in both Dubai and the UAE as whole, outnumbering even locals seven to one (Krane 2009). The movement away from hiring Indians as low-wage labour is also linked to higher wage demands by Indian migrants – based on the weakening of the UAE dirham in relation to the Indian rupee and rising wage levels in India, even for semi-skilled work. Employers constantly on the lookout for

the cheapest source of unskilled labour have turned to other markets such as Bangladesh and China. Dubai-based companies have also started outsourcing their manufacturing and labour – opening up plants and factories in India and other developing states. Garment manufacturing, for example, which used to be a large industry in the UAE, is now in steady decline. Because of high operating costs, manufacturers have chosen to move factories to less expensive locations such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This outsourcing of high-cost industries has also caused a decreased demand for certain types of low-wage labour in Dubai. Rather than move to the Gulf where they have to be away from family, many potential migrants now choose to remain in their home countries and work in the same jobs for a small wage differential.

In comparison to the early decades of modernisation in the 1970s and 1980s, Dubai today draws many more skilled migrants – from architects and human-resource managers to financial consultants and venture capitalists – representing a wider range of occupations and nationalities than the early skilled migrants to Dubai. This is a reflection of the diversification of the emirate's economy, as well as the opening up of various fields such as education and information technology (IT) to development and innovation. These industries draw migrants eager to make their mark and establish themselves in sectors that are in their infancy in Dubai but established in migrants' home countries. The early professional migrants to Dubai were primarily British (due in large part to the region's former status as a British protectorate), and came to manage the operations of the growing petroleum industry. Today, migrants from the United Kingdom (UK) still represent a large proportion of skilled migrants to the UAE. However, Indians, Americans and Lebanese also have sizable communities of middle-class expatriates in the emirates. This diversification is also indicative of Dubai's increasing embeddedness within the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and larger Middle East. Dubai has now emerged as the preferred destination for young Arabs, preferable even to a posting in a Western developed nation (Slackman 2008b). For educated, middle-class and religiously moderate Lebanese, Egyptians and Iranians, Dubai represents a desirable mix of Islam and Westernisation, a version of globalisation that is unavailable or unacceptable in many of their home countries. Skilled migrants from outside the Arab states come to Dubai lured by the promise of tax-free salaries, year-round sunshine and a lifestyle that is not attainable in their countries of origin. Dubai's sense of unexploited possibility and unique brand of modernity are primary reasons for its desirability as a destination.

## Key contributions

This book, as an interdisciplinary text, is situated within the intersections of research on labour migration, contemporary urban studies and processes of globalisation and neoliberal development. In summary, it makes three main contributions towards these existing blocks of literature. First, it brings the ethnographic and everyday into studies of globalisation and neoliberalisation in the Gulf through the employment of what Burawoy (2000) labels “global ethnography”. This book responds to calls for studies on neoliberalisation that focus on “diverse engagements” rather than add to the already vast literature on “the global scale of the project and its adoption by powerful global institutions” (Stenning, Smith et al. 2008: 229). While studies focused on Dubai and the Gulf have generally been limited, existing analyses adopt either a macro-scale, political-economy perspective or read the city through architectural symbols and material culture. Through joining more embodied analyses, this research supplements understandings of Dubai and portrays it as a lived space, rather than one of unpeopled architectural monuments or only as an effect of global capital. In doing so, this book comprehends migrant employment and exploitation, in addition to larger economic forces, as markers of global cities of the “South”.

Second, this research addresses a gap in the literature on male low-wage migration experiences. The great majority of research on labour migration in the Gulf has focused on consequences of migration for the sending state and aspects of reintegration into the home village. This gives only one side of the picture of the migration process. In investigating labour migrants’ everyday lives in the host country, this research also contributes to the push for greater responsibility on the part of host nations in guaranteeing basic rights and ensuring social justice for migrant workers. In representing male migrants’ experiences in the context of the receiving country, this book provides a more rounded analysis than previous accounts focused on domestic workers’ experiences. In doing so, it represents an important contribution to the study of South-South migration.

Third, this book contributes significantly to the literature on both labour migration and global cities by broadening conceptualisations of the migrant worker. Low-wage migrants are typically portrayed merely as victims of forces of global capital and lacking significant forms of agency. This book demonstrates that they also display remarkable modes of human agency and empowerment. In doing so, important possibilities for challenge and resistance to unjust discrimination are left open.

## **A note on research methodology**

It is widely acknowledged that the Gulf is a difficult place in which to do research (Al-Rasheed 2005, Hvidt 2007a). This has been attributed primarily to the closed nature of its governments, who have placed restrictions on ethnographic field research. There is also a lack of availability of information such as census data or accurate statistics on the numbers and percentage of foreigners. Kapiszewski, for example asserts that “the official figures often leave out the large numbers of illegal workers living in the GCC countries and do not deal successfully with the problem of who should be counted as national and who should not” (1999: 37). Information in newspapers and other popular media is also potentially unreliable as most media is state monitored or owned. However, information from mainstream media sources is often the only data available on subjects such as the underground alcohol and sex industry. In particular, ethnographic research in the Gulf region has been limited due to the difficulty of obtaining permissions and visas to conduct fieldwork. This situation is improving, however, with greater global integration of the region, increasing foreign influences and the resultant opening up to more critical analyses. In recent years, these have not just been from the academic sphere, but by journalists, artists and the film community. However, a reluctance to accept criticism remains. Gulf governments are, for example, extremely sensitive to negative portrayals of their treatment of foreign workers. Access for researchers and media to such populations is thus limited and monitored. As a state attempting to align itself with other global cities, Dubai is particularly wary of unflattering representations.

The importance of identity in Dubai was alluded to in the vignette that opened this introduction. The attempt to “place” or locate a stranger within the multiple social frames of ethnicity, nationality, class and gender is commonplace in interactions everywhere. However, this is heightened in a highly stratified space like Dubai, as this book argues. Because of the salience of social markers as immediate vectors along which persons are defined, my identity as a female researcher of South Asian ethnicity shaped the type of ethnographic research that I was able to carry out. This is important to the methodology of the book as my positionality and perceived identity enabled but also restricted access to informants and information. This discussion of positionality is also important to the interpretive paradigm that this book adopts – the researcher and object of research are linked and shape each other.

### **Negotiating gender, class and ethnicity**

Even the presence of a woman in an area that is coded as male is suspect....“The concept of an upper-class Indian woman walking around a factory and conversing with workers...went against the grain of the social and cultural norms that define caste, class and gender. As the general manager said to me on my first day, “you can do it but it is not appropriate for you”. (Fernandez 1997: 21; see also Sen 1999)

Occupying public spaces, working, earning and spending all come out as strongly masculine activities. (Osella and Osella 2006: 14)

Throughout much of the ethnographic research for this book, I embedded myself and observed activities in what would have been coded predominantly or strictly male spaces, similar to the South Asian social world described in the above quote. They included labour camps for men,<sup>8</sup> male leisure spaces such as the street or coffee shops and restaurants. I was also regularly present in male-dominated events such as migrant group committee meetings and the activities of local humanitarian organisations. My presence as an ethnic South Asian, middle-class woman in these circumstances was impossible to ignore and had to be explained.

In most male working-class environments, my presence as a researcher and co-ethnic was welcomed. Both low-wage migrant men and women were incredibly forthcoming with narratives and stories of migration. The overwhelming desire was for their experiences to be documented, and their eagerness to share their biographies and narratives came from a position of marginality, where low-wage migrant lives are frequently deemed unimportant. Both male and female low-wage migrants also regularly emphasised their position as structural victims, and conveyed a reflexivity and self-consciousness of constructions of identity.

In middle-class male environments, in contrast, my presence as young and female was seen almost as a transgression. In Dubai, young middle-class South Asian women were accompanied by either husbands or male relatives who also came as migrants. Single young women were often perceived as needing the protection or guardianship of a male relative, especially in a place perceived as licentious, such as Dubai. As a single, unmarried South Asian woman, my presence was often read as suspect and my motives questioned. In cases where I was at first viewed with suspicion, repeated involvement enabled me to “break in” to the group. I was often then treated as an honorary male member. Gender, in these circumstances, served as an initial barrier despite shared class and ethnicity. In both working-class and middle-class circumstances, I was

read as Indian or broadly South Asian. Despite representing myself as Singaporean, the visibility of my ethnicity foregrounded ethnic identity over national and other modes of affinity. Shared ethnicity and language functioned as an enabler in building relationships of trust with South Asian migrants of both genders.

### **Data collection**

Data was gathered through a method of bricolage, in which each method is valued as equally productive (Denizen and Lincoln 2004). This combination of methods facilitated dealing with a research site in which access to certain types of information was difficult. Each chapter of the book draws on a variety of primary and secondary data sources that together generate an overall theme and argument. Most of the primary data collection was undertaken in 2008. This was just prior to the onset of the global financial crisis, when Dubai's economic fortunes were at their peak. The task of ethnography in researching migrant experiences in Dubai was "the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?" (Appadurai 1996: 52). Informed by similar perspectives of tying together the local and global from Burawoy (2000), particular attention was paid to how processes of neoliberal development played out socially and spatially in the everyday – defined as "the recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of the social life of ordinary individuals" (Velayutham 2009: 261).

A significant proportion of this fieldwork component consisted of time spent with a Dubai-based humanitarian organisation. This association facilitated access to many low-wage migrants and provided the opportunity to develop on-the-ground understandings of how migrant welfare is dealt with by non-state actors. Working with an organisation that dealt daily with complex welfare issues related to low-wage migrants aided in the negotiation of ethical dilemmas while conducting fieldwork. I was quickly made aware, for example, of the legal and material limits of my ability to assist runaway domestic workers. My own precarious position as a non-citizen and researcher determined the extent of my ability to intervene and participate in such situations. Contact with migrants was also established through various hometown associations, which facilitated access to middle-class migrants and entrepreneurs. A small sample of low-wage male migrants were also given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of parts of their everyday lives that they wanted to document. These augmented understandings of everyday experiences of low-wage migrants that were initially developed through interviews and observation.



In addition to ethnographic observations, a total of 60 in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with both low-wage and (broadly defined) middle-class migrants. Low-wage migrants are characterised as those who do not earn above the minimum wage required to bring family members to Dubai as dependents. They were typically engaged in low-paid jobs in the construction and service sectors. They were predominantly of South Asian origin. The majority were from South India and were male low-wage workers.<sup>9</sup> All interviewees were migrants and 18–65 years old. Interviews were conducted in English, Tamil, Malayalam, or a mixture of the three.<sup>10</sup> Interviewees were recruited primarily through networks established via migrant groups and the placement of advertisements in locations where low-wage migrants lived. The snowballing method was subsequently applied. Two focus groups (consisting of 6–12 persons) in labour camps amongst male Indian low-wage migrants and one focus group amongst female low-wage migrants in a garment factory were also conducted. Contact was maintained with key informants after the initial period of fieldwork.

A visual database of photographs taken during the period of field research was also kept. Visually exploring and representing Dubai is an important component of the research, as it is a space where change is noticeably marked on the physical landscape. Socio-economic polarisations can also be charted through the material landscape of Dubai. A database of international news reports on Dubai from September 2007 to December 2010 was also kept and utilised as a resource for data about the emirate. This form of data collection was especially useful after the initial fieldwork period, when the effects of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) were being acutely felt in Dubai, but where the researcher could not be physically present. This database complemented the gathering of information through print media such as magazines and newspapers.

Finally, a range of blogs about Dubai were analysed. These were typically maintained by middle-class expatriates in Dubai or Emirati nationals. These blogs particularly informed ideas around how Dubai is represented and were also spaces where migrants could publicly and anonymously express thoughts about living in the emirate, with little censure. Dubai-based blogs are thus seen as an active and democratic civil-society space in the absence of a parallel entity outside the virtual world. The data gathered from this mixture of methods was coded for recurrent and dominant patterns. The themes that emerged form the basis of the following chapters of the book and are detailed in the next section.

## Chapter summaries

This last section of the introduction provides a summary of the following chapters as a lead-in to the rest of the book. In concert with the more political aims of this research, the division of chapters reflects both an acknowledgement of the agency of (marginalised) migrants as well as their relative lack of power within migrant contexts. Chapters 3 and 5 emphasise the salience of the structures within which much exploitation of migrants takes place, while Chapters 4 and 6 show how possibilities for empowerment and challenges to marginalising institutions exist. The way in which technologies of neoliberal development are variously embedded in discourses (Chapter 2), state structures (Chapter 3), bodies (Chapter 4) and the urban environment (Chapter 5) is one of the key conceptual threads that is woven through the book. Chapter 6, in contrast, shows how informal social networks function outside such neoliberal logics. This mode of dealing with frames or “fragments” acknowledges the impossibility of a totalising narrative.

*Chapter 2: Dubai as Metaphor* deals with discursive constructions of Dubai. It dissects the dominant ways in which Dubai has been represented, in both popular and migrant discourses. The chapter examines how a neoliberal development rhetoric is actively embraced by the state and performed in ways in which a desirable image is strategically crafted for a global audience. Dubai’s attempts to mould itself into a global city such as London or New York are discussed through its attempts to draw international capital and labour. Migrants are drawn to Dubai largely because of its significations of a mode of post-colonial, non-Western modernity. The chapter also demonstrates that the city’s aggressive development, evidenced in the built environment, can be read as a form of cultural expansionism. Finally, the chapter shows how Dubai’s meteoric rise and fall (post-2008 global financial crisis) on the world stage has been seized on by commentators as a cautionary tale against the excesses of greed and megalomania. By functioning as a symbol for such diverse discourses, Dubai has evolved into a metaphor for themes of global resonance.

*Chapter 3: Migrants and the State* examines migrants’ relationships with both receiving and sending states. It unpacks legal, political and everyday discriminatory frameworks in Dubai and how they are inscribed on low-wage migrants. Through detailed and moving ethnographic accounts, the chapter demonstrates how migrants in Dubai are stratified along multiple intersecting lines of race, class, nationality, gender and immigration status. The real consequences of these divisions to migrant workers

in terms of abuse and denial of rights are brought to light. This chapter also provides a more balanced account of the structural inequality that characterises the lives of low-wage migrants in Dubai. While most popular and academic accounts attribute the situation of exploitation of low-wage migrants to the lack of enforcement and care by the government of the UAE, as well as the lack of political pressure from the international community and rights organisations, they neglect to take into account the role of the sending state. This chapter gives a more rounded account by exploring the role of middlemen agents and embassies, as well as the need for a more transnational conceptualisation of rights, in order to deal with the problem of low-wage migrant exploitation. In the context of global neoliberal restructuring, this chapter calls for more international governance mechanisms to ensure low-wage migrant rights are protected.

*Chapter 4: Neoliberal Narratives* examines low-wage migrants' constructions of masculinity, femininity and empowered selves, a reaction to their marginalised situations and the possibilities for reinvention that Dubai represents. Through analysis of regular routines, discriminatory practices and enforced discipline, the everyday infantilisation and emasculation of low-wage migrants by employers is extensively discussed. Simultaneously, this chapter shows that migrants' subjectivities are shaped by immersion into a space of modernity and neoliberal rationality. This chapter focuses, in particular, on the ways in which these altered conceptions of self are incorporated into ways of dealing with difficult and exploitative migrant life in Dubai. These new ways of governing the self, learned by low-wage migrants, are encouraged by employers, charity workers and middle-class migrants. This chapter thus charts the creation of low-wage migrant narratives of self that subtly challenge employers' and the state's constructions of them as disposable, dangerous and as having no other need except to accumulate capital. The neoliberal ideology that constructs them merely as workers is thus re-appropriated in empowering ways.

*Chapter 5: The Divided City* uses the built environment and everyday mobilities in the city to analyse inequalities in the emirate. It understands how space and movement in the city reflect, reify and create divisions, through the exclusion of certain groups deemed undesirable. The chapter examines how these practices are sustained through state-led neoliberal actions, which result, for example, in the building of gated developments. The chapter examines two different types of gated community: a middle-class luxury development and a labour camp. They are both dominant residential forms in Dubai and are a prominent

feature of the everyday lives of migrants. The consequences for low-wage migrants of living in such spaces, such as alcoholism and depression, are discussed. It is not just in living arrangements, however, but also in movements around the city that migrants are segregated. The unintended consequences of this socio-spatial polarisation and control of space in terms of the informal practices that migrants develop are also interrogated. Finally, the shopping mall, the most important leisure space in Dubai, is examined as a public space that encapsulates and embodies hierarchies of everyday life in the emirate.

*Chapter 6: Social Networks* examines informal social networks amongst migrants in Dubai. A theoretical framework of informality is used to understand the social networks that develop outside the neoliberal frames of efficiency and competition that the state uses to manage migrants. Cross-cultural as well as co-ethnic networks can act in both productive and abusive ways for migrants. This chapter emphasises how these networks often function as coping mechanisms and forms of care in day-to-day life for marginalised migrants in Dubai. Through ethnographic case studies ranging from the work of hometown associations to rotating credit unions, this section of the book shows how low-wage workers in particular rely on affinities and altruistic acts of aid in order to survive the difficulties of migrant life. In doing so, the chapter maintains that possibilities for a caring city exist even in Dubai – an urban space that has often been considered shallow and uncaring, especially to low-wage migrant workers.

The short **Conclusion** draws the themes of the book together to illustrate how this particular study of migration in Dubai is relevant to discussions of international migrant labour rights and a wider social justice agenda. In doing so, the argument is put forth that frameworks outside the nation-state are the most productive in creating circumstances that encourage better provision of low-wage migrant rights, welfare, respect and social justice. It is also suggested that it is informal, unregulated and organic forms of sociality that make a city a liveable and pleasurable space, especially for low-wage and marginalised groups. Finally, possibilities for future research are suggested.

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## 2

# Dubai as Metaphor: Corporate Entity, Global City, Hope and Mirage

Through four inter-linked yet competing metaphors, this chapter illustrates how Dubai has come to symbolise alternately the neoliberal corporation, global city, hope and mirage. These framings are important in the larger narrative of this book; idealised and discursive representations of the emirate underpin migrants' experiences in Dubai. To understand processes of migration fully, it is critical to unpack how migrants' experiences of the city are framed not only in material and structural terms, but also within, and in response to, prevailing regimes of representation. These "imaginative geographies" of place, Said (1978: 55) suggests, are often far more important than its objective constructions. The representations of Dubai that this chapter highlights circulate not only within the emirate but also outside its boundaries, within a globally mobile and informed community of tourists, architects, city planners, investors, media commentators and potential migrants, among others.

These framings of Dubai draw on contemporary media sources, migrants' narratives and academic discussions of the emirate to foreground four linked ideas. First, the metaphor of *Dubai Inc.* argues that the Emirati state strategically foregrounds a neoliberal landscape of rationality and value-free commerce for display to a global public. The media is complicit in highlighting this aspect of Dubai's development and sustains an image of the emirate that is predominantly one of corporate rationality and efficiency. Second, *Dubai as Global City* suggests that the emirate's form of cultural expansionism is representative of an idiosyncratic post-Western modernity. This challenges Orientalist readings of the Middle East as emerging from within the teleology of European development. *Dubai as Hope* – the third metaphor through which the city is conceived – is one by which low-wage migrants are particularly lured, but which they also reify and perpetuate. The promise of social

mobility that this metaphor suggests is also shown to be misleading. Last, *Dubai as Mirage* is a discursive assemblage that encapsulates international public disapproval of Dubai's aggressive mode of development and disbelief in its ability to sustain its combination of neoliberal rationality and ostentatious growth.

These imaginings of the city are useful starting points from which more tangible migrant relationships with the emirate can be analysed. While not exhaustive, these representations indicate important framings of the city-state that weave through the following four chapters. Not always made explicit in the rest of the book, they interweave with various aspects of urban migrant life, animating and shaping each other. In unpacking discourses of Dubai, this chapter also makes possible challenges, contradictions and re-imaginings.

### **Dubai Inc. – the state as neoliberal corporation**

This section discusses narratives that present Dubai as the embodiment of a neoliberal corporation through framings that are actively initiated by the state through place-branding strategies and reinforced by media representations that portray the emirate in a one-dimensional manner, understood primarily through a selective reading of its built environment.

While Dubai remains part of the Muslim world, the real religion here is business. (Weir and Woo 2007)

this freest of free market enclaves. (Slackman 2008)

You can't become a citizen of Dubai, Inc. because corporations don't take on citizens – just employees. I'm not sure why anyone would even care enough to try. ([www.secretdubai.com](http://www.secretdubai.com))<sup>1</sup>

What's good for the merchant is good for Dubai. (attributed to Sheikh Rashid)

The characterisation of Dubai as a thoroughly corporatised state is the metaphor that is most prevalent in contemporary descriptions of the emirate. The image of Dubai as a business enterprise, with the Emir of Dubai as the "CEO Sheikh" (Molavi 2005) directing development, is one that foregrounds the idea of top-down planning and makes economic progress its primary priority. Dubai Inc. is also a metaphor inspired by the fact that many of Dubai's ruling classes are also its economic elite, who own the largest businesses and head the most important state-led



corporations. In this way, the job of governance overlaps significantly with generating economic growth. While this confluence is not unique to Dubai, here both state and economy are concentrated in the hands of one family.

The ruling Al Maktoum clan controls the main sectors of the economy, including the ports, airline, real estate and heavy industry (Sick 1997: 17), blurring the line between public and private within the city-state. This corporation is one in which public interests are increasingly controlled by private means. Dubai, in this sense, is a family-run business. Governance decisions are also made in a top-down, largely non-democratic fashion.<sup>2</sup> This mode of authority is largely uncontested in return for the provision of a high standard of tax-free lifestyle for the employee-residents of the state. As in a corporation, there is little need to consult a docile and dependent workforce. This type of social contract has been seen by some as a largely successful mode of ensuring economic progress – especially prior to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Expanding industries and high levels of GDP growth and foreign investment in the emirate are cited as evidence of this.

Material splendor and authoritarian government can, it turns out, go together. ... the blue-chip buildings next to the shabby high-rise clad in garishly colored glass and surmounted by a pagoda folly, the emirates are essentially an advertisement to an increasingly wowed world: Look at what enlightened, corporate, efficient and non-democratic government *can do*. (Kennicott 2007)

It is not just media commentators but migrants who have taken on and employ this metaphor of Dubai as a corporation in everyday conversation. Indian lawyer Anwar's praise and admiration of Dubai's ruler is one that is echoed by many migrants.

He (Sheikh Mohammed) is making wonders – Palm islands, 7-star hotel, tallest tower. And tourism will improve. It's all about the efficiency of the CEO. His ability, you can say. And there are opportunities here because of Sheikh Mohammed – he is creating new new things.

Veneration of the ruler is justified, not through his lineage, but because of his embodiment of an efficient and enterprising Chief Executive Officer (CEO). This narrative of development, which cuts out significant contributions by others (as demonstrated in the previous chapter),

is one that is internalised even by migrants. For many middle-class migrants from India, Dubai's autocratic neoliberal corporate mode of governance is a model that is highly successful, particularly in comparison to the governance of their home states. It enables, for example, the functioning of businesses, without the kind of bureaucratic red tape and corruption that characterises many dealings in India.

The "Dubai Model" of state-led infrastructure development places emphasis on the consolidation of new economic sectors including trade, finance and tourism, and in establishing a global reputation as a regional and world leader in those industries. The state is viewed as geared towards aggressive capital accumulation, based on the assumption that what is good for economic growth is also good for the well being of the public as a whole. This harks back to the quote from Sheikh Rashid at the beginning of this section that what is good for the merchant is good for Dubai. The emirate's pursuit of economic gains, then, perhaps reflects historical continuity, rather than an incorporation of what have been conceptualised as recent neoliberal modes of development, or a coming together of both.

The UAE boasts one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. However, such development has not been accompanied by equal progress in political or social reform. Unlike some other Gulf states, such as Bahrain, the UAE has not taken serious steps towards more democratic government. On the other hand, the religious conservatism favoured by Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia has also taken a back seat in Dubai. It instead attempts to create a more inclusive and tolerant environment for its large expatriate community and foreign investors. Tourism advertisements for the emirate often feature swimwear-clad Westerners frolicking on beaches – an image atypical to the region. These are part of the strategies that the state uses to disassociate itself from the violence, instability and religious traditionalism of its neighbours. These constructions of a particular brand of modernity are discussed further in the following section.

### **The built environment**

Key to the establishment of confidence internationally has been Dubai's display of a mode of rational, calculated and stable governance, especially crucial within the politically volatile Middle East. The architecture of the built environment of urban Dubai with its futuristic skyscrapers embodies such rhetoric. Through the numerous "rows of office and hotel towers decorated in marble and gold leaf" (Kennicott 2007), large-scale developments such as Internet City, Media City, Knowledge Village, Dubai International

Financial Centre (DIFC) and Jumeirah Lakes Towers the landscape of the city has been dramatically and rapidly altered. This infrastructure building has also drawn global brand-name corporations such as Halliburton to set up headquarters in the emirate. Dubai's reputation as a regional business centre and emergent "global city" was subsequently launched. The construction of such a physical landscape is not then merely for infrastructural purposes, but also serves to establish Dubai as an ordered, rational and bureaucratised space for global public consumption. It is a landscape that embodies the neoliberal qualities that other large successful "global cities" possess. It advertises Dubai as a safe and conventional place to do business – where Islamic conservatism and cultural restrictions do not inhibit the accumulation of capital. Sassen makes this point about the demonstrativeness of corporate buildings effectively.

The dominant narrative presents the economy as ordered by principles of technical and scientific efficiency and in that sense as neutral. The emergence and consolidation of corporate power appears, then, as an inevitable form that economic growth takes under these ordering principles. The impressive engineering and architecture evident in the tall corporate towers that dominate our downtowns are a physical embodiment of these principles. (Sassen 1996: 144–145)

Characterisations of Dubai's main highway and corporate corridor, Sheikh Zayed Road and the DIFC as the "wannabe Wall Street of the Middle East" (Reed 2009) and "the new Wall Street...the centre of gravity" (Thomas 2008) are indicative of the discursive success of the city-state's aspirations to become one of the leading financial centres of the globe. Dubai was, for instance, one of the main benefactors of the withdrawal of Arab capital from the USA after 9/11. Other Middle-Eastern states and non-Western sovereign wealth funds also saw Dubai as an alternative location for investment. This creation of a rationalised landscape has helped to draw both multinationals and states to inject capital into Dubai. While the emergence of rationalised cityscapes and the symbolic meanings conveyed by their materiality is not unique to Dubai, the speed and scale with which the emirate has pursued such developments, together with the ways in which the built environment has been appropriated by the media as a metaphor for the state's central ideology, are significant. The complicity of the state in embracing associations with a neoliberal corporate mode of governance indicates a collusion of interests that work to consolidate dominant discourses of Dubai as corporation.

The highly rationalised material landscape of the city-state signifies a “universal and secular vision of the human” (Chakrabarty 2000: 4) – one that privileges the same values across cultures and space. These values of rationality and capital accumulation – are seen as having emerged from the West, and subsequently adopted. Modernity and its symbols, in this conceptualisation, are passed on from Europe, where they emerged, to parts of the as-yet-unmodernised world. This trajectory of development based on an a priori European model, has been much critiqued for its singular and imperialistic notion of progress, but is still a widely adopted epistemology. Dubai’s adoption of such symbols of rational modernity, however, should not be seen as an unreflective acceptance of Western values, but as a selective and strategic reinterpretation. Dubai, in this reading, symbolises the ideal post-colonial city. It successfully performs not just economic integration into the global neoliberal system, but also cultural and ideological mimicry. It is a self-conscious and highly successful means of generating wealth, which is then redistributed based on older ideas of tribal kinship and solidarity.

Scholars such as Elsheshtawy (2004a) suggest that the “Dubai model” is perhaps indicative of the emergence of a cultural position that is conducive to the articulation of a “post-West” (Sayyid 2006: 179), where the Middle East and Middle-Eastern cities can be spoken about from an epistemological perspective that does not position them merely as Other. It is also an acknowledgement that modernisation and modernity need not follow a single evolutionary trajectory, but can take alternative forms. As an example of this, Dubai has been regularly highlighted as indicative of how modernity and globalisation can take aggressive and extravagant forms mingled with elements of “traditionalism” and Islam. To use Ganguly’s terms, the “Orient”, Islam and the Middle East are “no longer the ‘Other’ of modernity but something that actively solicits it” (2005: 13). Whether this is indicative of more than just an emergent cultural position and constitutes evidence of “a new spatial order”, needs further discussion (Elsheshtawy 2004a: 6) that is not possible here. What is important to note is that this perspective is embedded within a larger critique of the epistemologies of urban theory. As Ananya Roy (2005) points out, although the majority of urban change is taking place in the “Global South”, most urban theory continues to come from the established centres of the “West”.<sup>3</sup>

### **The role of the media**

The built environment in Dubai functions as a vehicle through which cultural identity and values are negotiated as part of the “experience

economy". In this reading, cities are not looked at "as skylines but as brandscapes and buildings not as objects but as advertisements and destinations" (Klingmann 2007: frontispiece). Following Colomina (1994), this section suggests that architecture can no longer be isolated from its representations in a global economy dominated by the public media. The entrance of architecture to the realm of mass media in the form of photographs marks a simultaneous entry into the realm of historical space. Images in this space are more readily accessed and disseminated than the built object and in this way are more permanently or persistently in circulation. The line between architecture and mass media has, in effect, become increasingly blurred (Colomina 1994). In the case of Dubai, it is the iconic images of the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab hotel, Palm Islands, towers along Sheikh Zayed Road or Burj Khalifa – the tallest building in the world – that have come to stand as signifiers for the city-state. Splashed across magazine pages, billboards and websites, these representations inevitably essentialise the emirate. They paint Dubai as a space of opulence, highly rationalised modernity and unmitigated consumption. The global media in functioning as the primary disseminator of these signifiers is thus instrumental in shaping dominant representations of the city-state. With the increased proliferation of new media such as blogs and social networking sites, the spread of images is even more prevalent. In disseminating discourses of neoliberal rationality and modernity embedded in the physical landscape, the media has been crucial to Dubai's formation of a global brand name. The significance of the global and globalised media landscape to the diffusion of discourses of the emirate is also significant to its characterisation as a "global city".

### **Dubai as global city**

For many low-wage migrants, their first encounter with multicultural difference at a multinational scale is in Dubai. The city symbolises a global space unlike any they have previously encountered. Living amidst diversity, even if not interacting with it, is a novel and exciting experience, seen as a model for what the larger world outside their home countries feels and looks like.

In order to counter the disempowering rhetoric of the inevitability of globalisation, Gibson-Graham suggests that we "think not about how the world is subjected to globalization (and the global capitalist economy) but how *we are subjected* to the discourse of globalization and the identities

(and narratives) it dictates to us" (2002: 35–36). This section speaks to that call in unpacking discourses that conceive of Dubai as a metaphor for globalisation. The frame of globalisation emphasises certain characteristics of the city-state, most obviously, Dubai's highly diverse population, where nationals are a minority population overshadowed by large numbers of migrants responsible for the everyday functioning of the emirate. In this framing, the emirate is conceived as dependent on a global population of workers and unable to exist without them. The average Emirati is, within these discourses, somewhat insignificant.

It's an amazing country. The guy who bakes your bread there's Iranian, the person running the restaurant is Indian, and the carpenter's Punjabi. The man who irons your clothes is from Madras, the taxi-driver's Pathan, the electrician's Pakistani, the sales person's Indian and the nurse who gives you an injection is from Ceylon. We're like ornamental fish or birds: they feed us, clean out our pools and cages, and like looking at us. In this country we're just something to look at. (al-Murr 1992: 384 in Dresch 2005: 139–140)

Migrants themselves are extremely aware of the position they inhabit. There is a strong sense of pride in being associated with the sense of cosmopolitanism the emirate conjures. "Where else can you find so many people of different religions and cultures living and working together? Only in Dubai!" The dependence of local Emiratis and the state on a migrant population is also latent in these articulations.

Just as the emirate has become a metaphor of a globalised world, it has also become a symbol for the unregulated excesses that have been blamed for the global recession beginning in 2008. "Dubai is a living mental metaphor for the neo-liberal globalised world that may be crashing – at last – into history" (Hari 2009). The city-state functions as a symbol for unmitigated development and mode of globalisation that has proven catastrophically unsuccessful. Globalisation, understood here as predominantly neoliberal, is represented by Dubai, and by Dubai's economic collapse in the GFC. The mode of rational, value-free economics that was previous celebrated is now seen to have spectacularly failed.

Dubai is seen not just as a metaphor for the GFC or global processes, however, but also as an economic node from which other parts of the world are affected. Dubai here is an instigator of global change. "Yes, from the common man to Angelina Jolie, from trade to tourism

to commerce to real estate, it appears that the recession in Dubai has extended its fronds into all corners of the world. Welcome to the global recession" (Hill 2009). The emirate's successes and failures are intrinsically tied in with the global economic system.

The emirate, then, is not just a subject of global forces but an active and significant agent in processes of globalisation through its embeddedness within the global capitalist system, as is starkly evident through the acquisition of assets by the emirate's sovereign wealth fund. Dubai World,<sup>4</sup> the investment arm of the Dubai government, already controls ports across the globe from UK to China. It has, further, made investments in Nigeria to develop oil and natural gas, proliferated the entertainment sector through purchases of shares in Cirque du Soleil and casino operator MGM Mirage, and initiated talks about acquiring percentages of NASDAQ and the London Stock Exchange. These projects are indicative of only a small portion of Dubai World's undertakings. Dubai's government-owned real-estate conglomerates such as Sama Dubai, Jumeirah Group, Emaar and Nakheel also play an important role in spreading Dubai's brand of neoliberal development. They are responsible for mega-projects emerging across the Gulf, as well as beyond – in South Asia and North Africa. Developments include in a mixed-use luxury development by the waterfront in Rabat, Morocco; hotels across South-East Asia and the Middle East and a US\$25 billion project in Tunisia named the Mediterranean Gate. This can be read not merely as economic expansionism, but also as culturally spreading Dubai's model of state-led development. Embedded within these expansionist initiatives are neoliberal values of competition and entrepreneurialism., but disseminated alongside them are the top-down modes of planning and decision-making that the "Dubai Model" embodies.

Some such projects have been critiqued as serving global capital rather than the interests of local residents (Bargach 2008) and mimicking historically colonising powers. However, in the post-9/11 political climate, Dubai's sovereign wealth funds were seen as preferable alternatives to their vulnerable American and European counterparts. The post-9/11 loss of confidence in American stability and stock markets saw a large amount of capital and investment (predominantly by investors from the Arab world) transferred to the Middle East. Dubai was possibly the largest beneficiary in this global movement of wealth, in another excellent demonstration of how the city-state's international reputation and fortunes are linked to larger global forces and its embeddedness within international flows of capital and information. As Harvey points out,

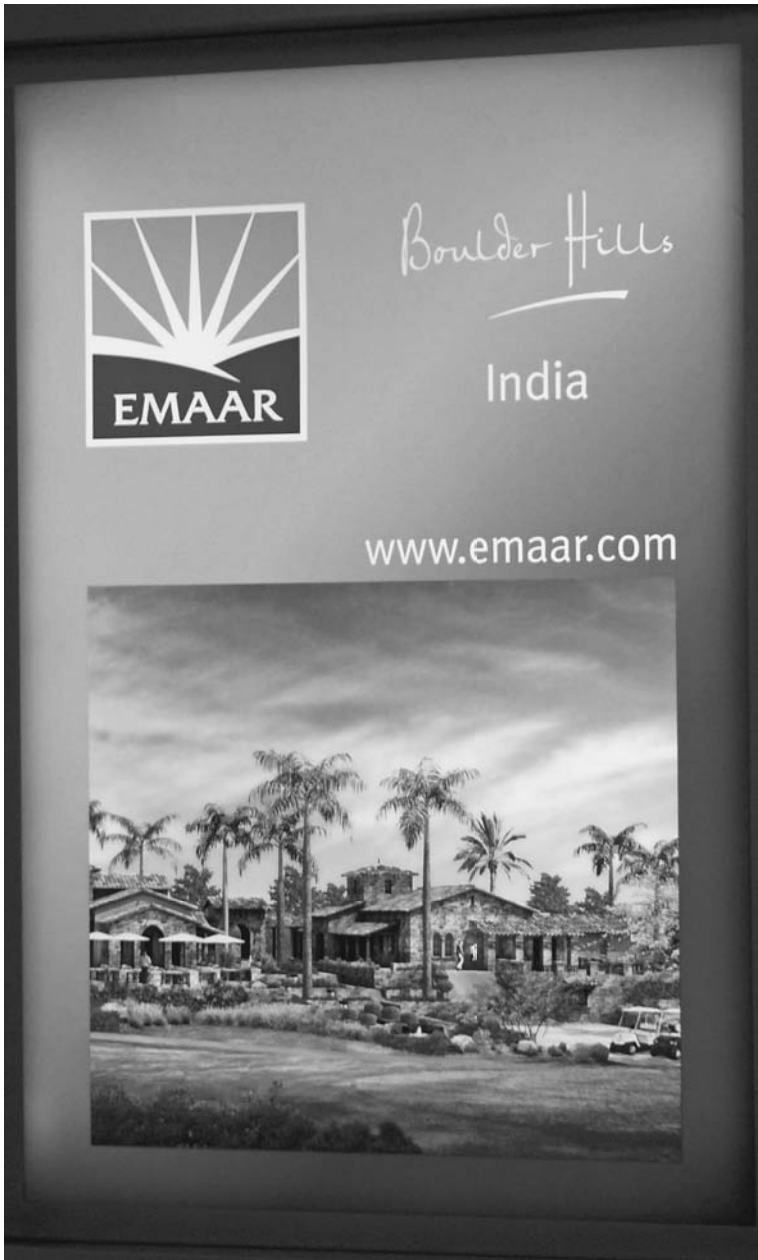


Figure 2.1 Advertisements for Emaar developments



this is a characteristic of today's urban nodes and is an important factor in their institution.

Contemporary cities are deeply implicated in the circulation of capital and a strong case can be made that this is now the primary (though by no means exclusive) process out of which city forms crystallize and have their being. (Harvey 2003: 37)

For migrant entrepreneurs, too, Dubai's globalisation is framed in terms of its relation to larger structures of capital and labour. Najeeb, who runs a large manufacturing firm in the UAE, articulates the problem of being reliant not just on an international labour supply, but also on global currency markets. Because the UAE dirham is pegged to the US dollar, which was rapidly losing value in 2008, working in Dubai became less attractive for potential migrants.

Another problem is that the currency fluctuations happen. In India and the US dollar – it is directly affected in the dirham. Value goes down, and nowadays India is also booming. Manpower shortage. My manpower resignations total in previous years was only 2 per cent. Now it is almost 20 per cent.

Dubai is not just an agent that draws global flows of labour and capital, it is also subject to global fluctuations. This embeddedness within the global economy is an important understanding even for low-wage migrants. Their position as transmitters and producers of globally mobile capital through remittances needs to be actively learned and negotiated. The everyday realities of globalisation become in this way far more real and consequential in Dubai, compared to in India, for instance, where fluctuations in currency and global remittance rates are not as significant.

### **Global city?**

Comparisons of Dubai with leading global cities such as New York, London and Tokyo are frequent in both academic (Elsheshtawy 2004; Walsh 2007; Malkawi 2008) and media analyses, and convey the intent of the city-state in joining those ranks. Dubai's project, however, does not uncritically mimic the "global city" of the West. In much of its architectural motifs as well as rhetoric, there are attempts to incorporate regionalised Arab elements and Islamic heritage. This is evident in structures like the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab hotel or the Madinat Jumeirah complex,

which mimics traditional wind tower designs. They purport to signify an element of Arab identity and in doing so convey Sheikh Mohammed's ambitions of developing Dubai into "an *Arab* city of global significance"<sup>5</sup> (Kane 2007). The scale, extravagance and sheer audacity of some of Dubai's landmark developments can perhaps be seen as amounting to an almost post-colonial "showing off" to the developed West – a proclamation of being able to do it bigger and better. "In Dubai, the themed architecture is not only authentic, or nearly so, but is produced at a far more dramatic level. Along Sheikh Zayed Road, the rows and rows of skyscrapers don't just suggest or symbolize a Manhattan-like scale – they match that scale tower for tower" (Hawthorne 2009). In addition to the world's largest shopping mall, Dubai is also home to the world's tallest tower, largest indoor ski slope and largest mass of man-made islands, to list just a few. These architecturally articulated ideologies form part of the city-state's nationalist narrative of development. As I have argued, these discourses also convey important ideas outside the emirate's borders. Dubai's brand of autocratic Islamic governance combined with neoliberal economics suggests that this may in fact be a more successful form of modernisation than that of an imagined "West".

Dubai's development can then be read as a challenge to the established centres of the Western developed world and, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, as an articulation of an alternative non-Western modernity. As previously discussed, Dubai's recent role as a global investor in various mega-developments around the world, and as a destination for global capital complicates formerly established colonial relations of power. With significant control of capital and resources, Dubai's role in the capitalist world system can no longer be seen as merely one of the dependent.

We should not, however, overstate its exception to colonial dependencies. The emirate still embeds itself within the global capitalist system – and this, in the readings of some post-colonial scholars, is indicative of the city-state defining itself within a Eurocentric epistemic world order (Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2008). The emirate's development is still always read in relation to the West, and non-indigenous standards of modernity. Within this reading, Dubai has not effectively de-colonised in terms of charting an organic mode of development that does not continually embed itself within global (capitalist) structures of dependence.

Easterling (2005: 1) suggests that a "special kind of architectural research" could contribute to studies of globalisation – with the built environment being able to reflect effectively mechanisms of market

movements and economic shifts in the mode of traditional financial or political indicators. This mode of analysis would be particularly appropriate to a space like Dubai. With the city-state serving “as a model for the rest of the Arab world”, similar development trajectories across the Middle East have even been termed “dubaisation”, following a trend where older traditional cities are being shaped by modern urban forms and new economies. Dubai has emerged as a regional leader in this mode of ideological, non-national expansion. Especially through its “spatial products”, such as man-made islands and self-contained villages, the emirate has successfully disseminated its own “domains of logic” in the creation of possible “utopian worlds” (Easterling 2005: 4). In this way, Dubai is an “important media producer and play(s) a global role in propagating an ideology” (Gugler 2004: 8). Dubai, through both the performativity of its material environment and the discourses that surround its development, is implicated “worlding” practices (Roy and Ong 2011). Its urban landscape in this way takes on a circulatory capacity, mimicked in other metropolitan spaces, within the Gulf as well as without.

The position of self-appointed leader of the region and “catalyst” of socio-economic development has been explicitly assumed by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the current ruler of Dubai. In describing the emirate’s ambitions to “take our vision beyond Dubai” (2008), he asserts that Dubai is leading the region not just through examples of its economic success, but also through offering employment opportunities for young people and making infrastructural investments both locally and abroad. This mode of soft power is not, however, complemented by any tangible political action in the international arena, which remains the prerogative of the UAE Federation, whose directives originate from the capital Abu Dhabi (Peterson 1988: 92). Overtly displaying a lack of political motive (Al Maktoum 2008) can also be seen as a strategic move to constrain Dubai’s role to the less threatening realm of the cultural. The city-state has been largely successful in exploiting the cultural sphere in creating and shaping an image attractive and amenable to global consumption. As highlighted in Chapter 1, culture becomes a resource in the globalisation project, a means of ideological dissemination and economic expansionism (Yudice 2003: 9). Although Dubai’s development trajectory mirrors that of other small, resource-poor states such as Singapore, the rapidity and boldness with which it has undertaken change makes it an expedient case study in the neoliberal strategies of city-branding and global expansionism.

### Colonising 'the universe' – non-territorial expansionism

Harvey (2006: 25), in dissecting the political economy of public space, examines how the Paris Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867 were symbols not just of empire and colonialism, but also a celebration of commodity fetishism and technological progress. The display of manufactured items and technical developments in world fairs of the nineteenth century parallel contemporary Dubai's architectural displays. They too celebrated the ability to create structures that had not been previously attempted or deemed impossible, and they did so in a performative fashion that sought to convey their achievements to the rest of the world.

The Burj Khalifa and the offshore Palm, World and Universe islands are ultimate examples of this; they utilise expertise and technology that is at the forefront of its industry. Dubai's architectural creations suggest the discourse that other unique spaces across the globe are merely a part of Dubai's landscape. Like the world fairs of the industrial era that sought to recreate scenes and spaces from their colonies, recreations of places in Dubai's environment can be read as demonstrations of dominance. Residential and commercial developments that mimic global tourist locations or monuments are common motifs in the city-state. Dubai "Falconcity of Wonders" is one such development that proposes to build replicas of the Eiffel Tower in France, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the Taj Mahal in India, the Great Wall of China and even the Italian city of Venice.<sup>6</sup> The Ibn Battuta mall has different zones that are themed China, Egypt, India, etc. Another shopping complex, the Wafi mall, has been constructed to replicate the pyramids in Egypt.

The residential enclave of International City is another example of how this metaphor is utilised. The development is divided into zones named after countries such as England, Spain and France. The naming practices for these themed spaces in Dubai are also important in the creation of multiple spaces of difference: "Everything – from the smallest scrap of site to the largest planned development is given an emboldening name that evokes a village, a city, a land or a world" (Wright 2008: 82). The emirate, in this way, has become adept at using the built environment to create symbolic capital. "Architectural dreamscapes are readily convertible into marketable commodity" (Dear 2000: 145). These architectural simulacra serve to articulate symbolically that Dubai is a place where these spaces can be experienced, as a place perhaps where the entire globe can be encompassed and experienced.

As large man-made islands off the coast of Dubai, the World and the Universe take the idea of the universal exposition or world fair one step further. Rather than temporary exhibitions, these emblems of territory

are more permanently incorporated into the landscape. While world fairs seek to represent the various nations of the globe, these coastal developments aim to exhibit our entire universe. This speaks of an almost colonial desire to encompass wider cultures, structures and themes within the boundaries of the emirate. It can be perhaps understood as an attempt to bring Dubai to the World (and Universe) by bringing the world to Dubai. This desire for coloniality, expressed through Dubai's material landscape and rhetoric of naming, is also evident in its global acquisitions by sovereign wealth funds. Taken together, these projects in cultural expansionism are indicative of a powerful intention to make Dubai globally visible and relevant.

The building of replicas or themed cities and developments is, however, not unique to Dubai. The Chinese city of Shenzhen, for example, is home to a tourist attraction called "Window of the World", which houses replicas of some of the world's seven wonders and heritage sights. In Japan, an American-themed entertainment complex predates any of the themed developments in Dubai. American malls are also notorious for their theming practices. In these examples, however, replicas and recreations are selective features of the cityscape. In Dubai they are pervasive and carried out at a scale that has prompted commentators to categorise this mimicry as a self-conscious strategy of urban development. Disneyland, as exceptional space, has been described in a similar manner – making permanent themed attractions, through the creation of a themed environment (Bryman 2001). However, Disneyland is a fantastical landscape that is an environment only for leisure and play. In Dubai, the creation of themed spaces encompasses leisure, residential and work environments. Processes of theming and replication pervade all spaces of everyday life. This creation of environments and landscapes that mimic other places has prompted readings of Dubai as empty simulacra, lacking any identity of its own. Here, however, I have suggested that such readings overlook the colonial desire embedded in these material forms of mimicry.

### **Dubai as hope – possibility, opportunity and social mobility**

Dubai, it must be said, is like no other place on Earth. This is the world capital of living large; the air practically crackles with a volatile mix of excess and opportunity. (Molavi 2007)

In a place where a gallon of gasoline is almost as cheap as a liter of water in the U.S., anything seems possible. (Spano 2008)

Adding to the above quotes from the popular media, the following vignette highlights how the metaphor of possibility enters everyday

discourse among migrants in Dubai, and how it is constantly suggested by the built landscape.

It was a crowded Friday afternoon in Deira, one of the oldest areas of Dubai which is located on one bank of the Dubai Creek. Friday being the day off for most workers, Deira was packed with South Asian men drinking tea, talking and shopping. In parts of Deira stand five-star hotels such as the Hyatt, but the area is also host to numerous shops, eating places and rooms for low-wage migrants. I was walking along the busy, dusty roads after a cup of chai with two working-class Indian migrants, Haj and Mohammed, when we noticed signs around a soon-to-be-opened bus shelter. It was one of a series of air-conditioned bus shelters being constructed throughout the city-state in mid-2008, so that commuters would not have to wait in the open for buses in the summer, when temperatures reach up to 50°C.

Haj pointed to the bus stop and exclaimed:

You see, only in Dubai will they build an air-conditioned bus shelter! It is the first of its kind in the world! That is the kind of place that Dubai is. They want to have it for the sake of having a name that they are the only place in the world that have it. From nothing, they want to be the best.



Figure 2.2 The bus stop

Haj's reaction to the air-conditioned bus shelter is an acknowledgement of Dubai as a space of possibility, where even the boundaries of the climate are challenged and the limits of technology pushed. In this way, the built environment of Dubai again emerges as an important signifier in migrant (and other) imaginaries.

Haj's awe-inspired articulation of this image of the city-state as at the forefront of innovation is also tinged with ambivalence. While in admiration of Dubai's meteoric rise, he is slightly mocking of the aggressive and extravagant way in which Dubai displays its success. Despite ambivalent feelings, Haj and other low-wage migrants seek to be part of the modernity that the bus shelter and, in turn, Dubai symbolise. Suspicion of the ways in which the emirate seeks its development is also accompanied by a grudging acknowledgement that it is a model that is "best".

Shiny, new, over-scaled, scaleless, pompous, obscene, tasteless, but very real, Dubai is Utopian without ever using the word. It is visionary, but without the pesky obligation to be revolutionary. (Wright 2008: 80–81)

Dubai actively seeks to create such an image of unreality, of a mythical city. A ski slope in the desert, the world's largest shopping mall, the biggest theme park, man-made islands depicting palm trees and islands like the land masses of the world, as well as the planets of the universe, are all instruments in creating this landscape of fantasy and play. They echo a message that is actively encouraged by the state – that anything, even the unimaginable, is possible in Dubai. This visual consumption of iconic megastructures is also the starting point for many journalists' fascination with the city-state. Descriptions of Dubai in the media characterise the emirate as offering tourists "a kind of Disneyland fantasy" (Fattah 2006), "a floodlit, air-conditioned, skyscrapered fantasy" (Molavi 2007) and "a fantasy world far beyond Disney" (Salama 2007). The metaphor of Dubai as possibility is not just perpetuated by migrants but also very much a product of media discourses.

As apparent in the above photograph, the advertisement for the upcoming bus shelter invites the passer-by to experience "the future of Dubai". Like the futuristic image that an air-conditioned bus shelter conjures, the many glass-wrapped skyscrapers and high-rise buildings described earlier in the chapter also paint an image of Dubai that is comparable to other global cities such as New York and London. These visual cues indicate the ultra-modern nature of the city-state. As Haj articulated, it is not just the modernity of Dubai that is seen as seductive

by migrants; it is also its lure as a space that inspires hope that success is possible even when starting from “nothing”. The social and class mobility that many low-wage Indian migrants attain through working and saving in Dubai is indicative of how this discursive possibility is perceived as real. Migration to Dubai is an acceptable means of negotiating that mobility and leaving older, less prestigious status positions behind (Osella and Osella 2006a; 2006b). Dubai, in this way, offers a real possibility of escape.

It is not just working-class migrants, however, who feel the sense of possibility that the city-state offers. Standing in 360°, the circular bar off the coast of Dubai, and linked to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, I chatted to a couple of Scandinavian IT developers. They were in their late twenties or early thirties, and had come to Dubai to help shape an information technology industry still in its infancy. They told me that infrastructure in the Middle East had not caught up with much of the developed world, and was thus an industry that was more welcoming of new ideas and innovative practices. Sipping our drinks among an international crowd of young Arabs, Asians and Europeans, we could have been at any bar in the world, if not for the lit-up structure of the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab hotel looming in the distance. On our other side, the lights of hundreds of cranes and unfinished apartments on the construction sites twinkled on the Palm Jumeirah. Looking around, one of the IT workers said, “Anything is possible here”. He added pointedly, “If you have the money. Just look around. Donald Trump is building a tower there” pointing to the lights on the Palm Jumeirah. “This is the place to be”. His sentiments of awe and excitement are routinely echoed by many potential and current migrants to Dubai. Especially for migrants in industries such as architecture, hospitality and IT, Dubai offers a space of almost unrestricted experimentation. Dubai is a place that is just “becoming”: “In the Gulf, it’s not what’s here now, it’s what’s coming. Everybody’s on the way” (Lewin 2008). It is unexplored and untapped potential to which migrants and transnational corporations alike are drawn. Dubai is also an emerging market for sectors like media, information technology and education. It is a space that readily presents possibilities for rapid social mobility; “the opportunity to go up the ladder a bit quicker, work for some big brands and play a constructive role in building the economy” (NZ Herald 2009). The seductive potential of a rapidly modernising and developing space draws thousands, including low-wage migrants, to the emirate every year.

This sense of possibility works transnationally and is often conveyed (accurately or not) through friends and family who live and work in Dubai. Charith, a Sri Lankan waiter in a coffee shop, wanted to bring his



mother to Dubai to work as a domestic in a middle-class household. He planned to save up just enough money for a ticket, and was confident that she would get a job soon after she arrived. Victor's brother who works in a real-estate company in Dubai sent for Victor from Goa in India soon after he had finished his college studies. When I met him, Victor was applying for various positions and attending interviews. Although on a tourist visa, he too hoped that he would soon land a job and make his stay in Dubai more permanent. Kumudu, a freelance domestic worker who worked her way up to managing and soliciting cleaning jobs independently, wanted to open up her own cleaning agency and employ other women from her community in Sri Lanka to work for her. Although primarily a venture that would increase her own profits, Kumudu articulated this as a means of offering the possibility of social mobility to other women. Such aspirations are ubiquitous, with many migrants coming to Dubai on tourist visas, hoping to secure a job, but with only a vague sense of how that might happen. The belief in Dubai as a space not just of possibility, but opportunity, is an important and significant transnational trope that is responsible for the high levels of migration to the city, but also the exploitation that that sense of possibility enables.

### **Misleading accounts**

Representations of Dubai as a space of possibility are conveyed through narratives of success and conspicuous displays of wealth back home. The performance of conspicuous consumption in the home community is evidence of how the discourse of possibility functions transnationally. Returnees from the Gulf (as well as other migrant locations) often display material possessions, such as white goods, and build concrete houses with modern conveniences in their home villages. These demonstrations are "important displays of gendered power and agency" (Osella and Osella 2006a: 78), especially for male migrant returnees. These physical trappings, together with narratives of success, paint a picture of migrant life in Dubai as an accessible path to social mobility and an elevated status within the community. This, however, does not reflect the reality of debt and hard labour, and is a performative front that maintains status and repute within the home community. Many potential migrants are taken in by such displays and demonstrations of the possibility that Dubai offers (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 862).

When people come back from Dubai, they come back comfortably. And so seeing that, everyone wants to come here. I too came like that!

I thought I could work well here and earn lots of money.

The narratives of returnees here are seen as narratives of possibility – but one that is ambivalent – as “promising progress to all while delivering to a few” (Osella and Osella 2006b: 584). Another way in which this rhetoric is played out is through the conceptualisation of male migrants as “one day millionaires”. These celebratory constructions obscure the exploitative conditions under which wealth is accumulated. They also fail to show that many migrants return poorer and in greater debt than when they left. Difficulties and marginalisation are in this way glossed over by “conspicuous consumption and narratives of adventure” (Osella and Osella 2000, quoted in McKay 2007: 620). Even if migration entails taking on large debts, the lure of Dubai as a destination remains strong. In fact, the UAE remains the most popular destination for Indian migrants to the Gulf (Percot and Rajan 2007).

Joseph is a social worker in a Dubai-based voluntary organisation that deals with issues of migrant welfare. He asserted that it is the selective focus on the success stories of returnees, and the silence around the difficulties and realities of working in the Gulf that are responsible for the continued high rates of debt-bondage linked migration among Indian low-wage workers.

Everyone cannot be the same. All five fingers are not the same. But people will never see all these five. They will see only the biggest one. One guy will say I made good money there. I was working as an illegal and daily made 200 dirhams. He may be a good mason, a capable one. Or a good fabricator, or whatever it is. Oh! He made daily 200 dirhams, then why can't we also? Other four, nobody will look. You can't look always the positive, must look at the negative also.

Joseph's observation, although paternalistic, points to a naivety about migration to the Gulf. This is in large part to do with the lack of information about how much money migrants actually make, and the harsh circumstances under which many labour. Abraham, an Indian migrant, has been in Dubai for many years. He reflected on how he developed an awareness of the difficulties of migrant life in Dubai.

Before I came to Dubai, I thought it would be extremely easy to get a job here, that it wouldn't be difficult at all. Everybody was coming back with TVs and radios and sprayed (with perfume), I was led to think that Dubai was a big place. I thought that all my dreams would be realized after I came here, but that didn't happen. I was one of those fooled by all the stuff that people brought back.

When I first arrived, I wanted to go back. Now I tell people not to come here. Something is better than nothing. Or if they come, to come only if they have a guaranteed job and accommodation. Now they come thinking that there is gold strewn all over the streets of Dubai.

Remittances, gifts and material provisions for the family fulfil expectations of the traditional male provider (Osella and Osella 2000). For male migrants, inhabiting that identity means extending their cultural capital as Gulf migrants to the family back in the home country through the materiality of remittances. Especially common remittances are white goods – such as televisions, home entertainment systems and hi-fi stereo systems. Often, these acquisitions are merely displayed in the home but rarely used. They remain symbols of transnational modernity and the economic prowess of the migrant male. Most informants acknowledged that although white goods, electronics and even items of clothing were probably less expensive to buy and easily available in India, they still felt the need to send things that they had purchased in Dubai. Gifts sent from Dubai had a special kudos and cultural capital embedded in them: “Yes, he can get a phone in India. But my son wants a phone from Dubai”.

An employee in a cargo company situated in a low-wage migrant quarter in Dubai estimated that they sent an average of two to three tonnes of cargo every day to migrant-sending countries such as India, Pakistan and Sudan. “Oh they send back everything! Soap, shampoo, food items. Biscuits, chocolates, cosmetic items. Dresses, saris. They even send back empty paint cans – so that back home they can use it to store water. In this box there’s a washing machine. This is a TV”, he said pointing to items about to be shipped. The sending of white goods, gifts and cash remittances is a way in which the discourses of modernity, consumption and development associated with Dubai are embodied and transmitted across national boundaries. Everyday objects gain significance when remitted. They come to stand for the possibility for social mobility that Dubai represents. It is this potential for a lifestyle that involves conspicuous consumption and a better standard of living that acts as motivation for potential low-wage migrants. These objects that are sent home can also be considered a physical manifestation of “social remittances” – the “ideas, behaviour and identities” (Kunz 2008: 1399) that are transmitted by migrants who negotiate and inhabit new subjectivities.<sup>7</sup> Besides economic incentives, beneficial changes to status identity and social relations are persuasive reasons for international migration. Chapter 4 elaborates on these consequences.

Dubai as a space of possibility is a trope that is perhaps unsurprising. However, I have attempted to show here how far the physical landscape and environment of Dubai serve as constant reminders and act as symbols of social mobility that are impossible to ignore. They permeate and colour everyday conversations in the emirate. They also work transnationally, through the remittances and narrative performances of returnees. As we will see in subsequent chapters, these representations shape not just the ways in which migrants relate to space in Dubai, but also how they construct subjectivities, narratives and expectations.

### **Dubai as mirage: the myth of “El Dorado”**

The name of the fabled City of Gold has been repeatedly employed in media framings. They convey the sense of hope, possibility of wealth and the coveted consumerist lifestyle to which so many labour migrants are drawn (Spano 2008; Kerr 2009; Suraiya 2009; Trofimov 2009). El Dorado invokes a space of possibility, one that has not been completely explored or exploited, as we saw in a previous section.

Ironically perhaps, in the post-GFC period, characterisations of Dubai as the City of Gold became increasingly popular. Within the use of this metaphor lies an allusion to a mirage, where the promise of a City of Gold cannot possibly be real. “El Dorado is fading back into the desert” (Kerr 2009). Dubai does not in the end live up to the aspirations and dreams of those who flock to it. The image of a utopia that Dubai sought to create came apart with the global financial crisis, resulting in thousands losing their jobs and returning to their home countries within the space of a few months. “For many Indians, Dubai’s debacle is a shattering experience, like the discovery that the fabled El Dorado, city of gold, was after all made only of brass” (Suraiya 2009).

“As they did Ozymandias, the dunes will reclaim the soaring folly of Dubai” (Jenkins 2009) begins the title of the British *Guardian* newspaper article published in March 2009, the second comparison in just two months with Shelley’s mythical king of kings and the once-great city he created. The 1818 poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley is essentially devoted to the single metaphor of the shattered, ruined statue in the desert wasteland, with its arrogant, passionate face and megalomaniacal inscription. The statue can be seen as a metaphor for the pride and hubris of all of humanity – and in this case stands for the excess and arrogance that Dubai represents. The emirate serves as a metaphor for an ethical lesson about excessive ambition, greed and wealth – to the rest of the world that was in awe of its success. This depiction of Dubai

was a recurring theme in the international media from the last quarter of 2008 and much of 2009, when the effects of the economic downturn were becoming apparent in the city-state. The proliferation of negative representations about the emirate ranged from reports of leading real-estate companies culling their orders dramatically, the state-owned investment arm backing out of previously announced investments in construction projects, developers defaulting on payments or out-of-work construction labourers forced to return to their home countries. In fact, 400 building projects worth a total of USD\$300 billion were reported as having stopped (McMeeken 2010). “the one-time El Dorado that’s now hammered by sinking oil prices and a construction industry bust” (Trofimov 2009).

Liberal media outlets seized the global financial crisis as an opportunity to encourage widespread introspection about everyday practices of unsustainable consumption and lifestyles. Dubai, in these discourses, has come to stand for the extremes of this phenomenon. Although its trajectory of development has been far shorter than that of the developed “West”, it is seen to embody the worst of its excesses. “Dubai’s demise will be seen as jolly bad luck; less slap on wrist than slap on back. But it’s more than that. The presumption of building a five-minute city to vie with Paris or New York by copying the coloured shapes is stupid, dangerous and wrong” (Farrelly 2009).

This moral cautioning stands in contradiction to the “moral persuasiveness” of utopian representations of progress presented by a convincing state apparatus to local Emiratis (Kanna 2005: 71) and a wider global public. The previously discussed metaphor of possibility is challenged by these alternate discourses of folly. It is a critique of the Dubai state’s model of neoliberal development. Here, I want to suggest that it is an Orientalist positioning by Western commentators that makes these denouncements of Dubai possible. Drawing from Chakrabarty’s (2000) discussions in *Provincializing Europe*, non-Western modernity, such as that embodied by Dubai, is seen as never fully genuine. In these readings, modernity has already had its authentic incarnation in Europe and anything else can be only a copy, an imitation. This contextualises the reluctance to see Dubai’s modernity as serious and salient. It is also not “real” because it hasn’t had an organic period of development. These Eurocentric readings may also indicate fear of an emergent culturally and economically powerful Middle East, one that engages in soft power strategies and economic expansionism, as we saw in the previous section.

The metaphor of the city that will fade into the sand also invokes an impression of unsustainability – the conclusion that rapid and

unmitigated development such as Dubai's cannot last forever. Academic discourses also discuss the unsustainability of an urban form that is the "instant post-industrial city" (Bassens, Derudder et al. 2010: 299). The speed, scale and sheer audacity of this attempt to create such an "instant city" are seen as exceedingly egoistic – and as an endeavour that deserves to fail. Commentaries that seized this opportunity to berate and chastise the emirate for its excesses lament the loss of employment and dashed hopes of many migrants. While the Western expatriate lifestyle of decadence and debauchery (c.f. Walsh 2007) slipping away is seen as something that was inevitable, and that cannot last, the loss of income for the third-world migrant is portrayed as tragic. The low-wage migrant epitomises the ultimate "victim" of globalisation in popular discourses. Magazines and newspapers chronicled how laid-off blue-collar workers slept on park benches while unable to return to their home countries because of the situation of debt bondage in which they remained trapped (Schuman 2009). Although negative reports of the treatment of low-wage migrant workers in the emirate were prevalent prior to the GFC, the effects of the economic recession exacerbated the issue and gave fresh imperative to media outlets to lament this as yet another aspect of Dubai's failure. These framings echo popular depictions of low-wage migrants as victims of neoliberal exploitation in Dubai. The GFC provides yet another instance to rehearse these tropes.

laborers came here with big dreams. Lingaiah planned to save up for his sister's wedding back in Hyderabad, India. J. Anjaiah promised his daughters dowries and told his parents in India's Karimnagar Province that he would support them in their old age. Panjala Sureshkumar of Kerala wanted "to do something with myself... [to] become someone."

Dubai disappointed them all.

Lingaiah's construction project was canceled. Mr. Anjaiah broke his foot in a fall and was fired from his gardening job. And Mr. Sureshkumar lost his cleaning job when the hotel he was working in closed two wings.

Their work no longer required, they're now expected to disappear. (Harman 2009)

Within these representations, it is not employers or hiring companies who are blamed, but Dubai. It is the city that sold itself as a potential paradise that has not lived up to expectations and promises. It is the city

that is blamed for neither taking responsibility nor feeling compassion for those whom it has let down. “Dubai appears to have everything, yet my research could not find its soul” wrote one journalist (Quill 2008). The soullessness engendered by a relentless pace of development is hinted at by the image of the ruined statue of Ozymandias.

Even as reports circulate in the global media of fleeing expatriates leaving behind unpaid loans and bounced cheques, halted construction projects and deserted streets and skyscrapers, they are accompanied by images of resilience. Even after the multi-billion-dollar bailout from neighbouring Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed, the emir of Dubai, made public assurances that Dubai’s economy would bounce back and accused certain Western media outlets of unfairly bombarding the emirate with bad press. The state’s attempts to contain the damage inflicted through negative publicity have even resulted in the passing of a law that effectively bans reporters from publishing news that is damaging to “the country’s reputation or its economy” (Salama 2009). This is not just an acknowledgement of how important image-making and branding are to the continued success of the emirate, but also an indication of the precariousness of the global reputation on which so much of its development and ability to draw transnational capital hinge. Dubai’s combative strategies and continued undertaking of new projects seem to have succeeded in the performance of a spirit of resilience. In the words of one journalist, “In a place built on confidence and the projection of confidence the idea of failure seems inconceivable” (Black 2008). Migrant informants in Dubai reflected this attitude and brushed off predictions of eminent and total collapse. “That’s what people outside (Dubai) say. Here it is the same. Everything is normal”.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the different and sometimes competing and contradictory ways in which Dubai is represented. Depictions of Dubai as merely simulacra and reductive readings of its material environment have been shown to be limiting, bolstering a discourse of mimicry that denies the authenticity of an Arab, non-Western modernity. Here, the physical landscape of the city functions as an important and highly visible signifier – one that the Emirati state, migrants and media can imbue with multiple meanings that influence and shape one another.

Reading Dubai’s physical landscape as a text unpacked its city-branding efforts, which were shown to be important in the emirate’s

projections as a space of neoliberal qualities of rationality, efficiency and deregulated capital. The emirate's crafting of its built environment and its techniques of economic expansionism also indicate a (neo)colonial desire for cultural dominance. This chapter has also shown through migrant readings of Dubai's environment that the city can be conceived as a space of possibility and accessible modernity that speaks to aspirational desire. These representations are often misleading, especially when transmitted transnationally through returnees' performances of consumption. Finally, the chapter showed how Dubai's ostentatious and rapid growth prompted depictions of the city as an act of folly. As a Eurocentric reading, this discourse assumes that development is possible only along a single trajectory.

Dubai as indicative of the post-Western city is a significant theme that has been recurrent throughout this chapter. However, the city-state's economic and ideological embeddedness in colonial relations of power cannot also be overlooked. Where it is charting its own alternative path is in its mode of cultural dominance in the region and, more significantly, in the reluctance to make any real moves towards democracy. This is perhaps why, despite the modernity and progress signified by the physical environment, Dubai is still not seen as completely "modernised" and its symbols of modernity are not regarded as being authentic. Coming from an understanding that non-democratic authority in sovereign states is indicative of an earlier stage of the trajectory of human development, this Eurocentric position is reluctant to accept that alternative modes of governance are equally sustainable. This combination of state-led neoliberal development and an authoritarian ethnocracy is one that the next chapter explores in greater detail in relation to the lives of low-wage migrant workers.

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# 3

## Migrants and the State: Structures of Violence, Co-ethnic Exploitation and the Transnationalisation of Rights

### Introduction

Esther was an Ethiopian domestic worker for an Emirati family in Dubai, one of many African women for whom migration to the Gulf was a viable livelihood strategy. She was in her early twenties, and was nursing her baby boy, Ibrahim, when I first met her at a social worker's flat. Soon after I met them, Esther and her son would return to an uncertain reception from her family in Addis Ababa. Esther was forced to leave the UAE as she had become pregnant – a situation that typically results in the deportation of domestic workers. Under their terms of employment, childbearing is conceived of as illegitimate, and in breach of contractual obligations as workers in the emirate.

However, Esther's case was not straightforward. She had alleged rape by her Emirati employer – and DNA tests had proven that he was indeed the child's biological father. However, without official acceptance and acknowledgement by Esther's employer that the child was his, there was a complete denial of paternal obligation, and access to Emirati citizenship and the rights that entailed. Esther's son Ibrahim was thus born stateless and her employer faced no legal consequences, as the rape charge against him was not upheld. Esther, on the other hand, came from a poor but conservative Christian family, and was unsure if her family would take her and her fatherless child back into their fold. She had few savings, and would be unable to resume work unless and until she found someone to take care of her son. At our small gathering of fellow migrant women in a social worker's flat, we pooled together some

money and clothing to help her and her son over the next few months, after their return to Ethiopia.

Esther's son was a year-and-a-half old when I met her. For the previous four months, she had been living in the Dubai Foundation, a state-established safe house and rehabilitation centre of sorts for abused women and children. Prior to that, Esther had lived in the City of Hope premises, which for many years had been the only shelter available in the UAE for abused and raped women.<sup>1</sup> (The establishment of the Dubai Foundation within this context can be read as a reaction to criticisms by human rights groups and observers over the lack of appropriate care for victims of abuse in the UAE.) The site where the foundation was housed was on the far outskirts of Dubai – about an hour's drive from the city centre. The collection of buildings that it occupied had previously housed a psychiatric hospital, and the formidable façade of high concrete walls and bolted gates remained. Entry into, or exit from, the buildings required permission from the chief warden and was strictly monitored. On the day I met Esther and her son, they had been allowed only a few hours' leave, although this in itself was considered a privilege. It had only been allowed on the condition that Esther and her son were constantly under the watch of a social worker during their time outside the confines of the foundation. Most women in the facility never left its premises. Esther and her son had not been out of the compound in the previous four months.<sup>2</sup> Such restrictions on mobility attach ideas of shame to women in the foundation, which functions almost as a prison. The need to contain and physically distance women who are perceived as deviant away from the rest of the city conveys a fear of contamination or spread. Ironically, it is the city that is seen to need protection from these abused and marginalised women, rather than the women from the city.

This vignette draws together a number of themes that are discussed in this chapter. Most evidently, Esther's situation is indicative of the restrictive citizenship laws and the protection of attendant privileges in the UAE. It also exemplifies how the espoused divide between locals and foreigners can often become "messy" and complicated, although maintained and entrenched within the legal and social systems of the UAE.

In unpacking the experiences of labour migrants like Esther, this chapter examines migrants' relationships with both sending and receiving states. Alongside articulating the rhetoric of free market neoliberalism, the Emirati state regulates extensively its system of international migration in the interests of global capital. Although the regulation of migration has been identified as a global trend (Overbeek 2002), in the UAE it is extreme, and augmented by older tribal modes of belonging.

This chapter explores the effects of this intensified regulation in relation to the large low-wage migrant population. First, a structural-level, larger-scale perspective of the system of migration in the Gulf is provided to set the scene for subsequent chapters, which interrogate more local-level processes of migrants' everyday experiences in the city-state. I demonstrate here that the emirate's utilitarian and rationalised relationship with its diverse migrant population reinforces structural inequalities engendered by globalisation. These inequalities result in quotidian practices that are often contradictory to the ideal of regulation-free, neoliberal values that are espoused in official rhetoric.

Second, this chapter addresses the inadequacies of the sending state in dealing with low-wage migrant issues. This is done using the example of India, the largest migrant-sending country in the context of the UAE and the wider GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) region. It is shown that the Indian state seeks to benefit from sustaining a precarious form of employment for its citizens abroad. Last, this chapter concludes by calling for a transnationalisation of migrants' rights as a possible means of curtailing exploitative practices in processes of labour migration. I argue that there is a need for formal multilateral protection mechanisms to regulate processes of migration, so that indifference and the inability to regulate effectively abusive practices on both sending and receiving sides can be dealt with. This entails the adoption of a more public grassroots form of governance, and movement away from international neoliberal governance mechanisms that act in the interests of transnational capital (Overbeek 2002).

### **The tyranny of citizenship**

The Gulf states are unique as receiving countries. Although the Gulf is the region that has the highest dependence on migrant labour, the GCC states are also the most guarded about granting citizenship rights to migrants. This, however, is a relatively recent development. In the first years after independence, with a very small population, the UAE naturalised many expatriates so as to enlarge the country's legal citizenship body rapidly. Most of these were Gulf Arabs, and the rest were primarily Iranians and Baluchis from Pakistan (Kapiszewski 1999: 69). This practice ended in the 1970s. Today, even for Arabs who have lived in the UAE for many generations, naturalisation is no longer an option. Until 2011, citizenship was passed on only through paternal bloodlines, in a highly gendered adoption of the *jus sanguinis* model of citizenship. Now, however, children of Emirati women can apply for citizenship of

the UAE when they reach the age of 18. However, as highlighted in the above example of Esther and Ibrahim, even paternal blood relationships are contested when the potential citizen is deemed unsuitable. This system, in effect, favours a privileged class of nationals. Citizenship is ultimately restricted to a small group, and the welfare of this group of nationals is well looked after by the ruling sheikhs. In return, citizens do not question their right to rule, and do not agitate for democratic representation. Political rights are exchanged for extensive social rights and what has been described as a “cradle-to-grave welfare system” (Longva 2000: 180). Full citizenship and its benefits, such as free state education, are not offered to even long-term migrants, even those who might have obtained Emirati passports in the early years of independence. More recently, benefits previously available to all residents, such as free healthcare, have been limited to nationals. The roots of this mode of governance have been traced to Bedouin tribal politics, in which allegiance to the sheikh ensured protection for members of the tribe. This evolved into the current system of distribution of oil benefits and profits from state investments (Peterson 2001). This relationship forms the basic social contract between the rulers and the ruled.

In this transaction, the welfare of migrants is often overlooked. Their significance is as an “Other”, against which national identity and belonging are articulated and defined (Kapiszewski 1999). It is through the idea of the foreigner that the nation(al) comes into being. In a state such as the UAE, where independent nation status was achieved relatively recently, the articulations of such divisions are a significant part of nation-building discourses. With traditional displays of tribal and Emirati identity on the decline, an important way in which belonging is performed is through maintaining insider status through privileges and rights such as citizenship. With modes of governance based along tribal lines of patronage and protection, citizenship maps onto tribal belonging. Tribal demarcations that were maintained through violence have been replaced by the legal boundaries of citizenship and belonging to the state. Statist articulations, however, make this link guardedly. Maintaining barriers between foreigners and nationals is important for the protection of the political, social and economic privileges central to the conception of tribal identity – and, accordingly, what it means to be Emirati. Through the continued protection of such rights, the social contract between Emirati rulers and citizens remains uncompromised, although a dependency on a large migrant population is cultivated.

Also evident from the case of Esther and Ibrahim is that citizenship or nationality is seen more in cultural than in legal terms (Longva 2000).

Esther's position as foreigner and domestic worker places her, and by extension her offspring, on one of the lower rungs in the hierarchy of Emirati society. Her place of origin, Africa, and nationality, further substantiate this position.<sup>3</sup> Culturally, then, Esther's son is incompatible with narrow notions of an Emirati national. The illegitimate nature of his conception adds to this unsuitability. In a broader context, the presence of large number of foreigners in Dubai and the UAE are a potential cultural threat to the way of life and traditions of Emiratis. The maintenance of strict divisions between non-nationals and citizens is, then, a way to reduce the danger of such cultural contamination. The physical isolation at the edge of the city and eventual deportation of Esther and Ibrahim demonstrate ways in which those demarcations materialise. While this cultural divide is common even in liberal-democratic states, such as Japan, that adopt the *jus sanguinis* citizenship framework, in the UAE, it is heavily overlaid with meanings attached to occupation-linked status and cultural capital.

In maintaining distinct cultural identities, the most significant difference between Emirati citizens and migrants is to do with the type of paid work that they undertake. This in turn shapes other non-work relations between groups. Social distance, is thus "institutionalised" (Kapiszewski 1999: 34). Esther's low-status job as a domestic worker set her, and therefore her son, outside the cultural identity locus of Emirati nationals, who are reluctant to take on low-wage jobs. Gamburd (2009: 69) describes this bifurcated system that maps onto cultural meanings about locals and foreigners.

Not only do guest workers make up significant percentages of GCC work forces, they also occupy less desirable positions. Most GCC countries have a de facto dual economy, with well-paying, non-strenuous state jobs held by "nationals" and low-paying labor jobs performed by foreigners. GCC governments have created public sector jobs with high wages and good benefits as a way to distribute oil wealth to their citizens. Foreigners, meanwhile, do the difficult, low-status jobs in the private sector.

This primary division between the local Emirati population and migrants can be seen as what McNevin (2009) characterises as part of a wider history of producing insiders and outsiders in political communities. Ong (2006: 201), in describing similar divides between domestic workers and employers in Asia, asserts that contingent legal and lower-class status constitutes "biopolitical otherness". The risk of destabilising



these socially produced divisions by those seeking insider status needs to be protected against. One strategy of protection has been to employ large numbers of Asian and, particularly, Indian migrants in the Gulf. This reflects a shift in the immigration policies across GCC states, which changed as a reaction to rising Arab nationalism. With the institution of formal citizenship and nationhood status, the UAE, as with other Gulf states, became more vigilant about the distribution of rights. Arab migrants (from non-GCC states) were seen as more likely to demand citizenship and political privileges, unlike Asian migrants who were perceived as generally accepting lower wages and limited liberties (Winckler 1997: 487). They would also be unlikely to contest citizenship on a cultural basis of shared religion, tradition or language. The maintenance of cultural distance is thus one primary reason why Indians are the largest group of labour migrants to the UAE and the Gulf.

### **Hierarchies within the migrant population**

The division of labour, where citizens primarily work in the public sector and foreigners are the labour force of private companies, intensifies existing cultural differences between locals and foreigners. This separation is layered over with divisions of race, nationality, and gender to generate a complex web of hierarchies.

The labor market in the Gulf, bifurcated with the broad distinction of citizen vs. guest worker, is further stratified according to gender, ethnicity, and nationality. These divisions undermine class solidarity by enhancing competition between other groups. Leonard (2003: 133) writes, "Foreign workers are ranked by place or origin, receiving differential payment and treatment." Female domestic servants earn less than most other guest workers. In the UAE, for example, within the housemaid category, housemaids from the Philippines are paid more than those from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh in that order. Racial, ethnic, religious, and national stereotypes pre-terminate wages. (Gamburd 2009: 70)

In order to make migration to Dubai attractive, migrants are typically paid more than they would receive in their home countries. This, in effect, produces an unequal labour market where place of origin determines wages. In the skilled sector, too, Europeans, white South Africans and Australians receive higher wages for doing the same jobs as Arab or Asian colleagues. In this stratification, the Indians and Pakistanis are on the lowest rungs. Alagappan, who works in a high-level administrative

position at Dubai Ports World and who has been working in Dubai since the mid-1970s, described how Indians in successful positions in Dubai have had to work against this structurally embedded discrimination.

If you see, most of the Indians in their positions, it is because of hard work and dedication. Otherwise, in Dubai, they can't sit in that position. Because, always, priority is given to the other nationals. Europeans...locals and all those things. Indians, if they are sitting in their positions means they have done something for that organization and they sacrificed a lot. Because I have experience with all the people around here. I know they definitely sacrifice a lot. Or else they won't be there.

The colonial politics of European dominance reflected in these discriminations are perpetuated through the stark divisions between nationalities that are entrenched through practices of hiring and differential pay scales. This also prevents the development of a larger class-consciousness, as allegiances are not formed between different nationalities who are constantly competing and comparing. Stratification in the city thus reflects a hierarchy of states within the global market economy, where migrants from the more "developed" West are valued and respected over those from the "less developed" nations of the Global South.

The cultural divide between local and migrants with respect to paid work is one that is further entrenched through the employer-employee relationship between foreigners and Emirati nationals. The following section discusses the system of *kafala*, which is sustained on the divide between migrants and nationals, instituting a relationship of dependence. Through this effective privatisation of the immigration system, labour abuses are also legitimised.

### **The *kafala* system of sponsorship**

Every labour-importing state faces the challenge of balancing the economic need for migrant labour with the political imperative to control it. In the Gulf and UAE, in particular, this is achieved through a system of *kafala* or sponsorship. The policy of needing a local Emirati partner for all commercial ventures by migrants was implemented in the mid-1970s, and was a restriction aimed at discouraging permanent residence of non-nationals within the UAE. To reside within the UAE, then, an individual must obtain via his or her employer a work visa for him- or herself and a family visa should he or she want to bring his or her

family (women may sponsor spouses or children only in certain limited circumstances). The work visa process functions through the system of *kafala*, a formal practice of patronage that is common in the Gulf region. Free zones are spaces of exception to the *kafala* system, places where foreigners are allowed to hold a majority share or fully own a business or enterprise. Of course, this is an option only for entrepreneurs with a sizable amount of capital, thus categorically excluding the low-wage migrant. Most low-wage migrants are brought into Dubai through a *kafeel*, or sponsor, either an individual or enterprise for whom they will work throughout their time in Dubai.

Foreigners wanting to start a business also need a local partner or sponsor. For this, they will typically be charged a fee or a cut of the profits in return. The national will then typically own 51 per cent of the enterprise. This practice, however, has not created a new class of local entrepreneurs as was the desire when it was instituted. Instead, the phenomenon of “silent partners” emerged: “citizens who play a minor role in the economy by merely signing contracts and completing formalities” (Winckler 1997: 484–485). Based on independent estimates, the actual levels of unemployment among nationals, including those who do not contribute to any constructive work, are alarmingly high (Kapiszewski 1999: 237). Based on information from the Dubai Statistics Centre, only 8.7 per cent of Emiratis are employed, the majority in public administration (Kipp Report 2010). This reinforces portrayals of Emiratis as lazy and unproductive.

When the work visa expires (at the same time as the job contract), the migrant (and family) must leave the country. Migrants are thus valued only for as long as they are productive economic agents. The *kafala* system ensures that the migrant is dependent on his or her sponsor for his or her legal status, even if they are co-owners of a business. This creates a disjuncture between state articulations of migrant workers as free agents responding to demand in a global marketplace and the system of bondage to a particular employer. Should the migrant want to move to another job, a certificate of no objection must first be obtained from the original employer. Given that employers control the supply of labour, workers are not independently able to change their job to one that offers better remuneration. Absconding from or terminating a contract if the employer/sponsor objects, could result in a (year-long or indefinite) ban on entry and work in the UAE. It is also common practice for employers to take possession of the passports of low-wage migrant workers, ensuring that it is impossible for them to change jobs easily or even leave the country. In this way, the GCC states do not have

a free labour market (Longva 1999: 21). This is in contrast to most countries, which enforce some mode of differential exclusion. This system typically accepts desirable skilled immigrants for long-term permanent residency and even citizenship, while limiting the low-skilled to temporary status. The GCC states are extremes in this respect, where *all* migrants are allowed in only “within strict functional and temporal limits” (Castles 2003: 11). Migrants are valued only in terms of their economic contribution.

### **Implications for the low-wage migrant**

The largest group of low-wage migrants in the Gulf and UAE are from South Asia. Most are from South India, particularly the states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. It is this group of workers who are most adversely affected by the system of immigration in the Gulf, as they are most visibly and pointedly subjected to social and legal marginalisation.

Additional restrictions imposed on low-wage migrants mean very different everyday experiences for the different classes of migrants in Dubai. In the first half of the 1980s, for example, policies were adopted to ensure that migrants bringing in accompanying family members had a minimum income level. In the UAE, laws prevent the family from joining the individual migrating for work if he or she does not earn an income that exceeds 4,000AED<sup>4</sup> (Emirati dirhams) per month. As a result, “the success in reducing the percentage of accompanying family members was quite impressive” (Winckler 1997: 484). Low-wage migrants are not given the choice of bringing their families with them. In Dubai itself, this results in a population where there are three times as many males as females (Dubai Statistics Center 2006: 23). High living costs in the emirate are the second reason for the largely male population. Most low-wage migrants are male, and typically come to the UAE to be employed in semi-skilled or unskilled positions and earn 600–2,000AED<sup>5</sup> per month. This is, for most, sufficient only for their own maintenance and a small remittance, and is not enough to support another or multiple family members in the UAE given the relatively high rents and cost of food, education and transport (compared with their home countries and in relation to their typically small salaries).

Despite pressure from international rights agencies and the Indian government, there is no effective implementation of the minimum wage requirement in the UAE. With employers having ultimate control over the provision of visas, low-wage migrants are limited in their ability to bargain for better wages or move to a better paying job. They endure

poor living conditions and highly curtailed lifestyles in order to remit as much of their income as possible back to their families in home countries. The temporary hardship of separation is also viewed as a necessary sacrifice. Many low-wage migrants stay away for extended periods of time, visiting family only once in three or four years. Often this is a savings strategy, but it is also because many employers only rarely grant extended periods of leave. Family back home with misconstrued ideas about conditions and salaries in Dubai (as described in Chapter 2), often also contribute to the pressure to stay. For most low-waged migrants, the complexities of maintaining a transnational relationship extend beyond the emotional issues of separation. One Indian male informant expressed the difficulty of being in such a situation.

If you're a businessman, you can come with your family and leave as you please. But if you're a labourer, once you come here, you can't leave immediately. The people back home will increase their spending and so you'll have to stay here.

Dubai's very developed. A lot of development! But even if I like it, in my heart, there is still sorrow. Living away from family is difficult. Being away from my children is a big sorrow. (Translated from Tamil)

Being away from family for long periods also results in latent social problems among the low-wage migrant population. These costs, though, are not publicly acknowledged. The unusually high rates of suicide, depression and alcohol abuse among the low-wage migrant group, however, make these costs difficult to overlook. These effects will be discussed in Chapter 5. However, here it is important to note how the differential treatment of low-wage migrants places them in a position where they are subject to structural inequalities that result in wide-ranging social problems. The responsibility of addressing these problems lies at first, with the employer, and the nature of the system of sponsorship.

The *kafala* system is structured so that all care and welfare provision for the migrant is ultimately the liability of the sponsor. Employers are, for instance, required by law to provide health insurance for all employees. In practice, the arrangement can function quite differently. Many employers do not cover any health-care costs that their employees incur, and they are not held accountable as the law is not enforced.<sup>6</sup> Allowing employers to obtain visas for employees also means that the state does not regulate flows of migrants. With a potentially unlimited

supply, competition for jobs is intense. Migrants are at the mercy of employers who can dictate pay and benefits. Privatisation of the labour market also means that the state is less inclined to ensure that provisions for migrant rights and welfare are made. Without regulation to ensure standard hours of work, for example, employees are easily exploited. This is especially significant in the case of day labourers and domestic workers,<sup>7</sup> who typically do not even have recourse to a corporate infrastructure that might better institute a pay structure and working hours. Low-wage migrants also tend to have less knowledge of their rights as workers and reduced access to avenues through which they can air their complaints or obtain redress. This results in a relationship that is highly inequitable.

workers negotiate job terms and pay without the benefit of guidelines established by government, unions, employment agencies or private firms. A labor agreement established between two lone individuals who are operating without standard guidelines heightens the asymmetry of the employer-employee relationship. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 53)

This raises important issues of regulation and questions of accountability for the welfare of the migrant when the sponsor abdicates responsibility. Emirati partners in business with foreigners are usually not liable to workers or answerable to the law in cases where the company does not pay the worker and/or closes down. Although they act as signatories on applications for labour permits, they are often paid an annual fee for that, and do not take part in the actual day-to-day running of the company. "The partners then sign a side agreement that limits their actual ownership, so that the partner does not partake of profits beyond his yearly fee, thus protecting the expatriate owner" (Ali 2010: 85). This also means that they absolve themselves of legal liability in the case where the company goes bankrupt. Thus, when migrant workers do not get paid and the foreign partner absconds, the local Emirati co-owner of the business is not under any obligation to compensate workers. The foreign owner, often a co-ethnic, is often untraceable, a strategy to avoid being labelled bankrupt. Bankruptcy is a crime and a jailable offence in the UAE. In this situation, workers are in a position of extreme precarity and vulnerability, as the checks and balances that are supposed to protect their interests are inadequate or missing. The privatisation of these structural problems into the hands of employers removes responsibility from the state.

Contract substitution is another common form of exploitation. This basically refers to the substitution of the contract originally agreed upon in the country of origin with one that does not contain such favourable conditions for the worker, typically with terms like lower pay and housing allowances, as well as longer working hours. Once the migrant is in the receiving country, he or she has little alternative but to sign the revised contract, having no basis on which to negotiate. Many will have borrowed large sums to finance their migration, making a refusal of the contract and return home unfeasible until their loan is discharged. They are not given enough time to read the contract nor are terms explained to illiterate migrants. Jairaj, an Indian migrant who works as a cleaner in a hotel in Dubai, described how this happened to him at the airport in Chennai, just before he was due to fly out to Dubai to start a job. The contract he was presented to sign reflected a far smaller salary than he had previously been guaranteed. When he hesitated, he was told by his “agent” that he would be able to make up the rest working overtime and in tips. His agent’s assurance was of course, incorrect.

Another way in which the *kafala* system is regularly misused is through the selling of work visas. Despite the sponsor/*kafeel* and employer having to legally be the same person or entity, in reality, visas are not necessarily tied to a particular employer. They are regularly sold to migrants or “agents” in home countries with the implicit understanding that someone other than the sponsor will employ the migrant worker. This illegal selling of what are termed *azad*, or free visas, is one way in which agents are able to charge large sums to potential migrants that typically ensnare them within the structures of debt bondage. The situation of debt bondage arises because migrants are then tied to jobs until they have cleared their debt. In addition, they might have to pay a monthly commission to the *kafeel* who arranged for their visa.

Ironically, low-wage migrants on an *azad* visa have more freedom to move between jobs and employers, enabling them to bargain for better pay and working conditions (Pessoa, Harkness et al. 2014). Not being tied to a particular employer, however, may also mean periods of no work – an extremely difficult prospect for low-wage migrants paying off debts. Workers on *azad* visas make up part of the flexible workforce that is also comprised of overstayers and those working on tourist/visit visas. These illegal practices are widespread and their prevalence points to a relative tolerance by state authorities complicit in maintaining a flexible labour pool. The unregulated informal economy is discussed in the next section.

### The informal sector

The informal sector “is usually characterised by ease of entry and exit, little capital and equipment, low pay, lack of workers’ rights, labour-intensive and low-skilled work and no fixed employment contracts” (Ergun 2008: 116). Although the informal sector in economic systems was perceived as a hangover from “precapitalist modes of production”, it is now widely acknowledged that most capitalist systems have an informal sector that provides flexible (but often exploited) labour. In the case of Dubai, even the formal sector of low-wage employment is characterised by many of the exploitative conditions, such as non-payment and lack of employment rights that characterise informal sector work. Informal sector workers in Dubai occupy a range of industries. Many work as day labourers on construction sites, which need specific skills at different times in the build. Short-term or ad hoc jobs are taken on by irregular migrants, including those on *azad* visas. They save employers both the expense of a visa and having to deal with the bureaucracy necessary for the employment of a foreign worker, in terms of acting as a sponsor/*kafeel*.

Although states have developed sophisticated surveillance mechanisms, overstayers and irregular migration are still common.<sup>8</sup> There were 83,000 residency violators in Dubai in 2007 alone (Dubai Chronicle 2008a). This relative tolerance towards illegal migration suggests that the Emirati state is complicit in ensuring the existence of this flexible, temporary workforce. “Their presence is tacitly approved but because they tend to be lower or unskilled, their contribution is officially ignored” (Piper 2006b: 7). Besides the relative disposability of these irregular migrants, host country governments sustain undocumented migration that enables a flexible labour force that leaves when the economy shrinks and is unable to sustain them. It is an effective mechanism to deal with economic cycles, and especially in a volatile climate like that of Dubai.

There is tacit tolerance of the presence of migrant workers in irregular status on the part of many governments during economic booms, and to sustain large informal sectors in their economies, while officially they aim to be seen as “combating” or “fighting” irregular migration. (Wickramasekara 2008: 1253)

The UAE government’s tightening of the visa extension policy in 2008 was publicised as a means of addressing the widespread problem of migrants working on tourist visas (Dubai Chronicle 2008b). In practice,



however, border-hopping to renew visas continues to function as before. This lack of implementation, while giving the impression of cracking down on illegal migration, did not engender any effect. For overstayers, the UAE government's granting of amnesty to illegal workers once every few years (the previous two amnesty periods were in 2003 and 2007) has also created a level of complacency with regards to irregular migration. For some low-wage migrants, it is seen as a legitimate, state-sanctioned means of negotiating their irregular status while temporarily avoiding detection and arrest. Holding regular amnesties has been acknowledged as international good practice (Wickramasekara 2008: 1254) in allowing migrants to return to their home countries without incurring penalties for overstaying. In the case of irregular migration to the UAE, however, amnesties do not seem to address the root cause of the issue of irregular migration, which has to do with the strict hiring policies that tie migrants, via work visas, to specific employers. Business owners in the emirate who are reluctant to incur costs in hiring, encourage this practice by employing migrants without valid work visas.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the *kafala* system itself can be seen as producing illegality, and irregular workers. During the 2007 amnesty, for example, 51,277 irregular migrants turned themselves in to the authorities. The majority were low-wage Indian workers. One informant who has lived in Dubai for 20 years estimates that about 5,000 people looking for work enter Dubai every month on "visiting" or tourist visas.<sup>10</sup> The informal sector thus forms a significant part of the total labour pool in Dubai.

As a consequence of their marginality as undocumented workers, these migrants are not just more susceptible to being exploited economically, but also to becoming socially excluded. "Above all, irregular migration is a protection problem, since migrant workers become vulnerable to extreme violations of their human and labour rights... Fear of detection may keep migrant workers away from even legitimately available services" (Wickramasekara 2008: 1253). Many irregular migrants in Dubai express reluctance to approach embassy officials, local police or labour rights committees for fear that their illegal status emerges and leads to their immediate deportation and a future ban on working in the UAE. Further, these groups have no recourse to a labour tribunal or the police in instances when they are not paid for work they have carried out.

When we didn't hear from him, people said that those who live in Dubai often work illegally. That way they earn more money. And if we had looked for him and reported him missing, he would get kicked out of the country. (Bhattacharya 2008: 5)

The above quote was from relatives of a missing migrant worker who feared that he would be repatriated, and were thus reluctant to make enquiries about his whereabouts. He finally turned up with injuries at a public hospital in Dubai. This anecdote also illustrates that the family of a migrant typically has little, if any, knowledge about who he or she works for or the conditions under which he or she labours in Dubai. Many low-wage migrants tell their families little of their lives in the adopted country. While their work and living conditions might be seen as undesirable by the family back at home, deportation is most shameful and to be avoided at any cost. This is especially so if the migrant returns before settling his or her debt or remitting a substantial sum of money. The fear of being shamed in combination with the threat of deportation constitute “techniques of governance” that “make guest workers, both regular and irregular, physically useful but politically docile” (Gamburd 2009: 69). These disciplining techniques de-politicise the migrant population and discourage demands for rights or respect.

### Summing up the effects of the *kafala* system

The *kafala* system of sponsorship, agents, recruiters and people smugglers involved in these networks of migration constitutes what has been termed the “privatisation of migration” – a phenomenon that is seen as consistent with global trends of liberalisation and deregulation, in which the state has minimal involvement. In the case of Dubai, the privatisation of migration is grounded in older tribal relations of patronage. The absence of state regulation or monitoring of the mobility of labour can be seen as part of a longer trajectory culminating in more recent neoliberalisation strategies in the emirate. The *kafala* system has been in place since the early waves of migration associated with the discovery of oil deposits. However, new laws such as those requiring the employer to provide medical insurance for every labour migrant entering Dubai point to ways in which the state is further distancing itself from the responsibility of managing its large migrant population. Labour migration is dealt with as a private economic relationship between employer and employee. The *kafala system*, in this way, reflects the *laissez-faire* approach that the Dubai state espouses in its rhetoric as a space of commercial enterprise. Numbers of labour migrants entering the country are not limited and are seen as responding purely to market demands of native employers. This perspective, however, is highly problematic. Labour migration in Dubai is not a self-regulating economic phenomenon. Migrants, as we have seen, are in fact stripped of much of their agency in choosing their conditions of employment or changing

employers. This perspective also ignores the significant socio-political consequences of such a system in terms of the everyday lives of low-wage migrants.

Much of what has been done to improve the situation of labour migrants in the UAE can be characterised as state rhetoric and plans, with little result. Implementation and enforcement of laws that protect labourers and legally persecute unscrupulous agents and employers who do not fulfil their obligations is severely lacking. Instead, there is a sense of resentment towards human rights advocates and critical media commentators for the lack of public acknowledgement of the very minimal steps that have been taken by the Emirati state to rectify abuses (Sleiman 2010). International “shaming” practices involving defamatory reports by organisations such as Human Rights Watch are also seen as culturally inappropriate, especially as the international image of Dubai as tolerant and progressive is one that the city-state has spent time and resources developing. As a result of pressure from the United States and European Union during talks leading to Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), the UAE has had to take steps to address human trafficking and eliminate exploitative recruitment agents. In late 2009 and early 2010, the government announced a series of measures that were intended to improve the living conditions of low-wage migrants and provide a forum in the form of a labour court to settle disputes. The effectiveness in the implementation of these measures, however, remains to be seen. With the highly opaque legal system in the UAE, “their interpretation and application is subject to the discretion of the ministries” (Keane and McGeehan 2008: 85) and not audited by any independent party.

In the regulation of labour flows, the UAE is an extreme example of how “the rights of states clearly prevail over the rights of migrants, with states retaining the ultimate right to set the conditions under which foreigners may enter and reside in their territory” (Pecoud and de Gutcheneire 2005; see also Martin 2003, cited in Grugel and Piper 2007: 35). The state also has the ultimate right to determine when the migrant should leave its territory. In the UAE, this is expressed clearly in the ever-present threat of deportation or revocation of visa privileges.<sup>11</sup> This fear of deportation, because of the constant threat of it by the Emirati state, is the most effective means of disciplining the migrant population in Dubai. For many low-skilled migrants, who cannot return without having repaid their incurred debt and remitted a substantial amount of savings, deportation is not just socially shameful, but financially disastrous. The threat of deportation also prevents group bargaining for migrant rights, as collective protesting usually results in the perpetrators

being deported immediately.<sup>12</sup> Disgruntled migrants have very limited avenues to seek recourse, as police and labour tribunals have also been largely ineffective or uninterested in responding to migrants' claims of non-payment or late payment. Together, these point to the failure on the part of the receiving state in catering for the rights and welfare of migrants, and low-wage migrants in particular. The lack of formal support from sending governments and embassies also contributes to the inability of migrants to resist practices of exploitation. This is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

### **Structural violence – embodying multiple global inequalities**

As a public institution, Rashid Hospital by no means represents the best standards nor is it typical of medical care in Dubai. With the establishment of Healthcare City and the setting up of branches of the Mayo Clinic and Harvard Medical School, Dubai is establishing itself as a regional and international centre for healthcare for the wealthy. Rich Arabs from across the region regularly travel to Dubai to seek medical treatment. This has become a source of tourism revenue for the state with many staying on for an extended recovery period and holiday. Middle-class and wealthier migrants seek treatment at one of the many private hospitals that have sprouted in the emirate. In contrast, low-wage migrants in Dubai, when in need of medical care, are usually brought to one of the public hospitals, of which Rashid Hospital is one of the largest.

I met Laila towards the end of my time in Dubai. She was a patient in the psychiatric wing of Rashid Hospital. There are separate wards for male and female psychiatric patients; only women were allowed into the female-only wards (although women were permitted into male sections). Most visitors to the hospital are not allowed into the psychiatric ward unless they are immediate family or friends of patients there, and I gained access only through my regular visits with members of a local humanitarian organisation.

The psychiatric ward is placed at the end of a long corridor in a section of the hospital and set apart from other wards. Entry is only through electronically bolted heavy doors, which nurses inside open after they have determined your authorisation to enter. Sometimes, when leaving the ward, we would have to be quick to close the doors behind us, in case one of the patients who the nurses were forcibly holding back broke free of their hold and ran out. Patients in this ward are never allowed out. Inside, it is bare. There are no pictures on the drab beige walls. As

well as the patients' rooms, there is a large hall with tables and chairs beside a small open-air grassed courtyard. It was there that most patients lingered during the day. And it was on chairs facing the grass that Laila and I sat together every Friday.

Laila was a Bangladeshi migrant in her mid-thirties, with olive skin, a gold nose stud and fine, well-oiled, wavy black hair. I had learned from social workers and the nurses on the ward that she had been found by the police, wandering the streets of Dubai in a disoriented state. She embodied signs of physical abuse and had a "nasty genital infection", I was told by the nurses. I could still see shadows of bruises on her legs beneath the nightgown she wore. Why exactly she was placed in a psychiatric ward was not immediately clear, but she showed signs of confusion and disorientation for which she was being treated. As she was suspected to be a trafficked sex worker, placing her within the confines of the psychiatric ward might have been a strategy of segregation and exclusion of women seen as social deviants (as with Esther in the earlier vignette), or even punishment for practices the state deems illegal and immoral.

On my second meeting with Laila, I conveyed to her that she would be sent back to Bangladesh after the doctors in the hospital had determined that she was fully recovered. Rather than greet this information with the excitement expected of a return to family and familiarity, Laila broke down crying. As I left the ward that day, she clung to me desperately, begging me to ask "them" not to send her back (to Bangladesh). She explained tearfully that her family had borrowed and paid large sums of money to ensure her migration to Dubai, and that she could not and would not return unless she had made enough to pay back what they had borrowed. Her family would not accept her back, she claimed, if she returned penniless.

Stories of distressed low-wage migrants, such as the account described above, abound in Dubai. The analyses of many journalists and academics are often caught up in these descriptions (Molavi 2007; Krane 2009; McPhee 2009; Ali 2010) and fail to move far beyond. This, of course, does not imply that ethnography does not have a place in analysis – but merely that it should be the starting point. The materiality of the social, or everyday, habitus needs to be unpacked to understand embedded sociocultural processes. The concept of structural or symbolic violence is useful here in deconstructing the landscape within which low-wage migrants, such as Laila, are situated.

Farmer (2004: 307) defines structural violence as intended to "inform the study of the social machinery of oppression". Akin to ideas of "symbolic

violence” (Bourdieu 2000) or “everyday violence” (Scheper-Hughes 1996), structural violence draws from concepts of colonial inequality such as that developed by Frantz Fanon (1963) and Michael Taussig’s (1991; 1992) anthropological work in South America and Australia. It has been used as a tool to expose and uncover the underlying structures that legitimate exploitation and normalise it as part of the everyday. Structural violence serves as a “reminder that most violent acts are not deviant. They are defined as normal in the service of conventional norms and material interests” (Farmer 2004: 318). This is where the term is productive – as it necessitates an archaeology of the everyday beyond immediate and short-term causes. Structural violence also conjures the often aggressive and deathly confrontations that structurally embedded power relations entail. It articulates the ways in which physical violence is typically indicative of broader assaults to dignity and human rights. The concept has been critiqued for merely formalising what sociologists and anthropologists undertake in analyses of social structures, as well as for its homogenising of different types of violence, that is physical, symbolic, political and economic (Bourgois, Scheper-Hughes et al. 2004). However, in this instance, it is useful as a way of getting beneath descriptive categorisations and criticisms of the Emirati state in failing to institute better pay and living conditions. It is useful precisely as a term that can encompass national-level exclusions based around citizenship and class, global and globalised structures that depend on differences between states and older concepts of racial hierarchy. The concept of structural violence is a productive way to bring together the multiple variables and assemblages that come together to create the marginalised conditions under which low-wage migrants labour.

Laila’s experiences of physical and sexual abuse described above can, then, be read as material manifestations of the structural and symbolic violence that the system of migrant employment in the Gulf legitimates, reinforced through inequities between states. Laila is at the bottom of multiple vectors of inequality – nationality, race, class and gender. Dubai is a place where these various hierarchies come together in very visible and extremely polarised ways. First, because of the differential pay scales related to nationality, migrants from South Asian countries are typically paid the least for doing the same jobs. A national from a country with a higher gross national product (GNP) per capita must be provided better conditions of employment than a worker from a poorer nation to attract him or her to Dubai (Ball 2004: 129). This hierarchy based on nationality and ascribed race is built on an international hierarchy of nations, whereby the globe is divided into “first-world” and “third-world” states,

or “developed” and “developing” nations. “Third-world” labour – in this case sex workers like Laila, domestics like Esther and low-skilled construction workers like the thousands in Dubai – become the “slaves” of the “first world” (Gogia 2006: 363). As women, Esther and Laila are further subject to discrimination in terms of lower wages and subject to moralities that are not imposed on male migrants. Mobility, and thus international labour migration, must, then, not be seen as neutral concepts but ones that are intrinsically imbued, “produced and shaped by relations of power” (Gogia 2006: 360). This understanding of power and inequality draws on a highly developed literature of North-South exploitation, ranging from Gilroy (1993) to Escobar (1995), that deconstructs how the global hierarchy of states is tied to notions of race and coloniality. Race, for those post-colonialists, as in Dubai, is an extremely important marker of difference, often equated with nationality. South Asians such as Laila are discriminated against in Dubai because of their association with low status and unskilled jobs (such as sex work) that are often considered dirty and demeaning. Race is mapped onto class, also because of the historical legacies of British colonialism in the Gulf, and this in turn reifies everyday racially discriminatory attitudes in the Emirate.<sup>13</sup>

Laila’s abuse, however, is not enacted in the developed nations of the Global North, but in Dubai. Older notions of North versus South thus need to be reconsidered in this context of economic and political power shifting to the growing economies of the Global South – such as China, India, Singapore and the UAE. Pheng Cheah’s (2006) conceptualisation of globalisation as instituting “inhuman conditions” explores the implications of this change. Cheah describes how the global hierarchy of states has shifted with previously less developed nations undertaking practices of economic liberalisation. This, however, does not lead to developing nations experiencing uniform growth or improved living standards. Inequality and exploitation exist, but the perpetrators are no longer nation-states. He, together with other commentators such as Vandana Shiva, suggest that older colonial modes of exploitation now take place within the geographical boundaries of the South, but take the form of transnational capital.

their high economic performance, essential to their continued legitimation, depends on their willingness to accommodate transnational capital. These governments acquiesce in the exploitation entailed by profitable foreign investment: poor labouring conditions and low pay in Free Trade Zones compared to those in the country of origin of TNCs. (Cheah 2006: 164)

Transnational capital, in terms of investments in real estate and commercial ventures such as hotels and theme parks, as well as educational institutions and museums, is responsible for much of the recent economic success of Dubai. It is not just older power relations of coloniser and colonised that are being rehashed within the emirate, but also new ones that are coming into play. They are reinforced through laws, structures and relations that live outside but also draw on older colonial constructions of race and respect. Transnational governance entities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) are complicit in the sustenance of a global regime that is in the interests of transnational capital (Overbeek 2002), and thus in the manipulation of migrant labour. We need, then, not merely to analyse global inequalities in North-South terms, but also to consider divisions that cut across the globe and that reproduce relations of power at multiple scales. With increased access to international mobility, global inequalities have shifted geographies. Inequality is now transnational, across as well as existing within nations. The study of South-South migration, the majority of migration in Dubai, is an important component of such interrogations. It provides a lens through which new, post-colonial configurations of inequality play out.

Many scholars of migration agree on the significance of inequality across the globe as a “powerful incentive” for migration and as an initiator of social transformations. The movement towards a space of perceived opportunity is what the excluded and marginalised believe will bring “the chance of prosperity”. These ideas of mobility are often perpetuated by the “cultural capital” that globalisation mobilises (Castles 2007: 360). The images, stories and narratives carried through electronic communications have drawn a new wave of migrants to possibilities that were previously unknown. Dubai, as shown in Chapter 2, is very often the subject of these representations of modernity, prosperity and opportunity. Transnational cultural capital is extremely effective in the creation of desire, which in turn leads to migrants’ involvement in exploitative situations.

Going back to the vignette, it is probable that Laila’s family may have sent her to Dubai knowing that she would be involved in sex work. Kevin Bales (2004) explains the sending of a female member of the family knowingly into sex work as a strategy by poor families to ensure the survival of the rest through the “sacrificing” of one. Although his discussion is situated in the context of female sex workers from villages in Thailand who are “sold” to traffickers/pimps from the city, explanations might be similarly applicable. This is a strategy that is seen as a means to achieve social mobility by families where opportunities to



break out of the cycle of poverty are rare. Through the earnings and remittances of the one family member who is involved in sex work, the others can afford an education and thus access social mobility that could enable the rest of the family to achieve a better standard of living. Often, this also results in a situation of debt bondage, as with Laila. Debt bondage is considered the most common form of slavery today (Bales 2004: 19) and typically involves the repayment of agents' fees by the migrant, who borrows capital to migrate initially. This traps the migrant within a job and situation that they cannot leave until they have paid off their incurred debt.

Laila's circumstances are not unique, and mirror that of many other low-wage migrants caught in situations of debt bondage and economic exploitation. Her story is a micro-level indication of larger transnational flows of peoples and capital that take place across the globe. The inequalities, discriminations and abuses that they face have become normalised as part of a neoliberal global order. Starting from the everyday experience of the migrant, the notion of structural violence deconstructs how the silence around such structures of inequality also effectively legitimises them. Mobilities are generated through socio-economic inequalities and disparities between less developed and more developed nations, regions and peoples. Laila's case is also not exclusive to Dubai, or the Gulf – many migrants across the globe find themselves subject to similar hierarchies, to varying extents. Using the framework of structural violence, we see not just how Laila and other migrants in her position are subject to discriminations and the unfair *kafala* scheme within the UAE and Gulf, but also how they are a product of global inequalities and exploitative practices within a neoliberal regime. Dubai, as a destination for both migrants from the developing world and transnational capital, is a highly appropriate space to deconstruct these hierarchies played out in the everyday lives of migrant workers.

### **The role of sending countries**

Thus far, this chapter has examined the relationship that migrants have with the receiving state, situated within larger global, historical and transnational structures. This section of the chapter balances the discussion by interrogating the sending state's role in the provision of rights and care in the migrant context. India, the sending country with the largest number of migrants to the UAE, and the largest number of low-wage migrants, is taken as a case study of how low-wage migrant welfare, in particular, is neglected.

Termed “guest workers” in the UAE to underscore their reliance on the benevolence of the state, migrants are effectively placed in a position where they have limited formal rights, as this chapter has demonstrated. Under circumstances in which they have no access to long-term residence or citizenship and are forced to leave their families behind, low-wage migrants are in a position where ties to the homeland cannot be given up and must be maintained for an eventual return.<sup>14</sup> The receiving country places low-wage migrants in a situation where they are “needed but not wanted” (Piper 2006a: 7). With an eventual return to the sending country necessary, the migrant maintains both economic and social ties with the home community. This, in turn, means that there is no imperative by the sending state to target the low-wage migrant with specific policies to ensure that they keep remitting a portion of their incomes. The irregular migrant, given the instability of his or her legal status, is also highly beneficial to the sending state. This link between the unstable and circular nature of much low-wage migration, and the increased likelihood of income being remitted is significant:

the greater the uncertainty of settlement and tenure for Indian migrants overseas, the greater the potential economic returns to India. Under the conditions of globalized labour markets, intense state regulation of international migration (including the reduction of rights accorded to temporary and undocumented workers) creates a scenario where the sending state can financially benefit from their own citizens’ vulnerability. The two global movements of capital and migrants have to contend with very different regulatory regimes. (Walton-Roberts 2004: 56–57)

Both receiving and sending governments can thus be seen as complicit in the perpetuation of such bifurcated systems of flows, where capital moves quickly across borders while bodies remain static. This reinforces the need to re-examine recent discourses in migration that have celebrated the effects of return/circular migration and low-wage migrants’ remittances as contributing to development agendas (Wickramasekara 2008: 1247), as there is a disconnect between such rhetoric of nation-building and the reality for migrants. The cost of migration is seen not from the perspective of the individual migrant, but at the scale of the state. While depicted as transnational agents of change, low-wage migrants are often subject to structural exploitation by receiving countries and abuse by employers: consequences that sending countries are reluctant to admit as significant. Such unmitigated encouragement of

temporary labour migration masks the inadequacies and neglect of the sending states in providing for low-wage migrants' welfare and rights.

### **India's reliance on remittances**

In the year 2013, total remittances to India amounted to US\$71 billion, which placed it as the top recipient of overseas transfers in the world (World Bank 2013). Undocumented capital networks, which low-wage migrants frequently utilise, further inflate that number.<sup>15</sup> These remittances represent about 3 per cent of the country's GDP, a portion higher than even revenues from India's software exports (Chishti 2007). In Kerala, where the overwhelming majority of emigration is to the Gulf states, remittances constitute 22 per cent of the state domestic product. Remittances to this part of South India have had a positive impact on per capita incomes, standards of living and in the reduction of poverty levels (Zachariah, Nair et al. 2001, Zachariah and Rajan 2004). In fact, indicators demonstrate a level of development closer to nations in Western Europe and North America than to the rest of India (Pallikadavath and Wilson 2005). Remittances from overseas Indians have also contributed hugely in the improvement of India's balance of payments deficit, and account for more than the total amount of international development aid India receives. "There is no denying that the dependence of the Indian economy on this commoditized human transfer has allowed it to maintain a conventional trade imbalance and, at the same time, post record foreign exchange reserves (over US\$71 billion in 2002/03)" (Walton-Roberts 2004: 58). The monetary importance of migrant remittances to the Indian state is undisputable. But while the macroeconomic and development impacts of remittances have been analysed extensively in the literature (Zachariah, Mathew et al. 1999; Zachariah, Mathew et al. 2000; Zachariah and Rajan 2004), the relationship between the Indian state and the contributors of such overseas capital has primarily been limited to assessments of how non-resident Indians (NRIs) in North America and Europe maintain connections with the home country (Lessinger 1992; Lessinger 2003; Walton-Roberts 2004). Gulf migration has been largely overlooked.

It is estimated that about \$14 billion dollars, or more than a quarter of India's combined remittances, come from the Gulf. Within this region, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are the states with highest levels of remittances. With the 2008 financial crisis, remittances from the Gulf overtook even those from North America (Ratha, Mohapatra et al. 2009: 3). Migration to the Gulf is primarily low-waged and temporary, of a substantively different nature to the highly skilled migration to North America, which often results in permanent settlement. Although

low-wage migrants remit far smaller amounts in comparison to investments by wealthy Indians, their savings ultimately result in less reliance on welfare payments, new and better infrastructure at the community level and a better-educated population, thereby reducing a reliance on the state for the provision of such initiatives. The long-term consequences of low-wage labour migration and their remittances are overwhelmingly positive for the Indian state.

### **Indian neglect of low-wage migrant welfare**

Beneficial outcomes reaped by the Indian state, however, are not matched by a commensurate level attention to low-wage migrant welfare.<sup>16</sup> The inability to regulate or govern agents' recruitment fees is probably the single most urgent issue that needs to be addressed in relation to South Asian low-wage labour in the UAE and wider Gulf region. Despite legislation that stipulates that the employer should bear all recruitment fees, including the cost of travel to the UAE, many low-wage migrants from India (and other developing nation states) pay substantial fees to an agent who finds them a job and/or work visa in one of the emirates. Most agents are from the same sending country as the potential migrant, and most are unregulated and unauthorised by the state.<sup>17</sup> For many working class Indians, these agents are often the only routes to migration. They have knowledge about the bureaucratic processes of migration and links with potential employers. Many potential migrants mortgage or sell their homes and possessions or take on high-interest-rate loans in order to finance the placement fee that agents charge. Unscrupulous agents usually inflate the "fees" so as to ensure a large cut for themselves, even if the employer foots the entire cost of the visa and air ticket. These fees range from 5,000 to 140,000 rupees (Rajan, Varghese et al. 2010: 265),<sup>18</sup> very large investments for low-wage workers. While in the majority of situations the promised visa and flight ticket to the UAE come through, in some instances entire life savings are never recovered. Other migrants are turned back at the airport when they land in Dubai, where they are told that the visa that their "agent" has arranged is not valid. The repayment of loans taken to finance these agents' fees often accounts for a large proportion of the migrant workers' remittances. The level of indebtedness of foreign contract workers can thus be considered to be "debt bondage" as they are placed in a situation in which they are trapped in a particular job until their loan is discharged. Being embedded within the *kafala* system adds to the difficulty of changing employment. In such situations, low-wage migrants report taking an average of one-and-a-half to two years to clear their debts.

### Co-ethnic exploitation

Returning to the vignette of Laila in the previous section, the importance of regulating practices of unauthorised “agents” is apparent. Despite her experiences of violence in Dubai, Laila’s adamant refusal to return to her home country without having first cleared her debt is indicative of the power of shame that is a strong mechanism of control in many migrants’ lives (Lindquist 2004). This, together with the “selling” of visas, perpetuates a system of debt bondage that causes much physical suffering and mental anguish among low-wage migrants in Dubai. This section examines the conditions that enable such a system to thrive. The concept of structural violence is also useful here in understanding how exploitative structures are reproduced. This often takes the form of a victim becoming an eventual victimiser. In the case of low-wage migrants in Dubai, this happens when migrants there themselves become “migration agents” for potential migrants in their home village. In many cases, employers will ask one of his employees to locate for them more workers through his or her networks back home. This then gives the employed migrant the imperative to charge eager potential migrants back home “fees” for facilitating their migration. This form of co-ethnic exploitation is one of the biggest challenges to improving low-wage migrant welfare.

“Co-ethnic exploitation” is a double-edged sword (Velayutham and Wise 2009).<sup>19</sup> While friendship and family networks can function as productive ways to achieve social mobility through migration, they may also implicate exploitative relations. This problematises the characterisation of the low-wage migrant as victim, as many migrants exert agency in choosing to migrate despite knowing about potentially exploitative debt-bondage situations. Many migrants who have previously been duped by agents, or know of the manipulative nature of such relations, still take the risk of migrating using the services of an agent in their village or town, in the knowledge they could again be cheated. They are often trusting of these informal agents or brokers because they are known to family and community (Lindquist 2012). With the potential migrant being aware of the risk, and yet agreeing to such arrangements, the position of exploiter is also rendered morally ambivalent. The agent/exploiter feels justified in his or her role in enabling social mobility, even if it is at a high cost. As described by a migrant who also acts as an “agent”, “If I don’t get them a visa someone else will ask for more money and then they will have to pay even more. Like this at least they know that they can trust me and I will definitely get them the plane

ticket and the visa and not just run off with their money". Migrants who act as agents narrate their role as that of an enabler, in which they are able to open up the possibility of a better future and social mobility to their friends and family back home. Most do not see their taking of a large "fee" for the arrangement of visas as exploitative or illegal as the practice is so widespread. This also raises the question of whether demarcating practices as "illicit" or "illegal" purely from the perspective of the state is productive in addressing the exploitation of low-wage migrants (Pattadath 2010: 164–165). At the scale of village or community, there may exist informal mechanisms of control such as councils or associations that regulate agents. The individual agent or network of brokers is kept in check, but this does not mean that they are also held responsible if the migrant returns without savings and more deeply in debt. Failure is deemed the individual migrant's fault, while agents reap the (non-material) rewards of successes. A wider perspective that includes localised understandings of illegality and the self-regulating practices of agents needs to be developed in order to understand better the perpetuation of co-ethnic exploitation.

Despite the existence of self-regulating mechanisms, the regulation and policing of these recruiters is perhaps the most urgent job at the level of the Indian state, as it is the single biggest factor that would address the situation of debt bondage in which many low-skilled workers are embroiled. de Regt (2008: 598) points out that this neglect is indicative of "the weakness of government policies of both sending and receiving countries and illustrates the blurred line between legal and illegal migration". Although migration may be through legal channels, the practices mentioned above of agents who facilitate such mobilities are against the law, and immigration officials and employers are often complicit. The widespread and continued prevalence of this phenomenon also points to a lack of education initiatives to create awareness of such practices. In my discussions with low-wage migrants, the need to inform and educate potential migrants of informal agents and debt bondage repeatedly emerged as an important and urgent responsibility of the Indian government. Migrants and workers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) recommended dissemination through mass media outlets as well as more formal means of information distribution such as through regional arms of the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

Joseph, a social worker in a Dubai-based voluntary organisation that deals with migrant welfare issues, explains why there still exists a continual stream of low-wage migrants who are cheated by agents

and come to Dubai with large debts. He attributes it first to a lack of information about the reality of labour migration to the Gulf:

People are not educated, that is the main reason behind it. Now it is greatly reduced. Because a lot of Andhra people went back and they have seen a lot of people in a pathetic situation.

Some initiatives have recently been undertaken at the state and national levels in India. The establishment of the Overseas Manpower Company Andhra Pradesh (OMCAP) by the state government, for example, ensures greater government involvement in the training and recruitment of overseas workers. This initiative ensures not just that potential migrants are equipped with the appropriate skills, but that they are also matched up with employers, thereby eliminating the agent's middleman role. The entire process of training and placement should occur at no cost to the trainee. In December 2009 the Indian state also signed an agreement with the UAE in order to centralise recruitment through one agency. The long-term effects of these changes do not seem to be significant, although the Indian embassy has reported a reduction in labour complaints (Janardhan 2010). Given that much recruitment takes place at the very local level, mediated through kinship or friendship networks, a greater grassroots campaign is also necessary to effectively deal with the issue of informal recruitment.

The Indian state has also shown a lack of involvement in the implementation of workers' rights in Dubai and the UAE. The withholding, underpayment and non-payment of wages and breaches of work contracts are the most significant issues with regards to migrants' employment rights (Piper 2006a: 21). Such problems are widespread in Dubai, with construction labourers going unpaid for up to six months. Co-ethnic exploitation is embedded in these circumstances too, where the employers or managers who withhold wages are often Indian, just like the majority of their employees.<sup>20</sup> Temporary migrant workers whose visas are linked to their contracts have little opportunity and no avenue in such circumstances to air their grievances. The choice is typically between deportation and working under the employer's unsatisfactory conditions. The money and access necessary to bring claims of unpaid wages or mistreatment to court disables the low-wage migrant from seeking such recourse. Labour tribunals, even when they do rule in favour of migrants, do not enforce their decisions. Piper (2006a: 21) goes on to suggest that in such situations networking between NGOs

as well as greater initiative by embassies, for example in providing legal support, is needed.

The issue of jurisdiction here is important, as NGOs and migrant advocacy groups based in sending countries do not have the authority to settle disputes in the receiving country, and are of little practical assistance to migrants (Gamburd 2009: 74). Migrants must turn to either local NGO groups or their embassy or consulate in the receiving state, which has the most legal and political clout in dealing with such matters. However, embassies representing large numbers of migrants are often ill-equipped, and inadequate in handling issues of low-wage migrant welfare and legal representation. This often means that migrants turn to informal alternatives for support (discussed in detail in Chapter 6). As Gamburd (2009: 67) discovered, “housemaids whom I have interviewed often find services at the embassy lacking, noting insufficient staff and spartan accommodations. Rather than rely on formal institutions in times of trouble, women often turn to informal personal networks to help them out of difficult situations”. This was also a recurrent observation made by NGO workers. The lack of involvement by the Indian embassy staff as representatives of the sending country government in dealing with wage concerns of low-wage labourers, was lamented by an activist in Dubai:

But now they come over here, through some XYZ agent, and they can't even speak to someone. The agent will not take responsibility for non-payment of wages etc. He will say, “Come on, there are other people that are working. You're alone or what? You work!” But these fellows, they should go back and ask the government. There should be someone responsible on the government's side. That these people have been sent; they have not been paid the salaries... immediately they can call the embassy and tell them! So and so companies are not paying the salaries.

Beyond dealing with unpaid and late wages, my informant goes on to point out the Indian embassy's basic inadequacies in catering for the needs of low-wage migrants, who come mostly from Andhra Pradesh, with knowledge of only their local language, Telegu, and are not usually proficient in either Hindi or English – the languages in which the embassy functions. This also seems to point to the fact that the embassy is practically oriented towards the needs of skilled middle-class migrants. His criticisms are specifically of inappropriate language provision and



the lack of an accessible and widely known point of communication. He quoted from a conversation he had with an embassy official:

Activist: "*You* should have the helpdesk for them. In the Indian embassy. I know you, so I'll call you on the mobile. But an ordinary, normal person, how will he call you? How will he inform you of his problems, his grievances? I told him – you have to have a helpdesk."

Embassyofficial: "We have the mobile numbers, the helpdesk."

Activist: "What helpdesk? They don't speak Telegu...our people can't speak more than Telegu. So keep someone who can speak Telegu. Around 80 per cent of construction workers are from Andhra Pradesh. So you should realise that there should be someone who can speak Telegu. And not just a mobile phone, there should be a proper helpdesk. Where they can register their complaints."

Under pressure from organisations representing migrants, the Indian embassy established a 24-hour help desk, a service that has been outsourced due to the difficulties of the overstretched consulate in dealing with the logistical necessities of such an undertaking. Whether information about this service is being effectively disseminated, or if officials have been quick to respond to complaints however, still remains to be seen. In campaigning for their citizens' rights, representatives of sending countries also have to bear in mind the disadvantageous positions in which migrants from their country might be placed.

An additional problem for origin countries is that, with increasing competition on the "labour export market", they have relatively little influence on the treatment of their nationals in the countries of destination and little bargaining power when it comes to the negotiation of bilateral agreements (BLAs) or Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), partly because they fear losing their share in the regional or global market. ...But not all sending countries are equally affected by this and it seems the diversification in terms of skill levels, occupations and countries of destination is one way to avoid being the victim of competition of this sort. This has been done quite successfully by the Philippines. (Grugel and Piper 2007: 36)

Another example, Sri Lanka, as Gamburd (2009: 76) shows, lacks the political power or economic confidence as a debtor nation and developing

state to initiate a conflict in demanding workers' rights. They instead, "in many cases accommodate to the wishes of the more powerful GCC governments for fear of losing valuable employment opportunities for its citizens". Despite India's emergence as an important international player, its assertion of political pressure to guarantee, for example, a minimum wage for its construction workers has proved inadequate in changing standards. However, the reluctance of the Indian state to push for such reforms as a minimum wage for Indian workers is also because it would make them strategically disadvantaged compared to migrants from other countries who are willing to work for less. Any significant change in policy could result in a decrease in remittance income. The quest for cheaper labour from a greater diversity of countries has, for example, already led to greater numbers of Chinese and Filipino low-wage migrants in Dubai.

One strategy that sending countries like India can adopt to improve the situation of its migrants with less risk of remittance levels falling is through diversifying the skill levels and destinations of potential migrants. This, however, can be carried out only through a movement towards tighter regulation and greater involvement in migrant labour by the Indian government, as opposed to the more *laissez-faire* approach that it now adopts.<sup>21</sup> However, as long as an international hierarchy exists between labour-sending and labour-receiving countries, ensuring that low-wage, low-skilled migrants receive the same levels of welfare, protection and rights as skilled migrants will be a challenge (Gamburd 2009).

There is a growing awareness for the need for better provision of rights for low-wage migrants as Dubai integrates further into the global economy and is opened up to greater scrutiny and accountability. Along with international NGOs, sending-country governments such as India need to assert greater political pressure on receiving countries to demonstrate that the contributions and welfare of their lower-skilled migrants are just as valued as those of their skilled expatriates. Above all, this means recognition of migration as not only a purely economic process, but also a complex transnational phenomenon that requires both sending and receiving countries to protect the rights of the migrants from whose labour they benefit. Immigration needs to be understood as a foreign-policy issue rather than an internal concern that is only significant within the realm of national sovereignty (Kapiszewski 1999: 183). This requires a movement away from a focus on remittances and their impacts, and instead an increased consideration of social issues such as the provision and protection of rights in the host state. This requires a rights framework that goes beyond the confines of the nation-state.

## Conclusion: call for the transnationalisation of rights

The *kafala* system has engendered a situation in which the state has distanced itself from the regulation of labour through effectively privatising the relationship between employer and employee. In this frame, migrant workers are conceived of as free agents, responding to demand, although their rights are severely restricted. With neoliberal restructuring, the rights of non-citizens have been even further curtailed. Migrants are now subject to multiple hierarchies within a state that has embedded itself in a global system that favours the interests of transnational capital. This neoliberal shift, then, does not imply a decline of state power (cf. Ong 2006), but merely that the state employs more indirect forms of governance in adapting to local contexts. Neoliberal governance mechanisms, in this case, work together with older ideas of tribal solidarity to manage migrant labour.

In concluding this chapter, it is important to emphasise again that Dubai and the UAE are not unique in their management of temporary migrant labour. It is broadly acknowledged that migrants in most states receive rights that are significantly reduced in amount and scope than those of citizens (Ruhs 2002: 15). It is also widely accepted that low-wage labour migrants generally have a lower claim to rights, and that their working and living standards are lacking in comparison to their skilled compatriots. However, Dubai provides us with an extreme example of these phenomena, as representative of the extremely restrictive migration regimes across the GCC. The absence of a liberal democracy, political impetus or civil-society pressure to conform to international human rights standards makes Dubai a space where labour abuses are more likely to be tolerated.

It has been acknowledged that the political system of a state is the most important factor in ensuring migrant rights (Wickramasekara 2008: 1258). As we have seen in the case of Dubai, inequalities are often perpetuated through discriminatory wage schemes and citizenship laws. This chapter has also shown that it is the neglect and lack of regulation on the part of sending countries, as well as the unwillingness of other powerful states to put pressure on the UAE, that contribute to the perpetuation of exploitative practices in the processes of migration. Efforts of international and transnational organisations have also met with limited success, as most lack the means to enforce disciplinary measures or ensure compliance. For example, the three most significant global legal International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions for the protection of migrant rights have disappointingly low rates of

ratification.<sup>22</sup> The states that have done so thus far are mostly labour-sending ones (Ruhs 2002). In sum, this points to a need to reconceptualise our current system of rights.

Transnational migration has been heralded by many scholars (Weiss 2005, Williams 2009) as a strategy that balances the inequality between nation-states. This perspective does not take into account the emotional and financial costs from the perspective of the migrant. Using the frame of structural violence, this chapter has shown how the abuses inflicted on low-wage migrants are also a consequence of the inequality between states, and the power wielded by transnational capital. Ultimately, then, the phenomenon of labour migration, especially of low-skilled labour, is transnational and dependent on the disparity between developing and developed states, and rich and poor people (Phillips and Mieres 2014). It needs to be understood through a broader framework than one that limits analysis to single countries – a recommendation that migration scholars have started to make regularly (see e.g. Weiss 2005; Piper 2006a). Here is where the transnationalisation of rights emerges as a paradigm shift that is necessary to ensure the simultaneous responsibilities of origin and destination regions in the provision of legal rights, citizenship status and social inclusion. This means that our “conventional understanding of concepts such as citizenship and human rights need to be re-assessed for their validity or relevance” (Piper 2006a: 5). Labour migration, itself an explicitly transnational phenomenon, needs, then, commensurate transnational social policy regimes that incorporate sending and receiving governments and non-state actors (Hujo and Piper 2010).

Regulatory frameworks of the state are increasingly being challenged for example, by the work of transnational NGOs and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN). Such organisations are able to tap into more informal networks outside and across state boundaries that transcend the framework of the geographically bounded national entity in the protection of migrant rights.<sup>23</sup> Structures of governance are becoming more difficult to conceptualise because of their increasing transnationality and informality. Along with reconceptualising institutions of governance, there is also a need to rethink such political identities as citizenship – as governance is increasingly practised outside nation-state boundaries and applied to transient and mobile peoples. Some postnational discourses suggest that supranational institutions would be more appropriate in conferring a transnational citizenship based on universalistic conceptions of human rights (Faist 2000: 206–207). Less ambitious advocates call for citizenship rights for migrants in both

sending and receiving countries, or re-immigration with a full retention of rights (Overbeek 2002). As this chapter has shown, low-wage temporary migrant labour stands to benefit most from such new conceptualisations. However, there is currently little possibility for such paradigm shifts to be realised.

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# 4

## Neoliberal Narratives: Migrant Self-Constructions and the Performance of Empowered Subjectivities

In Aravind Adiga's Booker prize-winning novel *The White Tiger*, the aspirational protagonist describes the poor Indian village from which he originates.

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. (Adiga 2008: 14)<sup>1</sup>

It is the desperate need to escape this cyclical "Darkness" of poverty, hardship and lack of opportunity that drives Adiga's narrator to murder his employer and establish a new and prosperous life for himself in the "Light" of contemporary Bangalore. The "Darkness" that Adiga describes is a powerful driver for change, and justifies the high costs of change. Here "Darkness" and "Light" are equated with the geographical spaces of the village and the city, but they can be more productively understood as idealised polarisations – poverty and wealth, stagnation and growth, failure and success. The mobility of Adiga's protagonist involves moving away from one towards the other. This chapter, in parallel, describes the shifts in subjectivities brought about in the migration from perceived "Darkness" to "Light". Just as Adiga's protagonist evolves from a naïve village boy to a cunning and sophisticated urban dweller, this chapter

describes the subjective shifts that low-wage migrants embody and describe in migrating from India to Dubai. They, like Adiga's character, are empowered in ambivalent ways by these moves.

As many recent studies have shown, migrant subjectivities are remade under conditions of neoliberalism (Rudnykyj 2004; Kanna 2010; Gooptu 2013). This is most obvious in the encouragement of the adoption of a rationalist work ethic, independence and frugality as part of a discourse of self-governance. This chapter works as a counterpart to two chapters 2 and 3 in showing how ideologies and processes of neoliberalisation affect individual migrant subjectivities, in addition to the configuration of state rhetoric and immigration laws. It counters representations of neoliberalism as monolithic and shows how it is played out in everyday practices, discourses and imaginations. Drawing from both male and female low-wage migrant experiences in the emirate, the discursive space of Dubai is foregrounded as important to the formation of neoliberal ideas of selfhood. Through narrative constructions and displays of self, migrants justify their marginalisation and separation from families. The act of migration is conceived of as a journey or "rite of passage" for migrant men who are empowered by their role as economic providers to the family. Employers, middle-class migrants, and NGO workers also encourage these embodiments and articulations of neoliberal selves. Low-wage migrants' construction of themselves as subjects of neoliberal change reflects an aspirational agency that rejects state conceptualisations of them as purely productive agents.

This perspective advances recent trends that understand neoliberalism as increasingly linked with cultural processes within nation-states as well as outside them, and how these have implications for individual subjectivities (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ong 2006; Freeman 2007; Ong 2007; Cahn 2008; Kanna 2010). This chapter also aligns with this work in situating analysis firmly in a space outside the West, and countering Eurocentric notions that conceive of neoliberal governance as limited to the spaces of the nation-state. This is especially significant in the case of Dubai and the Gulf, as low-wage migrants are subject to strict mechanisms of control and surveillance by the state, as we saw in the Chapter 3. This chapter also departs from other studies on the formation of neoliberal subjectivities by examining working-class temporary migrants, whose connections to the receiving state are often precarious and contingent, rather than middle-class citizens of liberalising economies. In Dubai, this marginalised group is subject to both the sending state's ideas of masculinity, femininity and shame, and the neoliberal

economy and rationalised spaces of work in the receiving context.<sup>2</sup> The creation of neoliberal subjectivities is a decidedly transnational one.

Neoliberal subjectivities here are characterised by self-invention, entrepreneurialism and, above all, the ability to be free and autonomous subjects who have an obligation to maximise their own life enterprises (Rose, O'Malley et al. 2006; Horschelmann 2008). Although deeply aware of larger structural disadvantages they face, these marginalised migrants foreground the ability to make the most out of their own efforts. In highlighting migrants' narratives and subjective constructions of self, migrants are not mere "objects of development whose actions are structurally determined" (Silvey and Lawson 1999: 125). Instead, low-wage migrants are conceived of as interpretive subjects, balancing the more structuralist perspective of Chapter 3, which characterises them as subjects of global capital hierarchies. Migrants are not just reacting to processes of global restructuring by utilising their international mobility as a strategy for capital accumulation. They are simultaneously interpreting their position as transnational agents in empowering ways.

### **Migrant masculinities – the role of the provider**

The articulation of neoliberal subjectivities by marginalised migrant men is a project of reclaiming masculinity. The following section explores how particular ideas of masculinity are central to the South Asian male and highlights the paucity of male gendered experiences in the wider migration literature.

Recent decades of migration research have been marked by a focus on the feminisation of the field. Shadowing the trend of growing female migration, much research has focused on the mobilities of female domestic workers, care givers and sex workers (Yeoh and Huang 1998; Anderson 2000; Yeoh and Huang 2000; Parrenas 2001; Pratt and Yeoh 2003; Yeoh and Huang 2003; Percot and Rajan 2007; Mahdavi 2011; Pande 2013). This shift does the important work of incorporating female subjectivities into an academic literature that is often male-dominated, both in terms of the subjects of research and academics undertaking the research. However, there is now a reverse lack – of research on male migrant experiences. This chapter furthers recent trends that re-incorporate male subjectivities and understandings of migration into the literature and provide alternative representations to the reductive ways in which men and male migrants have been conceived (van Hoven and Horschelmann 2005; McKay 2007; Herbert 2008; Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009; Donaldson, Hibbins et al. 2009).

In conceptualising male migrants, “researchers tend to highlight apparently ‘deficit’ masculinities revolving around issues such as spousal and family desertion, ‘hyper-masculine’ identities associated with gender violence, or the failure of men ‘left behind’ to take on reproductive responsibilities” (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 843–844). Male migrants are portrayed in rather one-dimensional and unsympathetic ways, which consistently place their experiences in relation to that of the family or female (either migrant family member or left behind). Research needs to go beyond men’s roles as patriarchs (Herbert 2008: 201) or merely as subjects within the family unit, and interrogate their individual experience in the migrant context. Acknowledging this “neglect and oversimplification of men’s experiences” (Herbert 2008: 189), this chapter unpacks the layered complexity of men’s remade subjectivities. Here, the role of provider emerges as a dominant and basic trope in the configuration of male migrant selves.

Why did I come to Dubai? Because of my children. I’m sending them to good schools. My son is studying electrical engineering. And he wants to go to Hyderabad or Bombay and study some more. That’s why I have to stay here.

I have three younger sisters. Only I have to get them married off. It is my responsibility as an elder brother. Who else will do it?

We are here to work and save money. Why else would we come here?

There is a strong imperative in South Asian and in particular, Indian communities for the male to perform the role of economic provider for the family unit successfully (Singh 2006). Ideas of responsibility and sacrifice are intrinsically bound with this conception of gender. It is through the exertion and display of economic power that men establish their authority within the family and position as head of that unit within the larger community even when they are not physically present. Migration, in this way, is particularly relevant to constructions of masculinity as it is “a means of exerting agency at a distance” – through remittances, “a detachable form of masculine potency” (Osella and Osella 2000: 128). Although not physically present in the home environment, the man’s domestic dominance is maintained through the dependence cultivated by his remittances. The sending of money back home is also a form of familial and filial care. Although not present, he ensures that his family is financially comfortable. Herbert

(2008: 191) unpacks this equation between hegemonic masculinity and the provider role.

A primary manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, that is the “most honoured way of being a man” that renders other forms of masculinities inferior (Connell 1995), is to be the main provider and breadwinner of the family. Men are expected to attain wealth and financial resources and to exert power and authority within the spheres of the workplace and the family.

For most working-class Indian men in Dubai, the imperative to migrate is one that is primarily economic. Because avenues of social mobility and capital accumulation are unavailable or distant in the home-country context, international migration is seen as one of the most feasible ways for the working poor to negotiate their economically disadvantaged status. With greater industrialisation (especially in India’s south) and the resulting shift in types of available jobs, migration to Gulf states such as Dubai has emerged as an attractive economic option. Domestic or rural-urban migration, in contrast, does not provide the same level of cultural capital. In states with long-established migration routes to the Gulf (such as Kerala), the “Gulfan” is a highly desirable returnee identity. Although in purely economic terms it may be equally viable to work in India, labour migration to the Gulf still holds a greater cultural cachet in serving as a more arduous “rite of passage”, augmented by the fact that the Gulf, and Dubai in particular, is seen as a space of modernity and prosperity (as highlighted earlier). International migration, because of its more uncertain and arduous nature, is seen as a means through which a young man proves himself (Osella and Osella 2000). His masculinity is affirmed through a demonstrated ability to negotiate uncertainty and his value as a (prospective) husband is augmented. Migration, then, is prompted by a combination of domestic expectations of sojourn and larger structural changes such as in the labour landscape.

Whilst migration is often a risky adventure, it may also be prompted by traditional masculine roles of providing for the family with mobility emerging as a critical livelihood strategy in the face of radical neo-liberal restructuring in both the Global South and North. (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 856)

Rajan, an Indian construction worker, describes why he decided to migrate although he already had a job in India:

My children said to me, father, all my friends' dads have gone to Dubai to work. Why don't you go too?

I wanted them to be proud of me – that my father too is in Dubai – so I came.

Here, international migration is a type of risk-taking behaviour that demonstrates masculinity in ways that are comprehensible and visible. The reluctance to take risks in the new flexible economy of the neoliberal state is conceptualised as a sign of failure (Sennett 1998); likewise, the unwillingness to migrate is seen as an indication of weakness. Men from communities where large segments of the young male population migrate, such as in Kerala, face immense social and cultural pressure to depart. As apparent in the quote above, they migrate to fulfil expectations of family. “Anxiety about one’s capacity to provide is continual and deep-rooted; the modern man labours under a continual drive to earn, spend and provide” (Osella and Osella 2006a: 65). In these cases, “to stay put is to be left behind” (Sennett 1998: 87).

It is not merely the act of migration, but the type of work that many low-wage migrants undertake that acts as masculine display. “A man is one who does man’s work” (Osella and Osella 2006a: 39). Labour that is outside the domestic sphere and under often tough physical conditions is marked out as a form of superiority because it is something female migrants are unable to do, even though they too may migrate for work. “the male wage packet is held to be central, not simply because of its size, but because it is won in a masculine mode in confrontation with the ‘real’ world which is too tough for the woman” (Willis 1977: 150). Narratives of pride in being able to carry out such work are discussed in detail in following sections. We will also see how female migrants contest this notion that only men are able to survive in a foreign environment, through their own narratives of independence and self-reliance.

Most studies of gendered migration have continued to focus on mobilities from the Global South to Global North. Growing South-South migration, between less developed and developing countries, creates a very different dynamic, with migration often temporary and circular, and rarely resulting in permanent settlement. This has implications for subjectivities constructed in the host state. In light of their impermanent status, migrants are likely to maintain much stronger links with their home country, while simultaneously constructing selves that cohere with the demands and expectations of the destination environment. The rest of this chapter looks at the neglected role of the receiving context in forming migrant subjectivities among Indian low-wage male labour.<sup>3</sup>

## **Emasculation<sup>4</sup> of the working-class migrant**

One of the most significant effects of Dubai's destination environment is the impact of immigration policies and everyday discriminatory practices on low-wage migrants, which divest them of autonomy and respect. This section describes quotidian practices of marginalisation and discrimination that low-wage (male) migrants experience. It is through challenges to them that empowering neoliberal subjectivities develop.

### **Ethnic segmentation and ascribed subordination**

Migration to the Gulf enables the realisation of obligations expected of a male member of the family by providing for the economic needs of the unit. However, these mobilities also frequently entail embedding oneself in a system of hierarchies, where the low-wage migrant is typically at the bottom. The migrant, while enacting one aspect of the hegemonic male identity is forced to compromise on others; he gives up authority and control in the workplace for economic and status benefits. The emasculating effects of this compromise are explored here.

The scale of social status in the GCC states can be delineated according to ethnicity and gender (Kapiszewski 1999: 206–207). The embedded structural discriminations that constitute such a hierarchy were discussed extensively in the Chapter 3. Asian men<sup>5</sup> are at the bottom of that hierarchy, above only Asian women in status. For Asian men, their gender identity fluctuates from “more or less ‘male’ to more or less ‘female’”, depending on their type of job and circumstances, with middle-class status and a white-collar profession conferring higher levels of masculinity and prestige. Indian working-class men are thus doubly subordinated and stereotyped, without the compensating effects of a highly paid or well-regarded job. Their placement on the status scale configures how migrant men perform differently to employers, fellow migrants and family at home in ways that variously conform to, or challenge, their position within this hierarchy.

Larger-scale studies of globalisation often overlook such raced and gendered aspects of labour segmentation. However, analyses of how labour is gendered and raced are growing (McDowell, Batnitzky et al. 2007), as cities such as Dubai become more diverse and multicultural. With reference to ethnic clustering in labour markets in London, for example, Datta, McIlwaine et al. (2009: 867) describe how “discernable ethnic hierarchies overlay...national distinctions within each sector”. This mode of ethnicised layering is blatant in Dubai, and across much of the UAE, where jobs and salaries are highly racialised (as Chapter 3

demonstrated). Individual industries are also often dominated by one or a few specific nationalities. Building and construction, for instance, is dominated by South Asians. Within the division of construction, most low-skilled manual labour is undertaken by men from Andhra Pradesh. Administrative and more skilled positions, on the other hand, are often held by Keralites. Young Lebanese men are often employed in sales and marketing because they are perceived to be suited to the role because of their outgoing disposition and propensity to be persuasive.

The hotel and hospitality sector is where labour segmentation by ethnicity and nationality is perhaps most apparent (McDowell, Batnitzky et al. 2007: 2). Human-resource managers make strategic recruitment trips to countries such as India and the Philippines as those nationalities are favoured as cleaners, waiters and bellboys because of their perceived qualities of industriousness, courtesy and docility. Filipino men and women in particular, seen to have a pleasant, polite manner and a good command of spoken English, are perceived as suitable for front-desk positions or for work as waiters and butlers. Migrants themselves often internalise these stereotypes, with Filipinos often presenting themselves as more friendly and better communicators than other ethnic or national groups. White Europeans are typically favoured as higher-level managerial staff. While it is particularly prevalent in Dubai, this process also seems to be replicated in large hotel chains elsewhere (McDowell, Batnitzky et al. 2007: 9–12). The everyday reinforcement of these stereotypes through hiring and work practices reifies race and class hierarchies in the emirate.

Stereotypes of migrant nationalities can, however, be demeaning and serve to reinforce the already marginalised positions in which low-wage migrants find themselves. Hiring practices rely on perceived stereotypes, but these are then reinforced through the ascription of such predetermined characteristics to those groups. Indians in the UAE, for instance, are generally seen as a more docile and easily controllable by employers. This is one of the reasons they are favoured in low-level positions as office *peons* and construction labourers. They are seen as less likely to agitate for higher wages or demand political privileges and freedoms compared to other national groups. Migrants from regions in Europe, Egypt and Lebanon for example, with a more developed rights awareness, are perceived to be more “difficult” employees and thus less likely to be in positions where deference to authority and subservience are deemed important traits. (Waldinger and Lichter 2003) echo this:

As in other labour markets, the least desirable jobs often go to the most marginal groups, usually sorted along gender, national and ethnic lines. Crucially, the main requirement for jobs at the bottom of



the labour market, where workers have the least bargaining leverage, is tractability. Thus in filling secondary jobs, employers tend to prefer groups that they feel are best suited to subordination, then ascribe this character to members of the group itself.

Migrant groups who do not challenge authority are recognised as possessing docile qualities because of their race, rather than from being in a position with little or no negotiating power. The predominance of this form of ethnic segmentation is a result of not just stereotyping by employers but also of the role of ethnic networks in employment searches, as well as institutional discrimination (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009). In the booming construction sector in Dubai, for example, recruitment is often through established friendship and kinship networks, rather than formal agencies or advertisements. Migrants from the same region or even village are in this way recruited in a particular industry. In the context of the Gulf states, the *kafala* system of sponsorship, discussed in Chapter 3, is also an important reason for migrants' perceived docility. Indentured labourers keen to avoid deportation before their debts are paid do not contest their terms of employment. Employers routinely exploit this precarious situation through overwork, non-payment of wages and limiting rights.

Similarly, Piper reports on the changing preferences of employers in Asia in the demand for female migrants who are more docile, less expensive and having less of a "rights" consciousness than men. Docility, in this case too, is seen as racialised (2008: 1296). This is mirrored in the Gulf where there is a preference for Indonesian FDWs rather than domestic labour migrants from the Philippines. In addition to being seen as more demanding of their "rights" like days off and higher wages, Filipino domestics' knowledge of the English language is perceived as placing them in a better position to be politicised and gain support for collective action. Indonesians, on the other hand, are made out to be less antagonistic towards authority and more accepting of limits to mobility. Most Indonesian domestics are Muslims, and are thus likely to adopt more modest clothing or *abayas*<sup>6</sup> – read as a physical act of conformity and discipline (especially within the context of an Emirati household). Non-Muslim domestic workers often refuse to wear such dress, which is interpreted as a lack of docility and a resistance to employers' authority.

### **Feminisation**

Already marginalised migrants who internalise ascribed qualities of docility and subservience have additionally to negotiate feeling

disrespected and undervalued in their jobs and outside the workplace. This is especially emasculating for the South Asian male migrant who understands power and authority as signifiers of masculinity. This is exacerbated in the context of a restructuring economic climate, where jobs perceived as traditionally masculine are replaced by those requiring “softer” skills associated with feminised qualities.

Scholars of migration describe how the movement to a more service-industry-oriented economy in many receiving countries has meant that men who migrate for work now have to take on more feminised duties. Dubai, which is an acute example of the shift to the industries of tourism and hospitality, now draws more men who work as waiters, cooks, cleaners and butlers than it did in the earlier years of large-scale migration, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This has meant that “migrant men have to learn new feminised skills” of cleaning, cooking, washing and so on and adapt to changing demands of the economy (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 857). When they are in front-line positions in the service industry, their roles also involve adopting a position of deference to the customer. Even low-wage migrant men who do manual labour jobs take on traditionally female duties of cooking and washing as part of their daily routines in the adopted context – activities most would not themselves undertake in their home countries, where the division of labour is stark. Male migrants recount that having to learn and employ such feminised, domestic skills and embody deferential attitudes was a difficult part of adjusting to altered circumstances in the migrant context.

There is, however, a feminisation even in male-dominated manual jobs, such as in building and construction. This may not have to do with the actual duties essential to the job, which often require the display of masculine characteristics such as physical strength and endurance under difficult conditions. Emasculation is engendered through the attitude of deference that it is necessary to display towards superiors. The construction labourer is expected to obey orders unquestioningly, place himself in dangerous physical situations, give up his passport and often work without receiving a salary for months. He is also told when and how often he can return to his home country to see his family. This has to be borne without recourse or complaint; the average migrant is in a precarious situation where he can be fired and deported at any time, with another willing labourer ready to take his place.

No matter what he says – I have to do! Otherwise he will just find someone else to do my job. When we complain about our leaking roof, or that the toilets don’t work, or that the air-conditioner is

not working, he says that there are so many people waiting in line, willing to work and live with such conditions. So, what can we do? We just endure it.

This inability to challenge authority when unfairly treated and the non-questioning of orders are aspects of their lives that migrant men characterise as feminising and emasculating. Placed in positions where he is stripped of power and autonomy, the Indian male migrant is limited in being able to perform or assert any form of hegemonic masculinity. As Vengadesan, a Tamil construction labourer said with a shrug of his shoulders when asked what he would do to rectify the situation of his non-payment of wages, "The police don't do anything. What can we do?" Unquestioning acceptance and emasculation are not just qualities expected by employers, then, but are facilitated by the state's disciplinary authorities through their inaction. Strikes in recent years by unpaid construction labourers can then be seen not just as an assertion of rights, but also of masculine identity.

Inhabiting the bottom of a social hierarchy based on racial difference is a highly emasculating experience. Many Tamil or Indian men, for example, are accustomed to working in racially homogeneous environments where the entire workforce is Tamil or Indian, and therefore where little racialised discrimination exists (although caste-based stratification is still prevalent). But once in Dubai, they find they are at the bottom of the racial ladder, often because they take on the most menial and undesirable jobs. This institutionalised racism generates a sense of inferiority and loss of self-worth. Discriminations, in such situations, take on very specific forms. Tamil labourers, for instance, reported that they felt disadvantaged because they could not speak or understand Hindi,<sup>7</sup> the most common language of communication on the construction site. In situations where they had to work together with men from other parts of India, their national identity was frequently called into question because of their inability to communicate in India's national language. "Are you really Indian? Then why can't you speak Hindi?" Tamils were often embarrassed through this belittling and bullying and unable to carry out their work effectively because of their inability to communicate with their co-workers. The workplace in these instances is a microcosm where structural discriminations in Dubai's labour system play out, a space where negotiations of power take place – between supervisors and workers and between labourers of different nationalities and ethnicities. In these everyday encounters, it is often the men who are the lowest paid with the least desirable jobs who are respected the

least. Respect is also more broadly lacking in many social interactions in the workplace of low-wage migrants – both between employers and migrants and between co-workers.

Pattison's research with members of the working poor in Manchester, in north-west England, is instructive here. He emphasises the significant role of respect and dignity, asserting that this is often overlooked and that issues such as standard of living or purchasing power are given more importance in studying the lives of the working poor.<sup>8</sup> However, just as in this research, respect emerged as an important measure of self-worth and identity, although migrants could not “eat respect, shelter under respect or spend respect” (2008: 103). This lack of respect experienced by most low-wage migrants in the workplace as well as more generally in Emirati society results in them feeling undervalued and unappreciated as workers as well as members of the society in which they live and labour. This sentiment is reinforced by practices of residential segregation that render them invisible to many sectors of the population,<sup>9</sup> and created through everyday regimented and routinised rhythms, as the following section shows.

### “Machine life”

It is a machine life – we got to work in the morning, come back in the evening to the room, we eat, sleep, get up and go to work again in the morning, come home, eat, sleep, go to work again. There is nothing else.

The English spinner slave has no enjoyment of the open atmosphere and breezes of heaven. Locked up in factories eight stories high, he has no relaxation till the ponderous engine stops, and then he goes home to get refreshed for the next day; no time for sweet association with his family; they are all alike fatigued and exhausted. This is no over-drawn picture: it is literally true. (Thompson 1965: 201)

The first quotation, from an Indian labourer, was echoed countless times by other low-wage migrants in Dubai. The second is an observation made about the English working class of the 1830s. Although set 170 years apart, the sentiment is strikingly similar. It speaks of a gruelling daily life rhythm that is structured solely around work. It is also a rhythm that is imposed on the worker, conceiving of him in a one-dimensional fashion – singularly as a productive unit, with little consideration for his social or emotional needs.<sup>10</sup> Routine and repetitive work such as that performed by many low-waged migrants, in this way still exists within a

largely post-Fordist, neoliberal economy (Sennett 1998; Vogl 2004: 38). Such everyday realities of low-wage work sit outside projections of a modern Dubai, which privileges the white-collar flexible economy of the middle class.

The metaphor of a machine here is extremely telling in terms of how labour migrants envisage their own identities and lives in the emirate. The everyday is repetitive, monotonous and dehumanising. It is not however, merely the mechanised routine of life in Dubai with which migrants express discontentment, but the fact that there is no time or self outside of those configurations. The routine performance of tasks at work is seen as necessary to accumulate wealth. However, it is application of this strict routine to all aspects of migrant life that is causes dissatisfaction. Low-wage migrants are conceived of one-dimensionally by the state and employers – only as workers and not as complex social individuals with needs and desires beyond the accumulation of capital. This reduction to a productive “machine” is one that also denies the need for an intrinsic respect as a “full human being” (Sennett 2003: 13).

We are working daily! There is no such thing as leave!

When the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi died we had a day off. And just like that, when the Sheikh of Dubai died, we also had a day off. That’s all! That’s when we hired a van and travelled around sightseeing – around Al Ain and all that.

If we take a day off, they will cut our wages. So because of that we have no desire to go anywhere. Room-shop, room-shop. That’s all.

The Indian barber quoted above does not even have a weekly day of rest. This is a regular mode of labour among many low-wage migrants in Dubai, including taxi drivers, who work continuously and are only given a couple of months off once every two years, when they return to their home countries to see their families. The migrant worker’s needs for adequate rest, leisure and family relationships are curtailed by employers who are backed by a state that is preoccupied only with extracting productive capacity. The dehumanising aspect of such work is what Marx identifies as one of the forms of alienation. It:

mutilates the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil. (Marx 1906 [1867]: 708)

Through the “mechanisation” of the human body, any potential pleasure available through work is also destroyed. Thompson extends this mode of alienation to the dehumanising treatment by supervisors who, especially in work places such as construction sites, have extraordinary jurisdiction over workers’ bodies.

Managerial or supervisory functions demand the repression of all attributes except those which further the expropriation of the maximum surplus value from labour. This is the political economy which Marx anatomised in *Das Kapital*. The worker has become an “instrument”, or an entry among other items of cost. (Thompson 1965: 203)

Marx’s conceptualisation of the worker as instrument and their own descriptions of themselves as “machines” effectively encapsulate the ways in which workers’ bodily mobilities are organised. Emasculation, here, takes place through an infantilisation of the low-wage labourer, who is stripped of control of his daily rhythms. The employer or supervisor takes on a paternalistic role in dictating when he should eat, rest and work. In the construction industry, these functions are enforced on the work site as well as in labour camps – areas between which the majority of workers are shuttled back and forth daily.

The conformity to such a rigid routine is paralleled in Ong’s seminal study of Malaysian female factory workers. Tracing how they were subject to two major changes when they became integrated into factory work, she describes, first, a shift from a flexible work schedule to the hierarchical structure of industrial production and, second, the transition from autonomy in the work process to the usually oppressive compulsion of labour discipline (Ong 1987: 151). For many migrant men, these shifts are apparent in the move from India to Dubai. Most migrate to the Gulf in their youth – in their teens or early twenties – and for the first time are employed under formal work arrangements. Separation from family and institutionalised life in the labour camp is also typically a new experience for first-time international migrants. The structuring of the day according to the clock, for example, where work hours, meal times and rest breaks are limited and monitored in terms of minutes a day, is a level of structured temporality that many migrants initially encounter only when they get to Dubai. The workday is structured by when the buses that shuttle workers from the camps to the worksite arrive and when they return to the worksite at the end of the day to drop them back at their labour camp dormitories. In between, they are given stipulated breaks for meals

of half-an-hour or 45 minutes. In this way, low-wage migrants' mobilities and management of time is not their own but pre-ordained. This is indicative of an imposed discipline, sense of responsibility and enforced work ethic that they are made to adopt. In having their autonomy taken away, migrants are disciplined to regulate themselves in particular ways. One of the key effects of this imposed self-regulation is the creation of "docile bodies" (Foucault 1975). The docility of thousands of young male bodies is perceived as especially important.

Low-wage South Asian migrant men are uniformly characterised as bachelors by the state, public and the media, although many might have a wife and children left behind in their home country. This treatment refers to their single status as migrants – as they are prohibited from bringing wives and family as dependents on their visas. These men are portrayed in media reports and in general public discourse as dangerous Others who need to be policed and monitored, as a threat to social order and female honour (White 2009). So-called sexual crimes of expatriate men are highlighted almost daily in newspapers in the UAE. This stereotype in part validates the treatment of them as "boys" – making them wear identical uniforms, housing them in dormitories and denying them access to spaces of leisure or entertainment on their limited days off.<sup>11</sup> Low-wage migrants who work as gardeners, cleaners, cooks and drivers in households are called "houseboys", which is indicative again of the paternal relationship between employer and migrant, but also of the demeaning way in which they are treated. It is thus not just their physicality, but sexuality that is controlled. The assumption that the low-wage male migrant is unable to control his sexuality justifies his infantilised treatment as a "boy". The consequences of such control within the confines of the camp and construction site will be explored further in Chapter 5. Here it is sufficient to note that these restrictions and controls serve again to construct the low-wage labourer only as a worker – purely as a productive agent. He is thus conceived of not as a social being but as only having the economic need to accumulate capital. His physical, emotional and sexual needs are denied through this disciplining of the body and its treatment as a machine.

### **The performance and development of a neoliberal masculinity**

I've made it! I've broken out of the coop! (Adiga 2008: 320)

Returning to Adiga's text, with which this chapter began, we can feel in the quotation above the elation of the narrator at having overcome

the difficult hurdles of structural discrimination and a disadvantaged background to achieve a level of social mobility and economic success in moving to the city. Low-wage migrants, through migration to the Gulf, also see themselves as attempting to break out of the cycles that trap them within their socio-economic positions. This, however, as we saw in the previous sections, entails being subjected to everyday practices of emasculation, infantilisation and subordination. Here, I show that in reclaiming masculinity and a sense of self-respect, low-wage migrants articulate a sense of positive change and achievement that is initiated by the migrant experience. Through their narratives to researchers, media, family and each other, they perform these newly empowered subjectivities.<sup>12</sup> Departing from South-South migration studies of those left behind, this chapter addresses gendered aspects of migrants' subjective self-constructions in the receiving context, adding to the extensive literature on narratives of success on their return home (Osella and Osella 2000; Osella and Gardner 2004; Osella and Osella 2006b).

The following sections also demonstrate how the process of migration is a highly gendered one and central to men's personal development as much as that of women (Piper 2008: 1290). While migrant men construct certain narratives around ideas of self-worth and hard work, women are more likely to emphasise notions of self-sufficiency and (financial) independence. For men, the act of migration typically cements ties to the family – through an emphasis on the role of primary male provider. For women, the physical distance and economic autonomy enabled by labour migration conversely means that they are less subject to being governed by the family. In both cases, the economic capacity of the migrant to generate remittances means attaining a highly valued level of (self-) respect and dignity.

### **Narrating masculinity<sup>13</sup>**

Narratives of low-wage migrant men in Dubai mark them as reflexive individuals, aware of their complicity with and resistance to forces that constitute their individual subjectivities. The trope of victim, for example, was a common one for low-wage migrants who often spoke of themselves as victims of exploitation by agents and uncaring states, especially when speaking of their demands for higher wages or expressing dissatisfaction with working conditions: "We haven't been paid for 3 months! But we can't go to the police – they won't do anything. Why? Because he's a local! We can't do anything! And all the time, the interest on my loan is climbing higher and higher! I am just paying off the interest on it now – not even the main amount". While an immediate and highly



legitimate characterisation of their lives, it was not, however, the only aspect that was foregrounded.

In speaking about personal lives, their narratives were often infused with a feeling of quiet pride, especially for those who had paid off large debts, established themselves in a good position at work or who had been apart from family for many years. Herbert explains how these conversations are important sites where meaning around individual identity is created; “in the men’s interviews, the act of retelling their life stories gave them the opportunity to recoup a masculine identity by emphasizing their agency, pioneering spirit and constructing their role as the guardian of tradition or the heroic male” (2008: 189). Watkins (2003: 64) also documents Pakistani Gulf migrants as emphasising periods of hardship in their narratives, as well as the theme of selflessness. This is a way for them to negotiate their dependencies on Arab employers while maintaining themselves as “‘worthy’ individuals”. In this same vein, recent research (Osella and Osella 2000; McKay 2007) “highlights attempts by men to present themselves as ‘successful’ migrants, often performing a hyper-masculinity that portrays their positions as victors over adversity and abundant providers” (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 856). Similarly, in Dubai, this was a recurrent theme in men’s narratives. Articulations of victory and success ranged from descriptions of how a choice position was attained through hard work and smart negotiations to stories of battling and overcoming alcoholism and suicidal depression. Emphasised in these narratives are characteristics of a neoliberal individual – self-invention and the compulsion to maximise opportunity.

Abraham was in his fifties and had been working in the UAE since he came to the Gulf as a young man from Tamil Nadu, more than 20 years before. He talked about how he did not know much about Dubai when he first came to the emirate in 1989, on a “visiting” visa obtained through his sister’s husband. “After they brought me here, they didn’t help me at all. I struggled for a year and a half without a job. I did a coolie work on daily wages. It is difficult – sometimes you get work, sometimes you don’t. And finally now I’m in a good position in Al Mullah (the name of the company he works for)”. His story, quietly self-confident, tells of how it was only through independent hard work over many years that he was now in a junior administrative position in a large company.

Twenty-something Chathura works behind the counter at the Starbucks café in the Greens, a middle-class residential community flanked by tower blocks where executives of Emaar and other large companies are housed. Chathura was only a teenager when his father passed away and he spoke of his experiences of extreme poverty as a child. For him,

work – and the money accumulated through that work – was a means of escaping the poverty in which he had grown up. His narratives of transnational social mobility were reflexive in acknowledging his individual journey of betterment and self-improvement from his youth to early adulthood. He spoke, for example, of his delinquency and reluctance to go to school and his later realisation that the knowledge and mastery of a foreign language would prove useful.

Because we didn't want to learn because it wasn't interesting. ... I went to the class, but I didn't want to learn ... because I don't want to learn English, because it's boring. But when I came to work, I know, English is main thing.

He went on to describe the way he learned the language, drawing attention to the entrepreneurial way in which he did so on the job, asking his friends for help.

First time, you know some of the ones (words), I cannot pronounce. What I did, I asked my friends, "how to pronounce this, what is the meaning of this word?" I learnt, it's like that. First time is very hard ya? Then it's fine. Now also if I don't know what is the word, then I can ask my friend ... The thing is Sri Lankans can learn very well, very fast. If they heard some, one thing, (and here he snaps his fingers) they will catch very fast. You know for me also, since I came Dubai, almost one and a half months and one year ... almost 15 months. When I came Dubai, I can't speak like this, I'm afraid for customers ya ... then.

He lets the sentence trail off and smiles, not needing to say what is clearly apparent – that he has reached a level of spoken proficiency where he no longer feels embarrassed speaking to the real-estate and business executives who frequent the café where he works. The self-respect achieved through either becoming proficient in a language or quickly picking up skills on the job were regular tropes highlighted by migrant informants. Characterisations of one's own nationality or ethnic group as being superior workers, faster learners or more industrious were also common threads in discourses of individual success. This seems to mimic, but also to counter in important ways, the (previously mentioned) ethnic stereotyping by employers.

Vengadesan, a casual labourer in the construction trade, similarly conveyed a quiet pride in now being able to communicate with his

colleagues in Hindi, a language he had no knowledge of when he arrived in Dubai. This learning to speak Hindi, for Vengadesan, was not just learning a linguistic skill, but also a way to perform and assert his identity as an Indian on the worksite. The learning of this language also enabled him to communicate with co-workers and supervisors more effectively. For Vengadesan, an irregular migrant who usually worked on a project basis and often on daily rates, being able to converse in Hindi also meant increased chances of landing a job. He was reclaiming a sense of masculinity embodied in the productive worker and provider, which had been compromised by the belittling by his peers and his inability to communicate effectively on the worksite.

These various narratives all involve a shared sense of journey, development or growth – from a state where the migrant was either incapable, lazy or naive to one where he is more mature, aware, reflexive and has taken steps to improve himself. This sense of internal development was important to migrants' sense of self-esteem and gave the process of migration and separation from family back home more meaning than merely in terms of capital accumulated or remitted. It became a space where new subjectivities were developed. In these articulations, the worksite or place of labour became a space of production of these accomplishments. Datta, McIlwaine et al.'s research had similar findings, where "the building site itself emerged as an important space of male camaraderie, with respondents referring proudly to the fact that they had learnt to swear in many languages for example" (2009: 865). Migrants described the construction site, coffee shop or office, not just as a space for friendships to develop and new skills to be learned, but also one where identity and inter-cultural interaction were acutely performed. Within that context, the ability to work effectively with people of different nationalities who spoke different languages was expressed as a significant achievement.

Expressions of pride in their work, ingenuity, experience and ability to be creative in carrying out jobs were attributes that Filipino seamen also espoused to counter state and employers' representations of them as emasculated, subservient and pliable (McKay 2007: 627). In Dubai, stereotypes of Indian low-wage migrants as docile and unintelligent were regularly challenged, most often by migrants' narratives of being able to quickly learn new skills on the job and the ability to adapt rapidly to difficult work conditions and circumstances. In addition to challenging the reductive ways in which they are conceptualised, low-wage migrants also intentionally "played up" to the stereotypes employers held of them. Informants often spoke of "performing" or "acting" the

part of the subservient and obedient employee, and in most conversations with low-wage migrants, this was implied as a necessary survival tactic. “No, of course I don’t say this [complaints about employers] in front of them. I just shut up and go about my work. What good would it do me if I picked a fight with them?” There was an understanding that migrants had to constantly manage employers or superiors and perform the “good”, model migrant for fear of deportation or other forms of punishment. Domestic workers used these techniques more frequently in order to avoid confrontation and maintain a cordial work environment. Situated in the private domain of the home, their behaviour was more subject to surveillance. This duplicity by both male and female migrants also allowed for the retention of their sense of self-esteem while outwardly embodying the docile and pliable “good” migrant.

Low-wage migrants challenged other stereotypes of themselves, for example as sexual predators, through foregrounding alternative roles – especially emphasising those in the sphere of the family. Migrant men often highlighted in their narratives their roles as fathers, sons and workers – rather than as sexually active individuals – in order to combat popular representations of them as sexually predatory and dangerous. Telling stories of coming to Dubai because it was the wish of their children or parents were common ways in which family figured in these narratives. Migration, in these articulations was undertaken because of the family back home dependent on their remittances, rather than a personal “rite of passage” as a young man wanting to experience adventure.

### **The development of a neoliberal work ethic**

In addition to narratives displaying masculinity and challenging employers’ reductive constructions, both employers and workers repeatedly articulated the development of a work ethic formulated through the process of undertaking paid labour in Dubai. This was often employed as a rationalising tactic for their choice to work in the emirate and endure the difficulties of everyday life in the city-state. Datta, McIlwaine et al. report that this is also how fathers justify sending their sons abroad and enforcing a separation from the family, as a means to engender a sense of responsibility and work ethic in their offspring (2009: 862). This conceptualisation also resonates with the Osellas’ (2006b) discussion of Gulf migration as a “rite of passage” for young Indian men. In all of these conceptualisations, migration for labour is articulated not merely as a means to make money, but also valued for the improved work ethic or shaping of the individual.

A “rite of passage” implies that the individual inhabits a different state before and after the “ritual” or, as in this case, journey abroad. The previous section’s discussion of narratives of success introduced the idea of internal development brought on by the process of migration, which migrants incorporated in their stories. A significant aspect of this growth was also articulated as the development of a work ethic. This section describes the formation of this ethic and demonstrates that it is integral in the establishment of a sustained self-respect – one that is coherent with neoliberal notions of the “modern man”.

Work is now seen as the primary way in which people identify and situate themselves in the world, as it becomes the primary mode of social organisation (Casey 1995: 25). In Dubai, as earlier chapters have argued, work largely determines cultural identities and shapes class and race-based hierarchies. Work, in the contemporary world, also functions as an important way in which people become known to others; it is one of the most significant ways in which they engage with the wider community. “Labour power is an important pivot of all this because it is the main mode of *active* connection with the world: the way *par excellence* of articulating the innermost self with external reality. It is in fact the dialectic of the self to the self through the concrete world” (Willis 1977: 2).<sup>14</sup>

No, I never worked this hard in India. I have never worked this hard before.

I’ve seen a lot of (internal) change here. In India I was making more money than I do here. But I was drinking a lot with my friends and like that wasted it all. After coming here, I’ve changed.

Low-wage migrant men in particular expressed the formation of a changed attitude towards work and self-governance that they had developed since working in Dubai. A sense of discipline, for example in turning up for work at the stipulated time and enduring the work day (as discussed earlier in this chapter), were expressed as part of this learned ethic. Rather than speaking about discipline as enforced on their bodies, however, migrants conceived of it as something actively learned through the regulation and *doing* of work, and willingly internalised. Work here is seen as a pedagogical site where discursive as well as the learning of hard skills takes place. Casey (1995: 74) terms this the “hidden curriculum” of work, where everyday work contexts contribute to the “self-constituent” process in latent ways.

This latent learning was apparent for example, in the ways in which time became reconfigured. Many migrants spoke of the concept of time in India as more elastic. Everyday mobilities were not as routinely monitored or productivity as closely enforced. In India, the costs of not turning up for work or being an unproductive worker were far lower, and more manageable. In Dubai, there isn't even that choice.

There, if we don't turn up for work, we just don't get paid. But here, you have to work, or you won't be able to repay your loan and you will be sent back.

Discipline is enforced through both the threat of deportation, as well as the imperative to repay accumulated debt. The enforced socialisation into a time-based routine, then, functions as another mechanism by which migrant workers are controlled. This enforced discipline and the upholding of hierarchical power, while dehumanising, is also internalised, interpreted and narrated in ways that reveal a self-reflexivity that goes beyond articulations of victimisation. Control is not resisted, but internalised. It is not just the rhythms of work that necessitate discipline, but an inner compulsion to do so develops, too. This distinction between a passive submission to a set of routines and schedules and a self-regulated, voluntary practice is highly significant. This moral self-discipline is what Weber describes as capitalist work ethic (Sennett 1998: 99). Changes in subjectivity that Weber identified as taking place with the newly industrialised factory worker are similarly evident in low-wage migrants' articulations in contemporary Dubai.

The principles of discipline and self-regulation that were learned at work become a part of everyday governmentalities in the creation of "docile bodies". "The worker internalised the social discipline required of capitalist production as self-regulation as the ideal self. The everyday rules and forms of social interaction which occur in production are abstracted and reified as moral values to be extended into all other spheres of social and private life" (Casey 1995: 76–77). From a neo-Foucauldian perspective, this form of self-management is part of the constitution of a neoliberalised selfhood. If not for limited and exclusionary constructions of the low-wage migrant by the emirati state, however, such alternative subject positions would not hold such agency. The formation of a self-constructed neoliberal subjectivity can thus be seen as an act of reclaiming recognition and self-respect within the context of disempowering influences of the state.

Axel Honneth conceptualises this need for recognition within a society where the “hierarchy of values... robs the subject in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own abilities”. He goes on to explain how this results in a loss of self-respect: “the experience of this social devaluation typically brings with it a loss of personal self esteem, of the opportunity to regard themselves as beings whose traits and abilities are esteemed” (1995: 134). For the low-wage migrant in Dubai who is at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the self-discipline, skills and achievements realised through work are the most important ways in which a sense of value, respect and recognition is regained.

Sennett dissects this link between work and respect, between labour and judgements of worth. This, he asserts, is central to Weber’s thesis of the Protestant ethic. It interrogates the relationship between the value of hard work and one’s own self-respect as an adult citizen as coming about with the advent of modern capitalism. There are, thus, particular characteristics of modern capitalism that encourage the formation of such an ethic in relation to work.

Weber’s work ethic is about man or woman “proving” himself or herself through work; what the individual is proving is his or her basic worth; to Weber, the proofs offered are petty scrimpings and savings, the denial to oneself of pleasures, exercises of self-control – a kind of moral fitness training through work. (Sennett 2003: 58)

In addition to the ability to sustain the level of discipline required to live and work in Dubai, the exercise of self-control in spending earnings was similarly expressed as a source of pride. Carefully calculating their expenses for food, cooking their own food rather than eating out at restaurants, limiting leisure pursuits such as the patronage of sex workers to only special occasions or infrequently and staying within the camp confines on their days off were all strategies migrants employed to save money. These involve a Weberian refraining from participating in desirable activities and denying themselves indulgences in order to remit money back to their families and discharge their loans. These deprivations were perceived and articulated as completely essential for regular remittances from the very small salaries that low-wage migrants typically earned. Watkins’ reports similar behaviour from Pakistani migrants, whose consumption ethics in the Gulf were diametrically opposed to that in their home communities. “In this world of work there was a different kind of sociality where consumption was kept to a minimum and men’s lives were extremely frugal, for their real attention

was focused on their homes" (2003: 66). The practice of self-deprivation was also conceived as a means to assert autonomy and free choice. This is important to conceptualisations of neoliberal subjectivity – especially within a space where most other aspects of life are controlled and regulated. Jairaj, a 34-year old Indian who worked in the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Bur Dubai, spoke about how his habits had changed with migration.

I used to work overtime in the bar. I was so frugal. I never used to spend any of my money. I thought this was the only way I could save enough money to get all my sisters married. Till today I won't buy a single coffee, tea or soft drink. I only drink plain water.

The practice of Weberian self-deprivation however, creates dissonance and conflict when within the space of consumption that Dubai epitomises.<sup>15</sup> This struggle plays out in the lives of low-wage migrants – the irony of being so deeply embedded in a space of consumption, but not being able to fulfil desires that such a place actively engenders.<sup>16</sup> Low-wage migrants rationalise this – limiting themselves to necessities while in Dubai, but displaying consumption to home communities in India through remittances and gifts, as highlighted in Chapter 2. It is highly significant that it is the neoliberal space and rationalisation of life in Dubai that plays a large part in the "production" of this ethic. Being physically and discursively situated within this social space was starkly different to the experiences and worldviews accessible to low-wage migrants in their home country. In fact, even in a rapidly modernising India, the adoption of a disciplined and highly rationalised mode of self-governance is limited to sections of the population who have more direct access and links to the globalised international economy through work.

Ong (2007) for example, argues that only a minority of the Indian population, such as IT workers from Bangalore, are encouraged or permitted to develop such neoliberal identity formations. Similarly, Scrase in his work on "middle-class" Indians describes an analogous articulation of a work ethic that pervades non-work aspects of life and which is linked to changing economic conditions in India:

the notions of efficiency, privatization and deregulation (the buzz words of the neo-liberally *inspired* workplace) were rapidly gaining a particular currency as the central motifs of the everyday language and practice of workers. ... was often indicative of new sets of expectations. Obviously, the discourses, and their "ways of being", have



developed a life of their own such that they have become significantly responsible for developing new understandings of how individuals should govern themselves. (Scrase 2006: 5)

This development of a particular work ethic by the low-wage migrant population in Dubai suggests that the economic and political affiliations that do not exist in India for such neoliberal subjectivities to develop among the working class are present and accessible to migrants in Dubai. This ethic of self-governance is very much one that is derived from affects around work and the workplace. In Dubai, where low-wage migrants' everyday lives revolve almost completely around work, the identification with such affect and discourse is pervasive.

The learning of a strong work ethic and the discipline of the body was a source of pride for many low-wage migrants, of both genders. This sense of self-worth can be seen as one that is brought into especially stark relief in the context of Dubai, and against the juxtaposition of an unproductive and undisciplined Other. Because of its functioning as a welfare state, and the entrenched *kafala* system of sponsorship (considered in Chapter 3), citizens are privileged with benefits such as access to free education, healthcare and housing. It is "the distribution of revenue by the state, and consumerism" rather than production or work that are the driving forces for indigenous populations in the Gulf (Kapiszewski 1999: 17). In addition, many derive an income exclusively from acting as sponsors (*kafeels*) or silent partners in businesses. Emirati citizens are thus often only "rentiers", rather than productive agents in society. They passively receive a share of productive profits without having to engage in productive behaviour. It is this lack of a "productive outlook in behaviour" (Beblawi 1987: 50) that is often viewed with derision by migrants. Perceived as lazy because they live off the capital incurred through "rent" rather than through an earned income, Emiratis are viewed as not possessing the same desirable qualities of work ethic or discipline that migrants see themselves as embodying.

Ask them to do what we do! They would never be able to do it! They wake up late, have breakfast, smoke sheesha, eat lunch, sleep and then eat again in the evening. They won't do anything for themselves. And every five minutes – a cup of tea. That's their life!

This hostility and resentment towards Emirati *kafeels* can be seen in the context of a long and deep-rooted tradition of hostility and mistrust against rent and rentiers, seen as diametrically opposed to the "capitalist

instinct for work salvation” (Beblawi 1987: 50). It is not the legal status of the rentier but his social function as unproductive agent that arouses contempt. The migrant placing himself or herself in opposition to the unproductive Emirati is reinforced in feeling self-worth and respect through his or her productive capabilities and disciplined work ethic. It is however ironic that the very same capitalist work ethic that gives the migrant self-respect is one that is used to discipline and marginalise him. The Emirati state’s adoption of a rationalist governance mechanism creates a situation where low-wage migrants in particular are treated as purely economic agents and simultaneously denied having social, legal, emotional and physical needs.

Migrants’ expressions of entrepreneurialism in learning new skills and languages, self-reliance and self-discipline, however, cannot be explained merely as consequences of socio-economic and cultural changes that processes of migration bring about. These narratives are themselves a neoliberal discourse that *produces* particular types of individuals through their articulation and enactment. In this way, the “entrepreneurial Self”, as subject, is a tool of governance, not just of individual subjectivities, but through the individual, of the larger state, economy and civil society (Horschelmann 2008: 143). This chapter thus furthers the narrative of the book – in demonstrating how neoliberalism “remakes subjectivities” of the low-wage migrant – how it plays out in individual conceptions of self. In the case of Dubai, there is significant divergence between neoliberal state articulations, governance practices and individual governmentalities. The ways in which migrants practise individual governance are, as we have seen, indicative of their agency, and opposed to state attempts to marginalise and assert control. They conceive of themselves as autonomous, free and active subjects capable of self-realisation, despite state articulations of them as purely productive individuals. The rhetoric of neoliberalism takes various forms, denying low-wage migrants as complex social beings while simultaneously providing a means to articulate self-respect and perform empowered selves.

### **The disciplining affect of shame**

In the articulations of the work ethic that labourers adopt in the migrant space discussed above, the actual jobs undertaken are secondary to the learning of the ethic of self-governance. It is thus not specific skills needed to do the work, but the attitude towards labour that is significant. Although the low-wage migrant is typically engaged in menial or low-skilled jobs, he elicits pride and maintains

a sense of self-respect in carrying out his duties, as this chapter has shown. The meaning of doing such work comes from the effort put in as well as the sacrifice undertaken in carrying it out – specifically migration and separation from the family – than from its intrinsic value or contribution. Therefore, the type of work performed can have very different meanings when not in the migrant context. “The meaning of work changes according to who sees one doing it, so that doing work considered degrading near home may be more problematic than doing the same work away from home” (Rogaly 2008: 1438). It is common for family members, for example, to conceal the truth about what job their migrant member is doing in Dubai from the rest of the community. The social mobility and cultural capital that a family attains through having a migrant member in the Gulf can be compromised if it is known that the relative is engaged in an extremely low-status job such as working as a toilet cleaner or sex worker. In other cases, the migrant himself or herself conceals the nature of work from his or her family back home. The often-told story of the car washer, for instance, who takes a photo in his best clothes, standing next to his boss’s car and sends that picture home as an indication of his life in Dubai is one that reflects the nature of the duplicity involved in many low-wage migrants’ relationships with their family back home. The Osellas describe this maintenance of one’s prestige as enabled by “splitting the moment and site of wealth accumulation from its moment of consumption” (2000: 121).

The shame of being found to be working in a menial and low-status job by family at home is only matched by the fear of deportation. “More often than not, men described the fear and shame that was part and parcel of day-to-day life as ‘an illegal’ – a life characterised by the constant threat of arrest and deportation” (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 865). Irregular migrants without labour cards can be stopped by police authorities at any time on the street, or in their rented accommodation, and deported. In Dubai, however, it is not just irregular migrants who are fearful. Low-wage migrants are acutely aware of their tenuous position and how they can potentially be deported by the state at any time without recourse to appeal. Employers who threaten to cancel workers’ visas if they do not comply with demands often wield this as a tool to elicit submission. The fear of deportation exists across the range of migrant occupations, but to varying degrees. It is partially this fear that governs migrants’ behaviour, ensures compliance and produces a disciplined work ethic. The fear of bringing shame, on oneself and family emerges as a powerful technology of discipline.

Many families have little idea what the reality of day-to-day life is like for their low-wage migrant family member in Dubai. An Indian deliveryman who had lived and worked in Dubai for 20 years had never brought his family to the emirate for a holiday. An important consideration for most low-wage migrants in bringing their families even for a short stay is the cost of multiple airfares (wife, children, parents) and arranging suitable temporary accommodation. Given that most of them live in “bachelors’ quarters”, it would be unfeasible for their family to stay in a room shared with six to twelve other men. Renting additional accommodation is also extremely expensive. In this sense, the life of the migrant in the home and destination countries is kept entirely separate, although transnational communication through phone calls, texts, remittances and gossip is frequent.

Conversely, relatives back home may be very aware of how hard migrants work under difficult conditions and might not completely believe their inflated descriptions of their lives in Dubai. However, migrants depict most family as happy to go along with the story as long as they continue to receive regular remittances. “What would they do even if they knew? They would just worry and what good would that do? Spare them the worry”. These articulations can also be understood as part of the performance of a mode of masculinity, where sympathy from family is seen as unnecessary and an indication of weakness. “They don’t want to know about our lives here. They don’t care as long as we keep sending money. If money doesn’t arrive for a few months, they will call and ask, what’s happened? Why haven’t you sent the money?” “Send me money to spend, send me, he keeps saying and bothering me”. Most low-wage migrants speak of being acutely aware of this view of them as a “cash cow”. However, this is seen as part of their duties as provider.<sup>17</sup> The control of remittances is also a way in which male migrants assert authority in the family sphere without being physically present (Osella and Osella 2006a: 83). Although they do not regularly discuss details or share the difficulties of their everyday lives in Dubai, family back at home play an important part in sustaining a strong work ethic and attitudes of frugality that shape a neoliberal subjectivity.

Shame and honour have been understood as ideals and norms of behaviour that govern family status (Velayutham and Wise 2005). In most conceptualisations, responsibility for family honour is seen as confined to women, and men’s ability to control women and their conduct as a sign of hegemonic masculinity (Herbert 2008: 194). In the case of Esther, the Ethiopian FDW introduced in Chapter 3, who became pregnant while in Dubai but could not claim paternity for her

son, bringing shame on the family was an obstacle that she had to negotiate prior to her return. Female members in the home country cannot be directly monitored or controlled. Migrant men then place greater emphasis on alternate ideas of family honour, where they can assert some influence. This is most easily exhibited in financially supporting the family and through the marriage of sisters and daughters, facilitated by a large dowry payment. In this light, deportation or failing to remit a substantial amount of money prior to returning to the home country is not just shameful to the family, but also emasculating. Migrant men face tremendous pressure in this way from family in the home country to be a “successful” migrant. The primacy of their economic role as migrants is foregrounded not just by Emirati state discourses, but also through family in the home country.

Even though he couldn’t speak English very well and couldn’t read the text that he had been given at the interview, Jairaj was hired to work in a 5-star hotel, part of an international chain. He says that at first he was rejected for the job. It was only after he begged the interviewers, telling them about his four unmarried sisters, whom he had to marry off that they relented saying, “since you have all these responsibilities, you will definitely be a hard worker we think”. The discourse of potential shame starts from the recruitment stage, and initiates the development of a self-regulated “docile body”. Employers, by invoking the migrant’s need to fulfil his obligations as male head of the family, reinforce the need to be a “good” worker. Shame can thus be understood as an everyday affect of low-wage migrants and seen in the ways in which they manage their expectations of employers and their access to rights such as leisure time, fair wage practices and decent working and living conditions.

In another typical instance, Ani, a Tamil migrant, could not find permanent work for a year-and-a-half after he first came to Dubai, like many others who had initially been promised jobs. When asked why he did not go back to India during that time, instead of trying to make it in the Gulf, he immediately said, “They will speak disparagingly of you if you go back. He just went to Dubai and he is already running back. You have to make some money first before returning”. The disciplining power of shame is evident here. Although Ani had to do difficult “coolie” work that was irregular and an unstable source of income, he considered that a better alternative to being thought of as lazy or incompetent by his community back home. Migrants’ behaviour in the Gulf is often monitored by relatives or others from the same community and reported back to the community. The “translocal village”, in reproducing social relations in the home country functions as an extremely

effective policing mechanism (Velayutham and Wise 2005). Migrants often articulate a fear of “what people back home have heard” about their lives in Dubai. Family photos, phone calls and news from home also act as constant tangible reminders of the shame that men bring on their families when they do not return as successful migrants.

Here, the pervasiveness of cheap telephone calls enabled through the Internet becomes significant (Vertovec 2004). As migrants who had been in Dubai for many years reflected, “Before, we would get a letter perhaps once in 2 or 3 months. Now, for every small thing, they call. I now hear about it every time she has a fight with the neighbour”. The immediacy and regularity of connections with family back at home means that the prospect of shame is a concern that cannot be easily ignored. More frequent monitoring by family also means that any signs of failure (e.g., not remitting money regularly) can also be policed and questioned immediately. The threat of bringing shame on oneself and the family acts not just to discipline the individual migrant. It is also part of the structure that ensures that those who borrow large sums of money in order to migrate remain in a condition of debt bondage.

### **Women and narratives of independence**

Research has shown that women see migration as a greater part of their personal development than male migrants do. Women value the gaining of personal freedoms, access to public space and a higher socio-economic status to a greater degree than men (Piper 2008). The implications of this in sending countries and communities, in terms of challenging prevailing gender norms and order, have been well documented.

Similarly, the women in this research emphasised the independence gained through becoming the main breadwinner in the family and the learned flexibility necessary for survival as working women in Dubai. Compared to low-wage migrant men, the importance of a strong work ethic or discipline was not as prominently highlighted in narratives. It was the neoliberal characteristics of autonomy and entrepreneurialism that were foregrounded in female narratives. These referred to skills of being able live apart from family for long periods, negotiating new urban and cultural terrains and maintaining a sense of morality within what is perceived as a licentious space. While male low-wage migrants compensate for emasculation by employers and the state through performances of masculinity, female migrants were more likely to articulate the need to protect their sexuality. Both, however, sought respect and pride from their work. In discussing both male and female experiences of work, this

chapter unpacks how classed and gendered identities are reconfigured differently within socio-political systems and considers “how gendered identities travel and how these identities are remade at each stage of the migration project in relation to a range of different and often contradictory gender regimes encountered in different places” (Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 854).

Within a highly gendered and paternalistic society such as Dubai, women’s successes and achievements in the sphere of work are typically less valued. Despite this prevailing sentiment, low-wage women workers expressed enormous amounts of pride in their work – and the subsequent result of economic self-sufficiency. In taking on the male provider’s role of primary breadwinner, they also expressed satisfaction in being able to deal with often trying circumstances and yet continually remit cash back to their families. This often means having to live frugally or seek alternative sources to raise capital – markers of a neoliberal subjectivity.

In this house I’m working now, they won’t give me my salary in my hand. If I go and ask them for it, they will burn and fall to the ground (figuratively speaking). I have to work 24 hours a day but they won’t pay me! They say they’ll give me my salary when I am leaving to go back to India. I’ve been working here 2 years now, and they haven’t paid me. Recently, since I had some problems (back home), they gave me 2000 dirhams, but otherwise they haven’t paid me.

To send money back I do work outside the house. For that I get 500 dirhams. 200 goes to my daughter, 200 to my husband, and with the remaining 100 dirhams I manage to call home, etc.

Freelance workers and domestics who were not confined to their employer’s households, speak also of the value of the independence and freedom of mobility they had living and working in the emirate. “I like Dubai the most amongst all the countries I’ve worked in. Why? Because here I can walk around on my own. You can be independent. It’s like being in my own country”. Independence, both financially and in terms of daily mobilities, emerges as important in determining the quality of migrant life for these women. This need for autonomy however, is countered with the need to protect one’s sexuality. This requires the successful single woman to take on certain male characteristics of “toughness” in dealing with difficult circumstances, and de-sexualising herself in order to avoid sexual abuse, harassment and advances from “dangerous Others”. For domestic workers, this threatening figure commonly takes the form of

the male employer. Mina, an Indian domestic worker describes how she dealt with a sexually predatory employer.

I used to work in an Iranian household in Sharjah. The man of the house had 4 wives and 8 children. My duties were only to cook and clean the pond. For all the other work, they had another domestic worker.

When I first arrived, the neighbour said to me – that “Arabi” (Arab)<sup>18</sup>, he’s terrible. He makes all the domestic workers who work for him pregnant. You are so pretty, wonder what he’ll do to you.

I said I have no fear. I was in that house for two and a half years. One day he stopped and asked me, how is it that you live without a man? How can a woman live without a husband?

[At this point in Mina launches into a stream of angry Arabic, repeating what she said to her then employer.]

I said in Arabic, how can you ask this? Don’t you have any shame? Don’t you know what respect is? I’m here to work for you. If you want, you can keep me for that. But if you speak like this to me, I’ll go straight to the police. I’ll tell them you’re evil and harami.

Halas! Halas! [enough, enough] Why are you getting so hot and bothered he said.

You are an araba [boss] and should be same like a baba [father] I said. How can you speak to me like this?

Mina then goes on to describe how this very employer begged her to stay after her contract ended and offered to renew her visa, but she refused. In her telling of this story, Mina articulates self-satisfaction in having not just maintained her dignity under pressure from a person in a position of power but also in performing the role of model worker, which is recognised by her employer. His offering to extend her visa, in this context, is interpreted as a successful establishment of her worth.

While female low-wage migrants expressed immense satisfaction in attaining independence and in negotiating sexual threats, they still conveyed a fear of Dubai as a space of dangerous sexuality and emphasised the need to be vigilant, a recurring theme that is explored further in Chapter 5. This conceptualisation of Dubai becoming a licentious place as a result of increased development and population growth is one that was common among many migrant men as well as women. Female



migrants articulate an ability to exhibit “toughness” necessary to negotiate the “dangerous” street life in Dubai.

You can't walk outside after 6pm. In a place where even if a man bumped into you accidentally he would say sorry, now...when I go outside all covered up (she covers her head with her scarf) minding my own business, I hear “Tum Somali,... room?” – he's asking me if I want to go back to his room. I say “Chup!” and admonish him. He then says “ok halas halas.” That kind of country this has become! I've been harassed by a few black men asking me if I was Somali and soliciting sex. It's only after I threaten to call the police do they say “Sorry, sorry, halas”.

This management of one's sexuality also extends to the need to differentiate between, and therefore ascribe higher value to, the domestic and physical work that they do compared to sex work, a visible sector of the informal economy of the emirate. Here again, we see how particular forms of work constitute an important component of migrant identity. Domestic work is portrayed as difficult, unlike what is perceived to be “easy” – sex work. Sex workers are labelled social deviants by female domestics and their work is described as a dishonourable. Despite a shared marginalised gender position, there is little affinity. Job or profession instead emerges as primary mode of identification.

That is wrong I think. God has given us hands, eyes...we can work with them and the money we earn from that is honest money. But what they make from doing that is hell money. Why do they have to do that? We are here to work and earn money. If it's not enough we can ask for more. Please give me a dollar, two dollars more.

Similar to how low-wage male labourers are regarded, employers often treat FDWs only as productive agents. Their social and material needs are routinely denied. Many domestics do not get any days off, they often have to pay for their own meals although they live with their employers and they are not allowed to leave the house where they work. This management of labour is indicative also of the receiving state's lack of regulation to ensure proper provision of their rights. As already detailed, there is no legal protection for domestics under existing labour laws as they work within the private sphere of the home, where the state does not claim jurisdiction. Further, because they work within the home space, there is no differentiation between the working and non-working

hours. This blurring of boundaries is abused by employers, who expect domestic workers to be available 24 hours a day. Complaints and grumbling about their treatment and overwork are common among FDWs. This can be seen as a form of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1987) and attempt to assert agency. Sandya’s complaints about her employers is similar to that of numerous others:

I have to buy rice and everything myself. I have bought little pots and pans and I cook for myself in them. I don’t eat their food. I buy clothes for myself too – each piece costs about 15 or 20 dirhams. Oil for my hair, cream for my hands and legs – all this I buy myself too. And now they’ve locked the phone, so I cannot use it. It can receive calls, but I cannot dial out. Even on Fridays I don’t get leave. I have to go and cook for them and do the household chores. If I am just a few minutes late, they will complain and nag.

Such issues faced by domestics are common to their transnational class, and have been extensively discussed. Despite treatment that denies their labour rights and social needs, domestic workers rationalise their positions by claiming loyalty to their employers and expressing belief in such feelings being reciprocated. For instance, they describe how after years of loyal service, they are treated as a member of the family rather than an outsider or non-relation. This rationalising process places emphasis on their being valued for more than just their labour contribution to the household. Some domestics articulate this as recognition not just of their good work but also respect for them as people.

I do my work very well. I keep the house very clean and cook very well. Everything – briyani, chapathi, korma – all are no problem. Cake, pizza, all the things they sell in the bakery – I can make all those things! I know all these different kinds of work.

The kids really like me. Because I make all kinds of food for them. They’re always calling my name... they used to bring me everywhere with them. I’ve been to Turkey, Iran, Jordon and America. With them on their holidays. They treated me like one of their children.

Freelance domestic workers in this way also sought to interpret recognition and respect through their work. Freelancers whose employers gave them the keys to their flats, so that they had access to clean even when employers were not in, interpreted this as an example of how they were valued, trusted and thus given more liberties. Female domestic workers

saw these concessions as symbolic of how employers viewed them “differently”, as more trustworthy and responsible than other workers. These concessions and acts of recognition serve to cement the paternalistic relationship between domestics and employers, where disproportionate meaning is attributed to small acts. Reward and recognition for good work is often interpreted as a form of respect, even though formal and legal rights are still curtailed. Female migrants, in rationalising their marginalised positions, deny the reality of their underpayment and restriction of mobilities. Conversely, this unreflexive strategy helps migrants maintain a sense of self-esteem and worth even while undertaking often menial and undesirable work.

### **Moulding the “good” migrant**

This chapter has discussed how a neoliberal work ethic is claimed as an intangible “reward”, a corollary of migration to a space of modernity. In the absence of material signifiers of their work that they can claim, and together with their marginalisation by the state, low-wage migrants’ articulations of ability and work ethic take on increased significance in their conceptualisations of self. More than by the working class, however, post-liberalisation discourses of the marketplace have been taken on by educated middle-class Indians. Vora (2013), for example, discusses how middle-class Indians in Dubai articulate neoliberal subjectivities of entrepreneurship and consumer citizenship. In India, parallel discourses circulate in relation to ideas of work and, more significantly, the “good” and “productive” worker within the competitive and marketised economy (Scrase 2006: 7). These discourses are passed on to working class migrants in Dubai – infusing their subjectivities with normative ideals of morality and discipline. Indian middle-class employers frequently commented on how their Indian employees were better workers in Dubai – working harder, more efficiently and exhibiting a better work ethic. It is within the space of neoliberal modernity that the “good migrant” is elicited.<sup>19</sup> The good worker was also one who was always prompt, did not complain, did not consume alcohol or visit sex workers and faithfully saved a large portion of his wage to remit back to family at home. The embodiment of this ideal was actively encouraged through frequent appraisals of migrants’ work, comparisons between workers and the surveillance of activities outside working hours. A paternalistic tone of appraisal is common in speaking of working class employees: “They are good boys. They do their work well and on Fridays they are at the temple”. This benevolent paternalism

was not restricted to employers, but even lower middle-class migrants who had achieved a degree of social mobility. Senthil and Murugan, for example, are both skilled workers who live with their young families in Dubai. They had worked their way through the ranks, initially coming to Dubai as semi-skilled workers and without their wives and children, but garnering promotions through the acquisition of new skills and qualifications. They were invaluable in assisting with the setting up of focus groups and initiating access to labour camps. In the course of our dealings with low-wage migrants, they frequently counselled them on a range of issues. These included maintaining healthy eating habits, abstinence from alcohol, frequent exercise and the proper management of money. They established their legitimacy as carriers of this knowledge by presenting themselves as previously having been in the same position as the low-wage migrants we dealt with. They had, however, managed to achieve social mobility by embodying qualities of the “good” migrant, which they enthusiastically espoused. They would frequently lament the lack of education among low-wage workers, which was attributed to be the cause for the mismanagement of money and a range of other ethically and socially undesirable practices. Consuming (illicit) alcohol, frequent leisure jaunts out of the labour camp and visiting sex workers were conceptualised as economic wastage and morally undesirable, and seen to be the main reasons for the inability to repay debts. Just as in employers’ constructions, these middle-class men’s conceptions of the “good” worker did not just involve assessments of productivity or efficiency; they were also underpinned by specific moralities. Pressures to embody the “good” migrant also come from charity and volunteer organisations that aid low-wage migrants, and emphasise the need for similar qualities of frugality and self-discipline in terms of consumption and leisure. Similarly, church-run NGOs “govern” and induce a religious self-discipline among foreign domestic workers in South-East Asia. They are encouraged not to complain about their marginalised conditions, but to adopt an attitude of “forebearance” (Ong 2006: 210). These discourses suggest that if you follow the rules and embody the “good” neoliberal subject, you will also reap the rewards of capital accumulation and the ability to participate in middle-class modes of consumption.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the self-conscious construction of neoliberal migrant identities is a means of negotiating and inverting the emasculating and marginalising effects of employers’ and the state’s

depictions of low-wage migrants as purely productive units. This shift involves an identification with ideas of entrepreneurialism, frugality, risk and autonomy that did not feature in articulations of self prior to the migration experience. These discourses and performed subjectivities act as a compensation mechanism of sorts to maintain ideas of masculinity, or feminine purity, worth and pride that are central to an empowered and respectable self. They are reinforced by the expectations of family back at home and disciplinary discourses of employers and middle-class migrants.

This chapter also points to the need for respect in everyday life, especially in relation to low-wage migrants who are often not acknowledged as having social, physical and emotional needs in addition to economic ones. While migrants sought self-respect through performing jobs well, a larger respect through mutual recognition of one another as equal members in society is missing in everyday life in the emirate. Although it is a space characterised by divisions, stratification and discrimination, there are still pockets of possibility – where mutual recognition and care exist. This possibility is explored in Chapter 6.

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# 5

## The Divided City: Gated Communities, Everyday Mobilities and Public Space

### Introduction

In both places, I am stopped at the gates by a security guard who asks me to sign in before I am allowed to enter as a “visitor”. Inside, closed-circuit television cameras conspicuously monitor public areas. Individual residential units within the development are carbon copies of each other, each bearing signs of embellishment in vain attempts to stamp individuality on an intentionally bland canvas. Both spaces are also distinctly classed – compounding the homogeneity of the artificial landscape. When I leave both gated communities, I have to sign out, my transient visit tracked and recorded. That, however, is where the similarities end.

The middle-class gated enclaves and working-class labour camps of Dubai are obviously different spaces. One caters to a skilled expatriate population who demand standards of comfort, privacy and living found in high-income Western states. The other is typically relegated to the edges of the city, and houses the masses of cheap workers who build, clean and service the booming emirate.<sup>1</sup> The gates in the former are primarily to keep undesirables out. In the latter, they keep workers in. However, this chapter considers both within the frames of the “gated community”, as spaces in Dubai configured by a neoliberal logic that extends existing manifestations of social segregation. Spaces of consumption and leisure in the city that are demonstrative of neoliberal rationalisations of governance are also discussed.

In Dubai, exclusions play out in everyday spatial experiences of the city in stark and visible ways. The rituals of physical segregation largely

mirror and reify existing political and social segregations within the resident population. Here, difference, while existing outside geographical space, is simultaneously “located in certain times and actual spaces in their social production and reproduction” (Burkitt 2004: 213). The organisation of space *creates*, and additionally, *recreates*, divisions in the city. Space thus becomes an “actor” and, taking from Latour (2005), objects in space such as buildings, walkways and roads possess agency in the creation of social relations. Categories such as economic class and ethnic boundaries are, then, also a product of spatial relations in the city. Space as the unit of analysis is interpreted widely – as virtual and material, imagined and “real”. While Dubai is seen as a physical space of constant change, in reality, it creates and perpetuates old socio-economic divisions – between rich and poor, “haves” and “have-nots”. Dubai’s physical environment in fact mimics more latent structures of inequality as they become more pronounced with globalisation and neoliberal restructuring.

In speaking to the larger narrative of this book, this chapter demonstrates how the everyday spaces of home and leisure in Dubai play a part in the creation and perpetuation of a neoliberal discourse. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, neoliberalism is not just a package of policies and political ideologies but is also evident and circulating in everyday practices, imaginations and – in the remit of this chapter – spaces and spatial practices. It is a discourse that goes powerfully beyond state articulations.

Academic analyses of Dubai are often focused on the development of the urban environment, given that much of the emirate’s global visibility has been linked with the rapid change in its skyline and cityscape in the last decade. Many of these analyses adopt an architectural perspective (McBride 2000; Elsheshtawy 2004b; Wright 2008) and do not sufficiently explore the social implications of the use of those spaces, or often engage in generalisations reliant on anecdotal experience (Breen 2008; McPhee 2009). In spatial readings of Dubai, physical polarisations have been identified as a key component of the material landscape of the city-state (Elsheshtawy 2004b; Elsheshtawy 2008a). Elsheshtawy’s work, in particular, stands out for adopting a pedestrian perspective. However, most readings of spatial inequalities have been from top-down and have not engaged with everyday uses of the spaces of the city (Junemo 2004). Important discourses embedded in space or created by it are often overlooked. In contrast to most discussions of space in Dubai that are macro-scale, top-down analyses, this chapter assumes an everyday, pedestrian perspective.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the complexities of examining the neoliberalisation of space in Dubai, where the lines between public and private are blurred. The polarising effects of neoliberal restructuring in residential areas – the middle-class gated development and labour camp – are then examined. In these discussions, the quotidian performances that challenge neoliberal rhetoric remind us that it is not omnipresent and that it is in fact just one in an assemblage of processes that create the urban landscape (McGuirk and Dowling 2009a; 2009b). Everyday mobilities within this assemblage are then considered. Finally, the shopping mall as a privatised public space is examined.

### **State-led neoliberalism and the privatisation of space**

The effects of neoliberalism on real geographical space can be seen in the restructuring of urban landscapes. Despite variations that depend on the individual locality and specificities of the socio-cultural context, privatisation of space has been pointed out as a key feature of neoliberal cityscapes. In Dubai, state-led development and modernisation have meant that much of the physical infrastructure of the city has been designed to draw foreign private capital. This can be read as part of Dubai's more general neoliberal strategy of economic diversification and has resulted in significant changes in the physical landscape of the emirate through, for example, mega-developments such as Knowledge Village, Healthcare City, Media City and numerous others. The mantra of "build and they will come" has created a commercial landscape that is largely state-owned and developed, but houses private industry. Most new residential space is similarly state-built. This top-down model of neoliberal development draws desirable foreign capital and labour while not requiring its investment in the development of the city. Whose interests does the restructured city represent? The state? Foreign private capital? Or both?

The overlap of boundaries between public and private is further complicated by the fact that many companies that are treated as private entities were in fact started by funds provided by the sheikhdom. Today, senior government officials head and control a significant proportion of public and private firms in the emirate, and the ruler invests his own private capital in high-profile state developments. Members of the ruling family are also directly involved in business activities (Hvidt 2007: 570). There is little differentiation between government and business leaders. This

control of both state and private agendas further complicates the divides between the sectors of business and government.<sup>2</sup> This blurring makes possible a discourse where the public good is articulated as what is good for private commercial interests. As Hvidt (2007: 571) observes, this translates to a situation where the ruler has an extraordinary amount of control over the economic activities of the emirate as well as the shape of individual developments. Other states such as Singapore also utilise models in which government-owned enterprises function like private companies, but in the case of Dubai, this power is highly concentrated in one ruling family (Acuto 2014). This blurring of lines between public and private came to broader public attention with the GFC in late 2009. When Nakheel and Limitless World, what have been termed “government-related enterprises” (Bassens, Derudder et al. 2010), announced possible defaults of their loan payments, the Dubai state disassociated itself from those real-estate companies. Through disaffiliation, questions about the city-state’s sustainability were distanced from the failure of its commercial enterprises. The state asserts and withdraws its influence and alliances to its benefit and convenience.

An overwhelming percentage of the real estate in Dubai is built by a few state-linked developers: Emaar and Nakheel. Emaar is the primary developer of most large-scale gated communities in Dubai.<sup>3</sup> The Greens, The Springs, The Meadows and Arabian Ranches are some of the master-planned gated developments that it has built in the past two decades. Emaar, while governed by a board of directors and floated on the stock exchange, cannot completely be considered private. It was started with capital from the ruling sheikh and is provided land for its development projects for free (Hvidt 2007: 571). The fact that Emaar is linked to the state also means that control and development of neighbourhoods is very centralised and top-down. Together with Nakheel, Emaar is responsible for much of the physical change in Dubai’s urban landscape. Nakheel is a similar developer of fortified enclaves, such as the Palm Islands and International City. It is also responsible for the creation of non-residential developments such as Ibn Battuta Mall – the largest single-storey shopping mall in the world.

Besides functioning as a developer of high-end and gated developments, Emaar also acts as the body politic managing such enclaves. Although the space is seemingly privatised, then, the governance of these places is not through local residents’ committees or groups. A small consultative committee might exist to represent the interests of residents, but it is mostly symbolic as far as having any real voice in



*Figure 5.1* A poster for state-linked developer Nakheel

how residential spaces are managed. There is little civic participation in governance, even at a very localised neighbourhood level. These spaces, often rented by migrants for short periods or purchased by large conglomerates to house their employees, do not encourage a sense of ownership over space. Similarly, the enclaves of labour camps built by state-linked corporations are conceived of as temporary modes of accommodation. They are usually poorly constructed and badly maintained, and their purpose purely functional.

### **Gated space in Dubai**

In foregrounding the production of difference, this chapter examines both the gated middle-class residential developments and labour camps, as examples of ghettoisation at the top and bottom of the socio-economic scale. This is in contrast to most research that typically investigates middle-class developments and working-class enclaves in isolation. Both are examples of residential disaffiliation in contemporary cities. Both cases of exclusion have negative consequences, and not only in the case of the working class poor, which is commonly examined as being problematic in terms of urban marginalisation (Atkinson

and Blandy 2006: x). This reading has affinities with critical analyses of gated middle-class communities that have been portrayed as undesirable and likened to prisons and mental asylums, where disaffiliation is not voluntary (Bauman 2000:182). Such a conceptualisation broadens understandings of social exclusion in cities by positioning neoliberal strategies of privatisation in relation to discourses of urban social integration and equal rights to the city.

A gated community is typically defined as “a residential development surrounded by walls, fences, or earth banks covered with bush and shrubs, with a secured entrance. ... The houses, streets, sidewalks, and other amenities are physically enclosed by these barriers, and entrance gates operated by a guard, key, or electronic identity card. Inside the development there is often a neighbourhood watch organization or professional security personnel who patrol on foot or by automobile” (Low 2006a: 84). This chapter defines the gated community in more inclusive ways than traditional conceptualisations. This is in terms of both the level of “gatedness” or security and the substantive type of enclave. This chapter is interested in communities where gates are employed to keep undesirables out as well as gates that keep people in. The term “gated” is also not taken strictly; many developments in Dubai discussed here not completely gated, enabling the public to pass through their common spaces and grounds. However, all of them possess a higher level of security than typically found in non-master planned developments – whether security checkpoints that require authorisation for entry or key cards that allow residents access to car parks and buildings.

Gated middle-class developments and labour camps, while forming the backdrop to studies on Dubai, have not been extensively explored in the literature, although they form a significant component of the cityscape. Their juxtaposition as spatial articulations of neoliberalisation is also unique. These gaps in understanding of spatiality in Dubai are the starting point for this chapter, as labour camps and gated developments represent two of the most significant residential spaces in the emirate. Middle-class enclaves range across various sizes, with some exclusive developments consisting of just a single tower while others like the Jumeirah Beach Residences (JBR) are made up of 40 blocks (36 of which are residential). Some also consist of a collection of private villas. These gated zones also offer various facilities, with swimming pools, gyms and 24-hour security as standard. The more sophisticated have their own private beach access or golf courses. In terms of the local governance of these spaces, however, none have legal agreements that bind residents

and internally govern shared spaces. Most gated communities, because they are developed by state-linked master developers, are also managed by them. Although residents have appointed representatives to engage with the management, these residents committees are more symbolic than political. Their prerogatives are typically the organisation of social or civic activities such as recycling campaigns. This centralised governance of middle-class enclaves can be seen as an extension of governance in the emirate.

Similarly, the gated enclaves of working-class migrants range across different sizes and levels of comfort. Camps vary from single-storey units or villas to multiple blocks of four- or five-storey dormitory-style buildings. Low-wage migrants who live there are also subject to different levels of security. In some camps, movement in and out is monitored by a guard at the gate, and logged in a register. In others, although there are physical boundaries such as walls or gates, workers are allowed freedom of mobility, although the entry of visitors to all types of labour camps is still highly regulated. Labour camps officially fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour, which employs staff who are mandated to conduct regular checks of living standards. In reality, the companies who house their workers in the “camp” undertake much of the day-to-day management. The residents of camps have little or no say in their living arrangements, beyond occasional allowances that employers grant. Both middle- and working-class residents of Dubai, then, although living in enclaves that function as privatised entities, have little or no influence over the management of them. These circumstances of privatised space in Dubai means that the interests of the state rather than those of private residents overwhelmingly dictate the governance of these areas, and differentiates them from other gated developments discussed in the larger literature. Social relations engendered by and in these spaces must also then be considered within this context.

Most studies of middle-class gated communities have been of those in North America (Low 2003; Le Goix 2006; McKenzie 2006; Low 2006b) and Western Europe (Brenner and Theodore 2002), although in recent years there have been analyses of the development of such enclaves in parts of Latin America (Caldeira 2000; Janoschka and Borsdorf 2006; Roitman 2006), the Middle East (Glasze and Alkhayyal 2002) and most recently Asia (Fraser 2000; Wu 2006a; 2006b). These more recent analyses reflect the growing popularity of such developments in cities outside the “West”. These analyses also show that fortified enclaves can take on

very different characteristics depending on the type of government and political system under which they evolve. In Dubai, for example, private ownership of space is mandated according to different provisions than in more politically democratic locations. Land is distributed by the state as a commodity and was only recently opened up to foreign ownership.<sup>4</sup> As temporary residents, most of the population of Dubai does not own property in the emirate, resulting in a large rental market. This transient and highly commoditised relationship with space also has implications for the modes of civil society that develop in the emirate. As most gated communities discussed in the literature on gated developments are owned and run by private interests, Dubai's case presents interesting considerations for concepts of spatial governance. As with restructuring cities in other parts of the world, the most visible implication of this increasing neoliberalisation of space is that of socio-spatial exclusions (Glasse, Webster et al. 2006: 35).

Exclusion is a characteristic of all shared urban spaces (Webster, Glasse et al. 2002: 317). Gated communities, though, institute exclusions that are tangibly and viscerally felt, and make starkly obvious the differentiated publics that share a city. Additionally, gated communities and other such fortified enclaves do not merely reflect existing exclusions, but create new ones in terms of symbolic economies of mobility, access and prestige. In adopting this form of "spatial governmentality" (Low 2006b: 45), a certain configuration of the social order is maintained through material segregation of the population. This allows for the existence of a low-wage population seen as "undesirable", but still necessary to the functioning of the city to exist – albeit within their own "invisible" enclaves. Both working- and middle-class gated communities in Dubai are thus indicative of pervasive "urban pathologies" of social exclusion and strategic segregation (Le Goix 2006: 77).

Mike Davis (1992: 228) in his well-known study of Los Angeles, describes middle-class gated communities as expressive of "class warfare at the level of the street". Although a highly militant interpretation of such spaces, this conceptualisation implicates the physical landscape in socio-economic status differentiation and social exclusion. It is not just the people who live in them but the material landscape itself that normalises inequality and segregation, reducing encounters with different Others, particularly Others of a different class. Rather than an inclusive cosmopolitanism to which the postmodern and multi-ethnic city aspires, gated developments promote a greater fear of the Other (Caldeira 2005: 327), reinforcing the segregation that they help create.



## Symbols of prestige

Natasha was typical of many middle-class wives whose husbands had well-paying jobs in one of Dubai's state-owned companies. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment in The Greens, a middle-class gated enclave made up of low- and high-rise buildings. It was built by government-linked Emaar and was close to the main artery – Sheikh Zayed Road. Its easy accessibility and location in “new Dubai” made it a desirable place to live. The Greens, like many other middle-class gated developments in Dubai, consists of clusters of similarly beige-coloured buildings. Every collection of four or five six-storey blocks hosts its own swimming pool and gym facilities. These clusters were oriented around a small complex of shops and restaurants, which consists of internationally recognisable brands of fast food like Nando's, Wagamama and KFC. Buildings are flanked by perfectly manicured laws and shrubs, and there is even the occasional public art installation. Entry into any building requires a security card, and each cluster of buildings is policed by a uniformed security guard at all times. All side streets leading to individual buildings within the development run at right-angles to a main stretch. Unlike most streets in Dubai, they are all carefully numbered. This gated development could have been transplanted from a cityscape almost anywhere in the world. The one significant symbol of its particular geopolitical location is a mosque in the centre of the development, next to the complex of shops.

Natasha was newly married and had come to Dubai without a job, but as a dependent of her husband. Unlike the notorious caricature “Jumeirah Jane”, the stereotypical brash British housewife in Dubai, Natasha was Indian. She is characteristic of a newer breed of middle-class migrants who come from other rapidly developing nations in the Global South. Natasha liked The Greens for its standards of living and safety as well as the ease of lifestyle that was available to her there. The Greens' community commercial centre incorporated a supermarket, where she could easily shop for groceries, and a beauty salon where she went for regular manicures and other treatments, as did many other women who lived in the development. She employed a part-time domestic worker who cleaned for her every day, replicating the dependence on domestic help that she was accustomed to in India. Her apartment was always spotless, even after she had cooked a large, messy Indian meal. She had also carefully selected new furniture and curtains that would match the inoffensive beige walls and dark wood fittings. Her days, when I met

her, were spent shopping, cooking for her husband and in long frequent Skype conversations with her family in India.

For Natasha and other middle-class migrants like her, desirable levels of comfort and safety are available through this form of enclaved living. It is also a mode of disaffiliated living with which she is familiar. Natasha had previously lived in the Maldives, where she and her husband were housed in a serviced apartment by his employer. In India, she lived in an urban high-rise apartment and enacted a lifestyle common to a middle class removed from working-class and poor elements of the city. Gated developments, then, are perceived as continuations of, but also improvements on, what is perceived as a more “modern”, “clean”, and generally desirable lifestyle for this class of aspiring young Asians. “It’s much better here – it’s new and everything is close by” was a sentiment often expressed by Natasha, comparing her experiences of high-rise living. For most migrants from the developed “West” and the rising middle classes of the Global South, the enclave lifestyle is one that “easy” especially if provided for by employers and not paid out of their own pocket. The gated enclave is normalised and sold as part of the migrant “package” of a tax-free lifestyle. Skilled middle-class migrants who do not live in such spaces are seen as being outside the norm and as compromising on their living standards. Enclaved living is perceived as normal or right within this particular social milieu, part of the middle-class migrant habitus (Atkinson 2006: 829). In taking privatised segregation to be the norm, strategies of disaffiliation and exclusion are seen to be “natural” elements of the urban landscape and city life. For Indian migrants like Natasha, the gated enclave is, then, an acceptable extension of practices of disaffiliation that are prevalent in the home country.

Gated middle-class developments sell the idea of a total, contained way of life, in which the services necessary for the reproduction of everyday middle-class life are provided, so there is little need to exit the enclave and risk interactions with potentially dangerous and undesirable Others. In Dubai, gated developments take this containment to an extreme level not just with the typical amenities of restaurants, beauty salons and supermarkets within the enclave. The more sophisticated gated communities such as the Palm Jumeirah even have their own hotels, for example the Atlantis. In Dubai, where alcohol can be consumed only within the premises of a hotel, it is now unnecessary even to leave the Palm to seek such amenities. As has been documented about Saudi Arabia (Glasze and Alkhayyal 2002), gated enclaves in

Dubai were first developed to house the large influx of foreign immigrants associated with the oil boom. In Saudi Arabia, they are intended as spaces where foreigners can maintain the lifestyle to which they are used without tainting the local traditions and customs of a conservative Islamic state. However, they no longer serve the political purpose of cultural separation in more liberal Dubai, where there is little differentiation of social norms inside and outside gated enclaves. They can be read instead as symbols of prestige.

These notions of prestige are, in part, maintained through symbolic performances of space. (The almost uniform portrayal of Dubai as a space of decadence by the international media helps to further these symbolic constructions.) This is achieved, for example, through advertisements for property, which depict the exclusivity of gated developments through their composition by a narrowly delineated class and ethnicity of people, that is, rich and predominantly white (Ali 2010: 41). The “good life” that gated developments promise thus surreptitiously suggests the creation of a homogeneously classed and raced environment for aspiring Asian migrants. Although middle-class developments in Dubai house migrants of many different nationalities, this globally mobile elite class position homogenises. The cultural capital of cosmopolitan Indians like Natasha “whitens” and inscribes particular notions of classed status. Whiteness, in referring to a certain “set of cultural practices usually unmarked and unnamed”, is discursively embedded within particular locations in Dubai, key amongst which is the gated enclave (Frankenberg 1993: 1). Part of the unmarked nature of whiteness is that it is taken as normal. The homogenising effects of gated communities thus embed migrants in a space that is discursively and culturally white, but which passes as neutral. In mimicking Western suburban contexts, the gated community creates a culturally white middle-class living space. As spaces that are aestheticised in particular ways, gated communities regulate behaviour through the creation of a particular “taste culture” (Low 2006a). An insidious means of control, this strategy excludes those who cannot and do not fit within particular constructions of race and class that middle-class gated enclaves signify. Following sections explore how this is enacted through a homogenisation of space and the performance of securitisation.

### **Symbolic homogenisation**

Middle-class gated enclaves have been conceptualised as Americanising or “homogenising” the physical residential landscape. This is apparent in developments of non-Western urban space in China, South Africa

and the Middle East (Fraser 2000; Abaza 2001; Glasze and Alkhayyal 2002; Glasze 2006; Wu 2006a; Ruggeri 2007), and in the visual aesthetics of enclaves in Dubai. Most middle-class gated developments there are designed with a “Western” sense of the home, although a very diverse international population that lives in them. Many apartment complexes, for example, feature open-plan living – a concept not familiar or sympathetic to Arab concepts of dwelling. This adoption of a more “Western” or “global” aesthetic and architectural motifs might be largely to do with the fact that the predominant potential market for such developments is not local Emiratis. Most new buyers of these units are from the Indian middle class or Britons investing abroad (Ali 2010: 41). Along with selling exclusivity and luxury, these developments also display a Western aesthetic and modernity highly seductive to an emerging Asian middle class. In this sense, these homes can be seen as transnational ones (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 239), both in that they serve as dwellings for labour migrants and their families and through their design and the symbolic meanings they create.

The mimicry of Western aesthetics and corresponding lifestyles does not exist in easy agreement with the indigenous landscape and climate. It necessitates the expenditure of extensive resources to cool the homes with air-conditioning and green the common spaces of gated developments (Ouis 2002). Here is another highly visible vector of difference, in which the spaces that the rich and middle classes inhabit are differentiated through greening and landscaping from the undeveloped and working-class areas of the city. These include common areas in gated compounds, as well as hotels, restaurants and parks; the last of these charge an entrance fee that most low-wage migrants will not pay. In contrast, the labour camps and areas where most working-class people live are sandy desert, with little attempt made to vegetate or beautify the landscape.

The strategy of naming also works in the transplanting of a Western or globalised aesthetic to Dubai. Using such names as The Greens, The Lakes, Arabian Ranches, Palm Springs and Flamingo Cove the marketing of these enclaves seeks to conjure an idea and qualities of spaces that are outside the desert and the Middle East. Most of these names have little correspondence with the actual area where the developments are built. As Wu demonstrates in her analysis of gated communities in Shanghai, these naming practices seek to export, together with a Western aesthetic, the “dream of an American (Californian) happy life” (Wu 2006a: 191). Expatriates living in such enclaves can exist in their little suburban bubble with a Western style of living, mediated by the car,

with hypermarkets and highways within easy access. While this lifestyle seemingly embodies aesthetic and consumerist aspects of American life, it offers, however, no attendant social or political freedoms.

The strategy of naming is intended to give a place identity and act as a means of differentiation; however, it can be seen as effectively performing the opposite. While there is some attempt made to thematise and differentiate developments, most look very similar to one another. This perhaps has much to do with the fact that they are built by the same small group of developers. The generic architecture, inoffensive colour scheme and similar layout of streets means that these developments often become non-places, transitory spaces that residents pass through without forming any sustained attachment. This is compounded by the fact that many of the residents of these enclaves are temporary migrants, often renting apartments furnished and provided by their employers. Tara, a long-term resident of Dubai, used to live in Deira, a part of the city that is more socio-economically diverse and where gated residential developments are scarce. She described the lack of organic social interaction in the new, gated enclave in which she now lived.

Over there (in Deira), everything was close by. You can go to the cinema, the shop, you go to different different neighbours. I used to have huge (number of) friends. We used to go for games...after I came back from school we used to immediately change and get out to play and stuff. But over here it's like totally different...but over here....everyone's sort of like in their own world. They're friendly, it's not that they're not friendly. But there's a certain limit that you can...talk.

Although tinged with nostalgia, sentiments around the loss of community are echoed by many residents. In the gated enclaves, social networks around neighbourliness are not easily formed, and friendships are more made often along lines of nationality and language.

### **The performance of securitisation**

Gated communities have been explained as a result of a lack of trust in public institutions, such as the police, as well as arising out of a suspicion of unmonitored public spaces. These anxieties are seen as legitimate motivators for the increasing privatisation of public space. Crime, however, is not a significant concern in Dubai.<sup>5</sup> Despite frequent reports in the local papers of criminal activity, the emirate is seen by middle-class migrants as a relatively safe city, especially in comparison to other

more volatile zones in the Middle East such as Beirut or Tehran, or even cities such as London and New York. "Oh! It's very safe here! You can walk home at three in the morning". This does not imply that a "culture of fear" does not exist, but in Dubai it manifests more as a cultural fear of the classed "Other", invading and disrupting the order and aesthetics of middle-class spaces. Safety and security are thus more performed than enforced with any rigidity in gated developments in Dubai. It is the semblance of exclusivity and safety that exists. Residents themselves acknowledge that heightened levels of safety are more performed than real – further testament that these spaces function primarily as symbols of status. Middle-class enclaves in this vein can be considered what Wu (2006b: 50) describes as a "prestige community" where the gate dividing the inside from the outside is "more symbolic, marking the quality of the environment". He goes on to say that in these types of communities, the services they provide are not important, as they too are merely symbolic. It is the performance of security and exclusive access that are more important than real barriers to entry.

Not just as a quick route to accumulating wealth, real estate is marketed as a way to access symbols of modernity and status in Dubai. This can be seen in the way in which properties in Dubai are sold. Elaborate displays of property developments in shopping malls across Dubai and the UAE, as well as advertisements in newspapers and on streetside billboards, are ubiquitous. Scale miniatures and photographs feature prominently in property agents' displays, speaking of the visual aesthetics and potential lifestyles that such spaces offer. The Palm Jumeirah, one of the three palm-shaped islands off the coast of Dubai is regularly featured in displays of real estate for sale in shopping malls in the emirate. Besides playing on the international reputation for inspiring awe and that the Palm Islands have attained, photographs of the Palm Jumeriah always highlight the single trunk road to the mainland. This notion of exclusivity demonstrated through physical isolation is a discourse that is central to the notion of gated developments in Dubai. It is similar to the Burj Al Arab's performance of offshore exclusivity, where the hotel is housed on its own private island, making restrictions to entry easily enforceable. Separation from the everyday, pedestrian spaces of the mainland signifies not just a high level of prestige, but also a highly securitised environment. The World Islands, which are sold only through invitation, are another example. Although this collection of islands is incomplete and most are still undeveloped, they are patrolled by guards in speedboats (McGirk 2009), indicative of strategies of a "logic of surveillance" (Caldeira 2005: 328) that is part of the aesthetic of security. The

performance of security here can be seen as part of the larger construction of exclusivity and class. More pedestrian versions of gated developments in Dubai perform these notions of exclusivity to various extents. These symbolic meanings embedded in the gated development function as strategic markers of status in Dubai.

Middle-class gated communities, however, are not as impenetrable as they are made out to be. In fact, their everyday functioning is dependent on an army of unseen and unacknowledged domestics, cleaners, security guards and gardeners. This penetration and contact between insiders and outsiders is controlled and on the terms of the privileged owners (Caldeira 2005). The low-wage migrants who are responsible for the everyday maintenance and upkeep of middle-class enclaves have to inhabit a space of enforced invisibility. They occupy liminal and hidden spaces such as servants' quarters or store rooms in apartments, security rooms in car parks and back kitchens in restaurants. As we saw in Chapter 4's discussion of domestic workers, in residential spaces, too, they are viewed and valued only as productive workers. They become



*Figure 5.2* Maintaining the aesthetics of the gated development

incorporated as part of the aestheticised landscape, as yet another symbol of middle-class prestige.

Gated middle-class developments as examples of privatised residential space do not, then, merely generate socio-economic exclusions, but they are also locations for cultural discourses of whiteness and other less racialised forms of status. Much of the perceived prestige of such spaces is performed through the physical landscape and strategies of securitisation. They appeal to a largely mobile Asian middle class and articulate a successful modern lifestyle within a “non-Western” city. In Dubai, the pervasiveness of gated middle-class communities normalises this desire.

### **Gating the “Other”: labour camps**

Gaining access into labour camps in Dubai is difficult, as most of them are behind walls or barbed-wire fences and have a security guard at the door determining who enters and exits. However, when I did manage to gain entry to one of these camps to conduct an interview or a focus group or to tag along with NGO workers, I was warmly welcomed, greeted with smiles and often served food and drink, even if I had never previously met any of the camp’s residents. Although almost all low-wage labourers in these camps were dissatisfied with their living standards, they still embraced the space as a home in some sense (although this notion is problematic as this chapter later discusses). Unlike some low-wage migrants who were homeless, those who did have spaces to which they could retreat, saw themselves as relatively advantaged.

Many newspaper articles, current affairs programmes and journalistic accounts (Hari 2009; Krane 2009; Ali 2010: 91–95) have portrayed labour camps as completely undesirable and unhappy spaces. Because of difficulties of access, labour camps are under-researched by academics but are often the subject of journalistic reports as these are effective in showing the stark contrasts between life on the “inside” of these camps and “outside”, where the excesses and glamour of the city is highlighted. In contrast, I show how the camps allow for forms of sociality, bonding and the formation of networks that are necessary for day-to-day survival in the emirate for many low-wage migrants. Although camps are politically and culturally constructed as undesirable spaces, they are also lived in and experienced in different ways to popular conceptions. For many men living in these enclaves, they are the most hospitable spaces they have access to as low-wage migrants in Dubai. In providing a balanced



account, however, the exclusionary nature of labour camps and the permeation of neoliberal discourses into the space of the camp will also be discussed.

There is only one ethnographic study of a labour camp in the UAE (Marsden 2008). Marsden's focus on one Pakistani migrant's experience and networks in the labour camp is indicative that not all labourers are the same – they do not come from the same socio-economic background or experience the same standards of living in Dubai's camps. However, his study is of the exception rather than the norm. Most low-wage labourers live in more crowded and dilapidated surroundings and more difficult circumstances than Marsden's protagonist. Importantly, Marsden's study observes that sociality exists even within what have been labelled dehumanising spaces. This chapter builds on such readings and shows how the spaces of the labour camp function as key sites of male solidarity and networking. They also challenge the rationalised nature in which the labour camp has been repeatedly conceived.

Most "labour camps", as workers' housing compounds are called in Dubai, are in the area known as "Sonapur", which, rather ironically, translates from Hindi to mean "City of Gold". This is the largest area housing low-wage migrants and is built on the outskirts of developed areas of the city, so it is neither visible from major highways nor easily accessible. This dictates that low-wage migrants must travel for hours to and from their worksites in the middle of the city. Busloads of exhausted and sleeping low-wage construction labourers are a common sight on highways and roads in Dubai. In almost all labour camps and areas where low-wage migrants reside, issues of overcrowding, poor sanitation, overflowing sewers, lack of leisure spaces and poor links to other parts of Dubai are apparent. Not just journalists, but human rights groups have also critiqued living standards and sanitary conditions in labour camps. The efforts the Dubai government has made to address this issue have been minimal and can be seen as merely a performative response to international criticism rather than an indication of instituting any real change (Ali 2010: 91–93). Efforts to build better-quality housing for hospitality and construction workers, such as the Omran project in Jebel Ali or the residential community planned by Bawadi (Bakr 2008), have not kept up with rapidly rising demand.

Although they are not characterised by similar levels of totalitarian control, these labour camps exhibit similarities to Chinese, Mao-era work-unit compounds. One striking comparison is how in both, units of production are linked to units of residence. Men who work for the same company typically stay in the same block, room or camp as their



*Figure 5.3* A rubbish pile outside a residential block in a labour camp

colleagues, with the employer often managing the camp as well. Often, these companies also own the buildings where their workers are housed. The identity of the individual as worker thus shapes even the allocation of places for rest and leisure, reinforcing even in the spaces outside paid work the notion of the low-wage migrants as a productive unit. Here, the privatisation of space enables control of all aspects of the migrants' lives, as the employer also monitors the social space of the labour camp.

Within the camps, most rooms are shared – rarely with just one or two other migrants, and more likely with up to fifteen others. Beds are single or bunks. The rooms are typically small, and thus not conducive to spend long hours in, especially with other men. However, because indoor and privatised leisure spaces are largely inaccessible to them, low-wage migrants are forced into the intimacy of their rooms in the labour camps, especially during the hot summer months when sitting in public outdoor spaces during the day is intolerable. Caldeira's (2005: 331) assessment that "the outside space is left for those who cannot afford to go in" is one that seems to ring especially true in this case. In the rooms, beds take up most of the available space. There is little room to store items such as clothing so they are typically hung on bed

rails or on pieces of string stretched across the room. Despite this lack of personal space, which fostered feelings of temporariness, and where attachment was discouraged, migrants tried to personalise this space and craft it with their own domestic aesthetic, rather than a purely utilitarian one.

The need to create and display some ownership over everyday space was expressed in part through putting up pictures of family, religious deities or inspirational figures (see photos below). Low-wage migrants' attempts to personalise space with significant objects expresses a desire to maintain a sense of self through links with their past and families back home. These are attempts to "accumulate being, understood as our senses of self enmeshed in webs of experiences and relations, past, present and future" (Noble 2004: 253). Here, Miller's (2010) conceptualisation of how material culture such as clothing "creates" the individual, rather than only signifying them, is productive. The pictures and objects that migrants keep thus come to "make" more rounded and holistic conceptions of self, beyond that of the productive unit. As discussed



*Figure 5.4* A prayer altar in a labour camp

in Chapter 4, these serve as physical reminders of their roles as fathers, husbands and friends, and not just as workers.

New communications technology such as mobile phones also enables this mode of affective accumulation through less tangible objects such as recordings and pictures. The first time I met Haj, he played me a recording of his three-year-old daughter singing a popular Hindi film song on his phone. Listening to it regularly reminded him of his role as a father even when he lived without his family in Dubai. These recordings of his daughter's voice also "help produce a sense of continuity over time and space" (Noble 2004: 243). Haj could keep track of his daughter's development and growth even though he could not be there to witness it. In this way, he could continue to perform fatherhood even when he could not participate fully in it. The labour camp, as a



*Figure 5.5* Migrants' efforts to personalise space in labour camps

communal and social space facilitated the enactment of these sort of transnational relations.

Most labour camps that I visited also had a television and DVD player in each room. Although most contained air-conditioning, the units were often old and did not work well. When they broke down, they were rarely repaired or replaced. Despite labour camps being conceived of as purely functional spaces, where beautification and comfort are considered unnecessary, they are selectively and discreetly appropriated, through physical objects and modifications, as well as through the intimate and affective social relations enacted within them. Considered cumulatively, the space of the camp functions not just as another facet of the productive work lives of migrants, but also as a space where multifaceted, relational and affective aspects of migrant identity are performed.

### **Alcoholism and depression**

Male bonding over illegal alcohol consumption and pirated DVDs is common within labour camps. The camp here becomes the space in which low-wage migrants can engage in leisure practices, but conversely it is also the space in which they are incarcerated because they cannot afford other forms of commoditised leisure.

If you go out, you spend money. And what else is there to do in the room? So we drink.

For 20 dirhams, you can drink for 4 days. If you go to a bar, even for a small drink, you pay at least 20 dirhams.

Most low-wage migrants find it too expensive to consume within the legal economy. It is also difficult in terms of social boundaries as much as economic ones for low-wage migrants to access hotels, the only places where alcohol is sold in Dubai. This has provided the impetus for an underground economy of cheap unlicensed alcohol, sold informally within working-class areas. Here, the labour camp functions as space outside the formal neoliberal economy. Although illegal alcohol consumption is widespread among the male working-class population, crackdowns on sales are rare. Like the sex work industry in Dubai, it is officially unacknowledged but tolerated.

At first they said there is no alcohol here as it's an Arabic country. But slowly, secretly, they are producing it. There is no other

entertainment in Dubai. ... When we first came, there was only a little of this problem (of over-consumption of alcohol). It used to be very difficult to get hold of, but you could get hold of it. I came in 1992. Then, they were selling it, but it was rare. Now if you call, it (illegal alcohol) will come. If you call, they will come ring your doorbell with it. (Sarbutheen, Indian construction worker)

Low-wage migrants articulate that they engage in high levels of illegal alcohol consumption as a way to ease the monotony of a life with curtailed freedoms and opportunities for leisure. The often difficult and dangerous circumstances under which many migrants labour also creates a desire for escapism. An indication of the hazards that low-wage migrants face is evident in the number of deaths on worksites, which have been suggested to be on average 65 a month (Breen 2008: 223). Other estimates put a construction worker in Dubai's average life expectancy at 45 years (McPhee 2009: 195).

Do you want to know why we take this stuff? We get a sound night's sleep. Otherwise the good as well as the ugly memories come flooding to us when we all gather together after work. (Menon 2006)

Here, the space of the labour camp becomes a zone of escape from the reality of dangerous and exploitative migrant life in Dubai. The camp, symbolic of the marginalised lives of low-wage migrants, is, conversely, also the only space in which an escape, through alcohol, is possible. Consumption of alcohol is often articulated as a coping strategy by low-wage migrants who are separated from family for long intervals because those who earn below a certain wage cannot obtain family visas or afford frequent trips to visit family left behind. The development of depressive tendencies because of long-term separation is endemic. Jairaj talks about how he turned to alcohol, not being able to cope with leaving his new bride back in India.

I was at home for ten days after the wedding. Then I came back here (to Dubai). I couldn't take being away from her. I didn't eat or sleep much for a week. Then I started drinking thinking that it would help me sleep. Now I drink perhaps weekly once, when I get reminded of the problems at home. ... Whenever I call her, she doesn't pick up. In the past two months I haven't spoken to her. Her phone is always switched off.<sup>6</sup>

The private spaces of the labour camp are where problems such as separation are manifested viscerally. While the camp allows for the low-wage migrant body to be decoded as a productive unit, it is also a space where the structural violence that characterises low-wage migrant situations materialises in real and tragic consequences. Jairaj's alcoholism spiralled into an unmanageable addiction when his emotional problems were compounded by financial ones. In addition to the separation from his wife, he had to deal with the large debt he had incurred in paying an agent to come to Dubai. He recounted how he became suicidal:

I owed an 8 lakh<sup>7</sup> loan and was feeling terrible about not being able to pay it off. So used to I drink bottles of rum although there is no history of drinking or alcoholism in my family. One time when I was drunk, I bought a 250ml bottle of poison (with the intention to kill myself). I thought, how could I live like this? With so much debt. I felt pressured by all those issues – like they were pressing on me. Can you imagine the feeling of having two lorries drive into you? That's what my mind was like – broken into many many pieces.

I started abusing alcohol a lot more. I used to drink and then sleep exhausted. It began to affect my work. I wouldn't turn up for work regularly. I used to drink one or two bottles a day. That's how much fury I had. A superior at work who was concerned for me asked me what was going on. He told me to leave it (drinking). It's not good for you he said. But I told him I can't stop.

Jairaj went on to describe how other workers with whom he shares a room smelt something amiss and found him unconscious one day. He was brought to a hospital and survived the suicide attempt. However, he was not given any counselling after the incident nor were his employers informed. The lack of public discourse around depression as a medical condition, as well as the fear of deportation, might have contributed to the reluctance to bring up such an issue with an employer. However, suicide is an option taken by many low-wage migrants in situations of debt bondage, as the high statistics of deaths show. In 2008, for example, 138 suicides (by Indian migrants) were reported (Rajan, Varghese et al. 2010: 273).<sup>8</sup> NGOs contend that the real number is probably much higher.

High suicide rates, alcohol addiction and depression are significant unacknowledged social costs of the exploitation of low-wage migrant labour in Dubai. These consequences are largely unseen by the majority of the middle-class residents of the emirate as they play out within

spaces that rendered “invisible”, such as labour camps. It is not just bodies of low-wage migrants then, but also the pathologies of migrant exploitation that are made latent through residential disaffiliation. Also evident from Jairaj’s experience, however, is the importance of friendship networks within the spaces of the labour camp. Opportunities to share affective experiences of sorrow as well as happiness were articulated as important aspects of the sociality of the camp.

### **Homosociality**

In the popular imagination at least, emotional bonding between men is seen as uncommon, and among working-class men as even more unusual. In labour camps and spaces of low-wage male intimacy, though, personal stories and problems between co-workers were regularly shared. These interactions did not appear to be characterised by the machismo that is common in many relationships between men (Pena 1991), which can perhaps be read within the context of collective emasculation and disempowerment through their status as low-wage migrants in Dubai. Most emotional sharing was about news or complaints about cheating wives back home, alcohol abuse and crippling debt burdens. In Marsden’s (2008) account, the space of the labour camp even functioned as a site for political campaigning. These exchanges are facilitated by intense, enforced intimacy. The lack of privacy and the sharing of space during leisure time allow, and even necessitate, this formation of close links. As Chapter 6 describes, these connections are important not just in the creation of emotional bonds, but also in forming credit unions and organisations centred on shared ethnicity or even hometown. This reading of South Asian male migrant spaces problematises other conceptions that associate them with deprivation, lack of joy and loss of masculine potency (Ahmad 2009) and argues for an expanded reading that highlights the everyday coping and homosocial pleasures of friendship that they enable.

Homosociality and intimacy between men balances intense conceptualisations of heterosexual masculinity (Osella and Osella 2007: 3). These interactions between working-class men in Dubai might also be seen as a reflection of the rich homosocial networks in South Indian society, where men form intense bonds in situations where women are absent. These relationships were characterised by an easy camaraderie and sociality that was not necessarily sexual in nature. Men typically slept, washed and ate within the tight spaces of the camp, and articulated such intimacy as a normal part of the migrant experience.



The close spaces of the labour camp can also lead to frequent frictions between residents. When fights or riots break out in camps, work is disrupted, and they usually cost the employer in terms of delays and damaged property. Conversely, however, the containment of riots within the spaces of the labour camp can also be seen as a political strategy to limit such disruptions to these “hidden” spaces of the city (Buckley 2013). Security and surveillance are tools to reduce the incidence of such disruptions. Security guards in camps, then, are present not just to monitor entry and exit, but to maintain a sense of order and discipline among workers. When fights between workers or protests break out, the consequences often involve deductions of pay or deportation. Rioters are sometimes deemed to be mentally unstable and sent for psychiatric treatment at government hospitals. One resident of a labour camp describes how, as a new migrant, constant surveillance and wage cuts were difficult conditions to accept.

When we first came, they had us 20 men to a room. If we did anything wrong, they would cut our salaries. Three months salary, four months salary. They kept us in such conditions that made us think, why did we even come here? We felt it would have been better to die.

These techniques of disciplining the low-wage migrant body within the space of the camp can be understood within notions of biopower (Foucault 1975) formalised in institutions such as prisons, schools and mental asylums. Segregation facilitates control and surveillance of what is considered a “deviant” population. Within this discourse, low-wage male migrants, in particular, are conceived of as physical and sexual threats. Their activities and mobilities within the city, and even within the isolated spaces of the labour camp, must be constantly monitored. This increase in surveillance has been identified as a characteristic of neoliberalising cities (Peck and Ticknell 2002; Coleman 2004), but its heightened effect on certain aspects of the population is notable. Surveillance in labour camps contributes towards the dehumanising of low-wage migrant workers discussed in detail in Chapter 4, and is indicative of the paternalistic attitudes of employers who do not see workers as self-regulating individuals. This mode of surveillance is not restricted to labour camps and characterises many public spaces in Dubai.

The space of the labour camp as an example of privatised and disaffiliated residential space generates very different consequences to those engendered by middle-class gated developments. It facilitates the torment of work in Dubai, through functioning as a rationalised extension to the

space of work, where surveillance and control are pervasive. However, it is also a space where it is possible to access the “cure” (alcohol). The “invisibility” of the labour camp within the wider city, however, serves to mask urban pathologies of exploited labour. Finally, the labour camp enables acts of “repair”, through support networks of fellow migrants within spaces of enforced intimacy.

### **Paternalistic restrictions: the female labour camp**

The limited mobility of domestic workers within cities has been well documented (de Regt 2008; Gamburd 2009; Pande 2013), attributed largely to their work within the domestic sphere where employers limit access to spaces outside the home. Low-wage female migrants who live and work outside the domestic sphere are, however, similarly limited in their mobility, due to the similar circumstances of *kafala* sponsorship under which they migrate. Illegal but widely practised acts of control, such as the confiscation of passports, add to this lack of mobility. For women who live in labour camps, issues of access to the metropolis are layered with normative understandings of the “good” migrant and the “dangerous” city. Kanna (2010: 120) has suggested that this may be to do with restrictive gender regimes that are part of local tradition in Dubai which are, by extension, are applied to emigrant women. I suggest that the voluntary disaffiliation adopted by migrant women is indicative of their performance of sexual and moral purity when thrust into a foreign context, where they are less subject to surveillance by family and community. In doing so, migrant women also reproduce discourses that frame low-wage migrant men as dangerous sexual threats.

The women housed in labour camps in Dubai whom I interviewed and interacted with were often migrants who worked in garment factories, as cleaners in shopping malls or in other low-wage jobs in the hospitality industry. Most were either unmarried or had left husbands and children behind to work in Dubai. The nominally “single” status of these migrant women allowed employers to impose a rhetoric of paternalistic “protective care”. These female bodies were conceived of as vulnerable to the latent social and physical threats that the city hid. Their mobility was severely limited, even more so than that of male labourers in camps. They were constantly supervised, with their movements in and out of the camps policed even more vigilantly. Men were never allowed into the camp, and even women were vetted and could not enter without the prior permission of the employer. Ironically, for me it was even harder to gain access to a female camp than it was to a male one, even as a female

researcher. Women workers in garment factories described their daily lives as revolving around only the spaces of the camp and the factory that was housed next to it. The young Sri Lankan women who laboured there were only allowed out of this space once every few months on supervised “outings” to the beach or park. Supervisors in the factory justified this restriction of mobility as in their best interests (cf. Frantz 2008: 629).

Employers described migrant women as unable to negotiate the difficulties and dangers of a foreign city and so justified their constant supervision and monitoring through a discourse of benevolent protection. Living-out, freelance contractors working as domestics or other freelance low-skilled labour had, in contrast, more autonomy over their mobility than these other groups of migrants. Although those not tied to sponsors had more autonomy in terms of mobility, they were also more susceptible to exploitation in terms of non-payment of wages (Pande 2013). The infantilising conceptualisation of female low-wage migrants legitimises the need to manage, “protect” and restrict their everyday interactions. They are seen as incapable of making their own decisions about mobility and safety. The everyday activities of migrant women here are dictated by the patriarchal structures of employers that determine what they are expected to be, and thus do (Rose 1993: 18–19). The restriction of the mobility of female migrants constrains them to the private spaces of the home, or in this case, the labour camp. Public space, in this discourse, is the domain of men. However, these conceptualisations are also selectively adopted and appropriated by migrant women in performing the “docile”, virtuous and thus “good” migrant.

The restriction of their mobilities was often interpreted by low-wage migrant women themselves as a form of “protection” from dangerous Others and from the potentially dangerous and unknown foreign spaces of Dubai. Supervision on outings outside the camp was thus welcome. As articulated by a 20-something Sri Lankan seamstress: “Rolla Square (a popular meeting place in Sharjah) there are so many men. It’s so scary to go there alone”. Women migrants perform these narratives of chastity that do not just construct themselves as potential victims needing protection, but also portray low-wage migrant men as predatory. These conceptualisations resonate with domestic workers’ articulations of how their employers treat them like “one of the children” (Gamburd 2009: 66). This discourse of infantilisation is internalised by female migrants in subjugated living arrangements. The appropriation of such narratives by women can perhaps be seen as part of a strategy that maintains perceptions of their marriageability and virtue despite negative

stereotypes associated with migrant work abroad. Often, merely being away from the home community's surveillance, especially in a space such as Dubai that is seen as licentious, generates suspicion about the woman returnee's morality (Osella and Osella 2008: 161). Gendered conceptualisations of the "good migrant" as one who does not go out alone or associate with strange men resurface here as important in shaping migrants' presentations of self.

Restriction of mobility can result in situations in which, for example, female migrants who had lived in the emirate for three years had seen little of it, and almost nothing of the famed skyscrapers and hotels. This is also typical of most male labourers who live in labour camps and whose daily rhythms oscillate between the camp and the construction site. Women residents of labour camps had never visited the shopping malls or luxury hotels, except if they were employed there. This disconnectedness to the commoditised and privatised spaces of the city is described by various media reports drawing stark comparisons between the glitz of Dubai and the harshness of the lives of migrant labourers. In one example:

He is currently working on the 67th floor of a shiny new tower, where he builds upwards, into the sky, into the heat. He doesn't know its name. In his four years here, he has never seen the Dubai of tourist-fame, except as he constructs it floor-by-floor. (Hari 2009)

Although the excerpt above highlights a male migrant, female migrants are perhaps even more cut off from such spaces of the city, because they work primarily in indoor spaces such as factory floors or toilets in shopping malls. Although inside a mall, they are usually in peripheral or liminal areas, where they are excluded from the main hub of commercial and social activity. This is also true of low-wage migrants of both genders who work in hotels and restaurants. Like the working-class migrants who penetrate middle-class enclaves, these individuals are characterised by their identity as workers and marked non-participation as consumers.

### **Informal spatial economies**

The informal spatial practices and economies discussed in this section function largely outside the formal control and allocation of space in the city. Despite the fact that they, too, are subject to increasing surveillance and regulation, their existence demonstrates that neoliberalism as a logic

of governance is just one among an assembly of statist and quotidian discourses that influence spatiality and spatial practices in Dubai.

At one extreme of the socio-economic spectrum of labour in Dubai are migrant men who are unwilling or unable to pay rent and sleep in the common spaces of Sonapur. Most are undocumented workers, who were promised jobs in Dubai that never materialised after they arrived. Many make the decision to stay on as irregular migrants and try to find daily or piecemeal work. In these cases, sleeping in public spaces is not just a strategy to save money, but often the only option for men who cannot rent scarce bed spaces. Other public spaces that are surreptitiously colonised as sleeping places are parks in inner-city areas of Satwa and Karama. Even in the hot summer months, low-wage migrants roll their mattresses out on the sand with their plastic bags of belongings beside them. They have to rely on the generosity of fellow migrants for access to sanitary facilities. Such public spaces appropriated by irregular migrants are also subject to surveillance. In Sonapur, disgruntled residents informed NGO workers of migrants who were occupying the open spaces of the camp. Volunteers attempted to convince these “homeless” migrants that they had to either move to paid accommodation or return to their home countries if they could not afford to do so. Migrant men who accepted the NGO’s offer of a plane ticket home were given food coupons to use at restaurants and provided temporary accommodation until their return journey. Those who refused were warned that they would be reported to



*Figure 5.6* Migrants sleeping in the open spaces of Sonapur

the police. Here again, normative ideas of the “good” migrant determine who is given aid. Charity organisations and fellow low-wage migrants are in these ways incorporated into the mechanisms and discourses of surveillance that enforce desirable migrant behaviour.

Working-class migrants also have to deal with constant surveillance by the police and the associated threat of deportation. They are subject to being stopped at any time by state authorities and asked to produce their labour card – a continual threat for undocumented workers. Certain classed and ethnicised spaces within the city in these cases act as a kind of refuge. These migrant spaces that exist outside labour camps are marked by the development of working-class economies around leisure where men socialise on their days off. These are often linguistically or ethnically demarcated and cater to men from a certain country, region or state. The Tamil Bazaar in Deira is an example of such a space. These zones are rich in networks between low-wage migrants and serve as a site where productive connections are made and utilised. “You just have to go to the salon, tea shop or laundry shop – and you can have all the information you need at your fingertips – about job vacancies, who is a looking for a job etc. Everybody gathers there”.

Although the majority of low-wage labourers live in labour camps, many also live in shared villas and flats in older, more working-class areas of Dubai, such as Karama, Satwa and Bur Dubai. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a “bachelor”<sup>9</sup> to find a place to live outside a labour camp, even if he is a skilled professional. “Kenyan sales manager Kamau, 28, lived in bed spaces for more than a year before finding a room in a shared villa in Jumeirah. ‘I earn more than Dh 12 000 a month but simply could not find a studio’” (Dharmarajan 2008: 7). This is predominantly a result of the government’s crackdown on shared male residences and the demarcation of certain areas exclusively for “family housing”. Landlords also perceive groups of single men as potentially troublesome. “Bachelors”, and especially single South Asian men, find it extremely difficult to find shared houses or apartments in the city. This effectively seeks to push “bachelor” residences outside the developed areas of city to the marginalised spaces of the labour camp.

I have changed rooms four times over the past two years. I am ready to sign a rental contract to stop frequent shifts but I have been unable to persuade landlords and agents to agree.... Why is it that bachelors are thought not good enough to sign rental contracts even though there is nothing in the UAE law that prohibits them from doing so? (Dharmarajan 2008: 7)

The sexualised threat of the “single” and raced male body results in certain moral economies of space being created. Although it is an informal practice of housing agents, it is tolerated by the state, in whose interests it works. Deemed racially “undesirable” and “dangerous”, single men are thus relegated to the peripheries of the city, part of a larger neoliberal rhetoric where space is kept for elite consumption and marginalised groups are kept aside (Buckley 2013).

The scarcity of living spaces for “bachelors” leads to the employment of a variety of creative solutions, one of which is “hot-bedding”. Two or more men share one bed space, working in shifts and sleeping at different times of the day. This is also a way to limit income spent on rent. The extent of “hot-bedding” is visible on public holidays in Dubai, when there are large numbers of migrant men on the streets of working-class areas of the city. With small, crowded rooms and personal space limited to an individual bed, men who share their bed space do not have an alternate private space to retreat to when it is occupied and so are forced out onto the street. In one instance, municipal inspectors found more than 400 workers living in a single villa. Reports described “dozens living in every room and several sharing each bed” (Kakande 2008: 5). These 400 men were sharing 2 kitchens and 4 bathrooms in total. The reluctance of landlords to rent to “bachelors”, compounded by rising rents in the emirate, has led to such situations of overcrowding and illegal sharing. These cramped and overcrowded spaces are also often allowed to deteriorate. However, because of the high demand for space, it is not difficult to find renters even for villas in bad or close-to-uninhabitable conditions. This, in some instances has led to higher incidences of fires and unannounced evictions, compounding the precarity that low-wage migrants already face. Irregular migrant women freelancers or living-out domestics also often share bed spaces in such villas, where, because of their irregular status, they must cope with regular raids by police and harassment from land-owners (Pattadath 2010: 169).

In contrast to cases of extreme regulation, there is a large underground economy of space that exists. The flourishing of a diverse demand for housing is fuelled by a dynamic labour market, with many migrants working without documentation or on a short-term basis. The large flows of migrants in and out of the city create a constant demand for cheap housing, compounded by exploitative landlords evicting tenants so that they can get around government-imposed rent controls.<sup>10</sup> This flexible economy exists outside the confines of state regulation of housing and rents and is allowed to flourish to a certain extent. It can be seen as an implicit acknowledgement by state authorities of the importance of the

informal and flexible sector.<sup>11</sup> As Sassen (2001) effectively demonstrates, this unregulated sector is integral to the functioning of the formal economy in any global city. Informal and unregulated renting practices allow for a cheap and flexible labour force that can quickly react to the expanding or contracting needs of a changing neoliberal economy.

### **Everyday mobilities**

So far this chapter has shown how inequalities are spatialised in Dubai. Class divides can also be interrogated in terms of everyday mobilities of urban residents. This is in large part to do with the fact that Dubai is a city that is built for the automobile. Although there are pedestrianised areas in the older parts of the city, all the spaces of “new Dubai”, built in the past decade, are designed to be negotiated by the car. It is a mode of transport accessible primarily to the middle class, with most of the working-class population relegated to the dismal public transport system. This was made up of an inadequate and unreliable bus network until the opening of the metro in late 2009. Even within the train system, which was hailed as a way to reduce the reliance on cars in Dubai, there is a hierarchy of ticket pricing. This effectively segregates low-wage migrants from middle-class commuters even in the more democratic mode of public transport, so that they do not share the same compartment: yet another strategy to ensure the body of the (classed and raced) Other is kept invisible and separate. Low-wage migrants’ mobilities are further restricted by their inability to access parts of the city that are not linked to public transport networks. Domestic workers working for households in middle-class gated developments, on their days off, for example, have to resort to sharing taxis in order to access more working-class areas of the emirate where they shop and meet friends. The gated middle-class enclave is typically accessible only by car, another way in which working classes are excluded from such spaces as well as workers’ bodies within them.

Caldeira (2005: 330) observes that walking on public streets and the use of public transport are indicators of class in many cities. In Dubai, pedestrian streets and crossings are seemingly not taken into account in city planning (except within the confines of gated middle-class developments). The major eight-lane highway Sheikh Zayed Road, which runs from one end of the city to the other, does not incorporate regular under- or above-ground pedestrian crossings. Low-wage migrants often dash across, causing frequent accidents and resulting in high numbers of pedestrian deaths. Further, there are no sheltered walkways in most parts of the city to provide refuge during the summer heat, which often



reaches temperatures of 40°C. Bus stops, for example, until recently, were unsheltered. Air-conditioned bus shelters, the introduction of which was highly publicised in 2008, were found to be largely not working (Barhat 2008). Urban development in Dubai, directed for private interests, has resulted in the mobilities of the low-waged not being taken into consideration in the provision of infrastructure. It is a city built predominantly for elite consumption and use.

Public space in Dubai is configured so that it is synonymous with consumption (Vora 2013). This privileging of indoor space as one of neoliberal desire, and consequent devaluation of outdoor space is stark. Elite and middle-class leisure spaces such as shopping malls and hotels are privatised, restricted and sheltered. Working-class migrants seeking leisure zones in the city are relegated to outdoor public spaces – associated with heat, sand and dirt, especially in the summer months. Most of these spaces are not expressly designed for working-class use but function as centres of activity on weekends and public holidays (Elshehtawy 2008b). These are, for example, the walkways outside shops in working-class areas of Satwa or Deira, or greened islands between highways, often surreptitiously colonised by working class bodies at rest.



*Figure 5.7* Low-wage migrant men resting at a traffic island



Figure 5.8 Urban leisure spaces of low-wage migrants

Among the range of outdoor spaces of high status in the emirate are exclusive beaches, often attached to luxury hotels. These parks and beaches have high entry tariffs, discouraging low-wage migrant entry except as service staff. The proposed Palazzo Versace Dubai beach with artificially cooled sand was an extreme indication of how leisure space in the emirate has become highly privatised, branded and manipulated for the wealthy.

This ghettoisation and distancing of the working class from middle-class leisure spaces and gaze is a reaction to the threat of the “Other”, “re-produced through the sensual fields of the everyday” (Butler 1993:



*Figure 5.9* Cleaning up a private beach

487). In this conception, the racial threat of the Black body is always about to do violence to the integrity of the “white nation”. In Dubai, however, the threat can be read as the particularly classed and raced body that does not embody the good neoliberal consumer. In not explicitly engaging in conspicuous consumption, low-wage workers are symbolic of the failure of Dubai to create an environment of “play” for all. They become symbols of what the emirate does not want to stand for – poverty and inability to participate as consumers in the neoliberal economy that the state manufactures. By relegating them to the peripheral and liminal spaces of the city, the visible urban landscape is homogenised and sanitised.

The latent sense of racial threat overlaying the ordering of everyday mobilities within the emirate cannot be overlooked. With Indians making up almost 50 per cent of the population, there is a loosely articulated visceral fear that “they” will take over. This fear comes about not just because of the sheer number of Indian migrants, but because they are responsible for the day-to-day functioning of much of the city’s services. This dread of a demographic imbalance and resultant dilution of national culture is a discourse that has existed in Emirati society for

decades, given that foreigners have composed a significant section of the population since the 1970s (Dresch 2005b: 140). Ali (2010: 144) refers to this fear as the “‘siege mentality’ of nationals”, which he sees as heightened as a result of the post-2001 economic boom in Dubai, which drew greater numbers of migrants to the city-state. In this context, strikes by construction labourers can be read as a display of that mode of collective power – by halting work even for a day, millions of dollars in damage is incurred. More than just a fear of the differently classed Other however, this racial threat extends to middle-class Indian migrants as well.

The perception of racial threat, combined with the structural hierarchies that place Indians near the bottom, result in everyday racisms. The prevalence of racism is widely acknowledged and underpins everyday social interactions in the emirate. While previous chapters provided examples of racism in the workplace, it also permeates leisure spaces. Nova, a 24-year old Indian woman who works as a model, recounted her experiences of racism in trying to enter a nightclub at a luxury hotel in Dubai.

While going out clubbing, the bouncers, they see you're brown skinned, they tend to..um..keep you aside and make you wait. They tend to give more preference to white skin – in most of the clubs. They tell you oh you don't have reservations, you have to wait. The other person right behind us, without reservations, just walks in! You have to be Lebanese, because most of the bouncers are Lebanese, or you have to be Iranian, or you have to be white-skinned. These are the criteria. There you obviously feel discriminated. It happens in most of the clubs...most.

It's like right on your face! He tells you he can't let you in because the club is full and then five minutes later he just lets you in because we were with my Lebanese friends. It's very weird.

In everyday interactions in the emirate, race functions as an important marker of difference, even within middle-class scenarios of leisure and interaction.

### **Shopping malls: simulacra of public space**

Neoliberal restructuring of cities brings into relief the anxiety about visibility – who and what represents the city to outsiders such as tourists, desirable potential migrants and a global media. This also results in spatial strategies of social exclusion where undesirable aspects of the

city are hidden or relegated to the peripheries – as with labour camps in Dubai. In most representations of the emirate, the city has been portrayed as occupied by a rich and privileged elite or a wealthy middle class with high disposable incomes. Shopping malls, hotels, private beaches and clubs are the spaces most often linked with the city-state. Besides romanticised images of *abras* (boats) on the Creek, most of the images featured in the tourist and popular iconography of Dubai are of privately owned commercial space. These are open only to a certain public – only the spending consumer can access these areas. These, then, become the iconic public spaces that symbolise or stand for Dubai in the larger public imagination. The predominant discourse that accompanies such images is that the only way to access these spaces is through consumption. Dubai (or the version of Dubai that is most ubiquitous) can thus only be accessed by entering its privately owned spaces of consumption. Working-class populations do not participate as consumers within such spaces. Yet, as symbols of modernity and consumption, shopping malls universally evoke desire.

Shopping malls are not just zones of consumption integral to Dubai's global image, but are also public spaces in which most middle-class residents of the emirate spend their leisure time. The literature that has considered shopping malls as new public spaces is extensive (Abaza 2001; Bridge and Dowling 2001; Brody 2006; Chua 2003; Koskela 2000; Manzo 2005; Voyce 2006; Zukin 1995), and discusses the surveillance and control of populations, including marginalised migrant workers. Since Kanna's (2005) exploration of shopping malls in Dubai in the mid-2000s, the phenomenon has exploded with numerous more malls opening in the emirate, including what is touted as being the world's largest. Surveys cite the UAE as having the second highest number of recreational shoppers in the world who shop for "something to do" or "entertainment" (AMEinfo.com 2006). This is indicative not just of the pervasiveness of the consumption ethic in Dubai, but also that the shopping mall is a significant site to be considered in the physical landscape of the city-state. Especially during the hot summer months, they are zones of refuge from the heat and humidity. Frequented by both locals and foreigners, they are not just places for ordinary and everyday shopping, but also for the display and performance of consumption. In Emirati national discourse, "great concern is expressed locally about materialism and consumerism" (Dresch 2005a: 27), especially among youth, although this discursive disciplining contradicts much of the national celebration of consumption evident in shopping festivals, and the constant creation of new consumption spaces in the undeveloped desert within the emirate's

boundaries. Despite the moral panic around fostering a population that is tied to commoditised values, the lure of conspicuous consumption as a symbol of modernity and mobility remains.

Mid-eighteenth-century Parisian shopping arcades are credited with opening up streets and boulevards to shoppers who could now enter without any obligation to buy, rendering the border between public and private space more porous and fluid (Harvey 2006: 25). Dubai shopping malls further blur these divisions through incorporating the outdoors within indoor spaces. Ski slopes and European-style boulevards feature prominently inside air-conditioned urban malls, (and are now also found in malls in Macau, South Africa and the United States, among others). Rather than the street, the shopping mall thus emerges as the new public space in Dubai – the new boulevard, where inside and outside, public and private are constantly interchanged. These mall spaces of consumption and entertainment are where most middle classes (especially women) spend their time. It is also where globalised culture is consumed, in terms of diverse varieties of (fast) food, popular music, international fashion brands and Hollywood movies. While



*Figure 5.10* Bringing the outside in – a Venetian public square inside a Dubai shopping mall

consumption activity is less subject to policing, the behaviour of shoppers is closely monitored.

Coupled with the removal of pedestrian spaces such as pavements and the dominance of the car in the city-state, these interior spaces of consumption function effectively as the “new” public sphere. The implications are significant. Although they are ostensibly “public”, malls are in fact private spaces, frequently run by privatised and corporate interests. Within these public spaces, explicitly political activities such as protests and demonstrations do not take place. They act solely as spaces of consumption. Beyond the political, even the personal sphere is regulated. Public displays of affection such as kissing, for example, are often policed within the spaces of the shopping mall, with campaigns regularly implemented to discourage what are perceived “Western” immoral impositions. Prescribed moralities through such strategies are imposed onto leisure and consumption zones, just as they are onto the spaces of labour camps and bodies of workers.

Maintaining the morality of a space extends to keeping certain “undesirables” out.<sup>12</sup> Within that logic, low-wage male migrant threats to female sexuality need to be policed and kept out of the public/private spaces of the shopping mall, which is an acceptable and safe space for unaccompanied single women to socialise. In this way, urban space is “purified” and “aestheticised” through processes of exclusion (Koskela 2000: 246). Low-wage workers are thus frequently barred from entry to malls by security guards who are tasked with the “aggressive management of people flows in centres of consumption” (Noble 2009: 886), despite themselves having affinity with this category of migrants. Except when they are there as drivers (when they wait in the car park) or when they are shopping for their employers, low-wage migrants are seen as illegitimate in the space of the mall. Their inability to participate as consumers delimits their access to middle-class spaces of consumption. Low-wage migrants who do inhabit the mall are workers – as cleaners in toilets or waiters in restaurants – who never venture outside the demarcated zones in which they work (cf. Brody 2006). They are bused to the mall and back to their camps at the end of their shifts. Although they inhabit the physical space of the mall, their presence is contingent on the fact that they are “workers” rather than consumers. They are non-people in such spaces, their presence unacknowledged except as part of the infrastructure.

The reduction of low-wage migrants to workers does not just exclude them from the economy of consumption; it denies a part of their human and urban experience. Extending from Hegel, Miller (1987) argues that

we see ourselves as human not just through labour but also through consumption. This is especially relevant in complex societies of late capitalism in which we now depend more on the objects of consumption as resources in how we see and present ourselves. Denying low-wage migrants' needs and prerogative to consume is another means through which their totality as human beings is denied. This denial is even more pronounced within the context of Dubai – where consumption is an entrenched part of the economy and an important way in which the city envisions itself on a global scale.

Low-wage migrants are of course also consumers, and frequent remitters of consumer goods. However, the areas patronised by low-wage migrants are typically not within shopping malls and are largely invisible to the middle-class gaze. The construct of low-wage migrants as non-consumers is a classed perspective, a discourse that perpetuates reductionist understandings of the low-wage migrant Other to mark difference, status and social distance.

## **Conclusion**

Periyasami is a low-wage migrant from Tamil Nadu who left a wife and two children to work in Dubai as a security guard. After our interview at a coffeeshop, he invited me to a nearby worksite, where he both works and lives. It is in Deira, near the Tamil Bazaar, and we talked while he made dinner in his makeshift plywood hut at the edge of the construction site. The hut itself is just a single room about 2 metres by 1 metre, and a cheaply constructed affair. He shares it with another Indian migrant who is also a security guard at the site. Both men eat, cook and sleep in that space. Until recently, Periyasami told me, they were not provided water to drink or cook with. They still did not have a toilet – forcing them to rely on friends nearby for use of bathroom facilities. What stood out, however, in these stark and austere living conditions, were pictures of luxury hotels and high-end residential developments in Dubai cut out from magazines and pasted on the wall of the hut. Periyasami had never been to any of these places. In fact, he had never even seen them from the outside.

These cut-outs were ephemeral symbols of the desires that drove Periyasami to come to Dubai and leave his family behind. They were reminders of why he was in Dubai, when he did not have pictures of his family to put up. Although Periyasami knew little about the commercialised and privatised spaces of tourist fame in Dubai, the symbolic meanings of the city as a space of possibility and social mobility did not escape





*Figure 5.11* Pictures on the walls of Periyasami's makeshift residence

him. The images of luxury hotels and exclusive apartment complexes represented “the good life” that he desired for himself and his family. Although the penetration of outsiders is rare in the labour camp and other spaces of low-wage migrant residence such as this construction site, aspirations and desires from the privatised spaces of middle-class gated communities and other commoditised spaces of the city easily permeate. In the disaffiliated city, discourses, values and meanings cross physical boundaries far more fluidly than bodies. The poignancy of the contrast between the austerity of Periyasami’s hut and the luxury of the images on his wall is also indicative of the irony inherent in such polarised communities sharing a city. Dubai, as this chapter has shown, is a fitting case study of processes of urban disaffiliation that are starkly juxtaposed in the material landscape of the city. Although seemingly separate, middle-class spaces function as material motivators for a working-class population. Conversely, middle-class spaces also depend on an army of low-wage migrants to function.

This chapter has demonstrated how neoliberal technologies manipulate spatiality in Dubai. In neoliberal readings of space, the focus has been on how the privatisation of land has engendered different

exclusions, some more insidious than others. This shift has been taking place in various parts of the globe (Webster, Glasze et al. 2002), as in Dubai, where a unique mode of privatisation is pervasive and rapid. Dubai, here, is an example of how technologies of neoliberal urban governance function outside traditional Western metropolitan centres. This chapter supplements a range of work that has been conducted in North American and western European cities (Brenner and Theodore 2002; McKenzie 2006). In examining both middle-class gated developments and working-class labour camps as forms of urban disaffiliation, this chapter has also broadened the analysis of socio-spatial exclusions in contemporary cities.

This chapter has also discussed socio-spatial inequalities in the material landscape of the emirate as well as in terms of everyday mobilities. The embedding of such processes in the landscape, because of its permanence, reifies and naturalises classed divisions. Socio-spatial segregation and exclusion are thus seen as acceptable and natural. However, this chapter has also shown how, more than just reflecting inequalities, spatial practices impose class as well as race on bodies. In particular, it examined how a homogeneous Western lifestyle constructs “whiteness” in middle-class gated developments. On the other hand, in labour camps, the invisibility of marginal spaces make latent certain migrant pathologies enacted within them. The effects of incarceration in labour camps can, as we have seen, be violent and tragic. Here Harvey’s ideas of the city as dystopia or utopic degeneration become appropriate conceptualisations of Dubai (2000: 168). The chapter has also explored the creation of gendered and classed threats within paternalistic discourses of protection and safety. Here, working-class migrant men were seen as sexualised threats to female virtue. Finally, through a discussion of informal spatial practices and economies, the pervasiveness of the neoliberal spatial logic was questioned.

In this chapter, the lived spaces of Dubai functioned as political actors in the creation and perpetuation of segregation. However, the urban area does also at times act as a site where everyday acts of care and solidarity develop among its migrant population. Although the city is largely experienced as segregated, there are significant ways in which those divisions are productively negotiated.

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# 6

## Social Networks: Informal Solidarities and an Ethic of “Care”

We drove far out of the limits of the city, past the Jebel Ali port into the stretches of unmarked desert you traverse before reaching the limits of Abu Dhabi. The cemetery was nothing more than a compound of sand with makeshift walls made out of plastic that was already coming apart at several places. I was told that after the plot beside the nearby church had become full, the newer graves were forced to spill over into this more temporary area, clearly indicative not just of the high numbers of migrant deaths in Dubai but also of the lack of infrastructure to deal with such collateral consequences of the city's growth in migrant numbers.

There were already about six women when we got there. They were all dressed in long skirts and blouses – attire typical of Sri Lankan domestics working in Dubai. A priest, dressed in robes, was also there. The ceremony was quiet and simple. After the priest read a short prayer, everyone joined in for a final Lord's Prayer. Even Mr Mohammed, a Muslim volunteer, bowed his head in silent respect. Just before the coffin was lowered into the ground, the women who had come to attend their friend's funeral asked for one last look at the deceased, Edna. The coffin was opened – it was cheaply constructed, made out of thin plywood, completely plain and unadorned. It hadn't even been painted; the coffin just as unmarked as the body within. Edna's corpse had been completely swathed in a white cloth so that even her face could not be seen. A tag hung from her wrapped-up body. When Edna's face was uncovered at the mourners' request, they immediately whipped out their cameras and began taking photos. What at first seemed like an inappropriate intrusion, I realised later was so that they could send these pictures back to Edna's family in Sri Lanka, who could neither afford to attend her funeral nor to repatriate her body. A Dubai-based humanitarian organisation had paid for the entire costs of the funeral, and ensured there were friends present to



mourn her. Her body had been lying unclaimed in the mortuary for a month before the authorities had contacted the humanitarian group for assistance. Edna's is one of many such cases. Some bodies of deceased migrant workers lie in the mortuary for more than a year unclaimed and unidentified until the police or a charity group arrange for a cremation. Most come from very poor socio-economic conditions in their home countries and their families have little means of tracing their whereabouts once they migrate.

Edna Fernando came to Dubai from Sri Lanka to work as a domestic. Like other FDWs coming from less-developed countries in Asia, she, too, probably had plans of returning to her home after a period of working and saving. But like many other low-wage migrants to Dubai, Edna never managed that return. She fell ill during her course of employment and died in a hospital in Dubai. Edna's story reveals the complexities of analysing migrants' relationships with the transitory space of the city-state. Although a temporary labour migrant to the emirate with precarious legal affiliations to the state, Edna's association with Dubai extended beyond the city merely as a site for work and capital accumulation. She had built friendships in Dubai with fellow domestics, formed affiliations with a local church and in the end, depended on the welfare of a charity organisation. For the members of the humanitarian organisation who made the funeral arrangements, themselves migrants, Dubai is a space in which they have actively invested. In enacting these acts of caring, they often place themselves in situations in which they risk censure and deportation. Often extremely inhospitable to migrants, Dubai also facilitates the formation of significant bonds and social networks. Often these connections are made between migrants of the same nationality or religious background. However, as with the humanitarian organisation's outreach, they also cross divisions of class and race. This chapter demonstrates how these social networks thrive within an informal space in the city, outside state regulations. It goes on to suggest that these elements of everyday life in Dubai point to possibilities of urban solidarity even within a highly rationalised and unequal place.

### **Urban Informality and "Care" in Dubai**

This chapter draws together everyday practices, logics and networks under the umbrella of urban informality to convey strategies that migrant communities in Dubai employ to manage their often-marginalised existence within the city-state. Chapters 3 and 5 showed Dubai to be a highly controlled physical, social and legal environment, especially

for low-wage migrants subjected to forms of social exclusion through systems of employment and restricted mobilities. Conversely, this chapter outlines the ways in which that control is somewhat challenged through forms of sociality and aid that are not always encouraged nor easily allowed to exist within the confines of the city-state. They are unstructured, informal reactionary strategies to the exclusionary practices of neoliberal governance. Urban informality encompasses these strategies of collectively organising under a regime where control and regulation of marginalised populations are pervasive. Informality here is often in reaction to, and results from, state practices. It is a set of reactionary coping strategies “determined by the nature of a political regime” (Al Sayyad 2004: 22).<sup>1</sup>

Processes and practices of urban informality are particularly apparent in spaces that are rapidly modernising and globalising through greater integration into a neoliberal economic system (Al Sayyad 2004: 26). Dubai is an appropriate case study as it is in the early stages of establishing its place within the global capitalist order (Marchal 2005). In the city-state, there are social spaces that remain as yet “uncolonised” by the expansionist neoliberal logic that economic liberalisation and restructuring create (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006). Neoliberalism is, then, not an omnipresent discourse, but one that selectively colonises particular relationships and interactions. The “uncolonised” zones of urban informality discussed in this chapter fall outside formal economic markets and other institutionalised laws of the state. Although indirectly still subject to the state’s control, they function in largely informal ways. They are the spaces of spontaneous and everyday interaction, and function in the peripheries of Dubai society where aid groups and faith-based charities exist. It is in these spaces that migrants develop and employ strategies to challenge dominant modes of affiliation and control. More precisely, urban informality here arises out of a necessity to subvert the disadvantages and inequalities engendered by encroaching state practices, that seek to rationalise social relations.

The informal is necessary alongside formal modes of interaction to create a better quality of life through improved trust relationships (Miszta 2000: 3; 2005). “The process of informalization is seen in the context of the persisting tendency towards the depersonalization of social relations in the public realm” (Miszta 2000: 9). As the previous chapter demonstrated, social relations in neoliberalised societies are becoming increasingly formalised, which typically cements existing social separations. In this context, the sphere of informality allows for possibilities of interaction and solidarity across formalised divisions.

Informality is thus reliant on and shaped by the formal structures in Emirati society, while simultaneously being a reaction to the pervasiveness of such constructions. The mechanisms generating informal adjustment thus come about because formal rules do not sustain desirable levels of civility, sociability and an ethic of “care”.

### Care

It is now widely acknowledged that an ethic of care is important in conceptualisations of inclusive urban life (Amin 2006). In examining social networks and interactions, this chapter acknowledges the quality of care in the establishment of ideal communal interactions (Amin 2009: 1). This chapter contextualises “care” as a set of networks, relationships and acts that express solidarities and connections. It functions in the informal realm, complementary to more formalised relationships in Dubai and the structures of exclusion that they entail.<sup>2</sup> Care here encompasses weak and strong social ties – of friendship as well as looser affiliations between persons and communities. It is characterised primarily by a respect for and recognition of the Other. Respect, as we saw in Chapter 4, was largely lacking in low-wage migrants’ lives in Dubai. This chapter shows that possibilities for respect and recognition exist, as evidenced through performances of everyday care.

Dubai has been popularly depicted as a space that is predominantly uncaring in relation to its migrants.<sup>3</sup> This perspective is prevalent in academic analyses of social exclusion (Elshehtawy 2004; Dresch 2006; Willoughby 2006; Davis 2007; Masad 2008; Vora 2008; Ali 2010; Vora 2013) and is augmented by extensive journalistic accounts and regular reports by human rights groups of abuses of low-wage migrants and mistreatment of foreign domestic workers (Leonard 2002; Zachariah, Prakash et al. 2003; Esim and Smith 2004; Verite 2005; Willoughby 2005; Breen 2008; Wickramasekara 2008). These readings have consequences in terms of everyday interactions and sociality in the emirate. Ali, for example, identifies commercialism and attendant superficiality as characterising much of the social relations between expatriates in Dubai. “the combination of the government building up the economy in the manner they have while ignoring or making the expression of non-commercial culture difficult and the temporary state of expatriates leads to a situation when superficiality of interaction is common” (2010: 68). Dubai, in these readings, exhibits few, if any, characteristics of informal practices that sustain an ethic of care or desirable forms of sociability. While such characterisations are valid and have serious consequences, it is also important to take into account that alternative readings exist. In

highlighting the “caring” aspects of solidarity and informal networks in the city, this chapter disrupts homogeneous perspectives of Dubai. The unequal formal relationships between state and migrants, and divisions within the migrant population that previous chapters unpacked, now open up a space for understanding the significance of informal networks of care.

### **Social networks and social capital**

The concept of social capital is important in developing understandings of how informal social networks function among diverse groups. At a basic level, it refers to access to benefits “by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures”. As Portes extracts from Bourdieu’s original conceptualisation, “social networks are not a natural given and must be constructed through investment strategies oriented to the institutionalisation of group relations” (1998: 3). Community-formation for individual gain is thus implicit in the formation of networked solidarities. From another perspective, Putnam (1993) argues that it is social capital that sustains a strong civic political culture. In his conceptualisations, social capital is merely a by-product of sociability, implied as existing “out there” rather than actively constructed.

Informal care networks in Dubai are often spontaneous and unstructured. In this way, they diverge from the above conceptualisations of social capital by Portes. Many of the networks described here are loosely formed, lacking any real means of ensuring the accountability of their members. Help and assistance, then, are given with a vague expectation but no guarantee of return. However, the possibility of favours not being reciprocated is worth the risk, given the intangible and more ephemeral rewards of sociality, camaraderie, friendship and class solidarity that are the everyday reciprocal basis on which these networks commonly function. These aspects of networks in Dubai have more affinity with Putnam’s definition. What are important, however, in Portes’s and Bourdieu’s conceptualisations of social capital are emphases on the constructedness of networks and the unequal access to social capital among different populations. This foregrounding “allows for an understanding of the inter-linkage between social capital, forms of social struggle and social hierarchy. From this point of view, social capital must be understood as hardwired into the process of the making and remaking of social inequalities, especially those associated with class relations” (Adkins 2005: 197). This chapter’s examination of social capital in Dubai makes apparent the ways in which low-wage migrant populations, in particular, rely on

informal networks to negotiate their diminished access to resources and more formal modes of support. The nature of social capital in Dubai is shaped overwhelmingly by formal institutional structures of inclusion and exclusion. Informal social networks, in this context, are coping mechanisms for marginalised circumstances. Temporary subversions of entrenched divisions of race and class within the emirate, however, do not give way to larger systematic shifts.

Situated within a region where strong tribal and clan affinities are markers of belonging, Dubai is a city where the significance of social networks has long been understood. Analyses (Elsheshtawy 2004) indicate that early traders and settlers formed productive and strong networks within the coastal emirate, laying the foundations for its success as a cosmopolitan trading post. With subsequent generations of migrant communities settling in Dubai, the importance of forming group affiliations has remained an important means of negotiating city life. The role of social networks in the study of ethnic enclaves, businesses and trade has been well documented (Light 1984; Portes 1987; Light and Bonacich 1988; Perez 1992; Zhou 1992; Portes and Stepick 1993; Nee, Sanders et al. 1994; Lyons and Snoxell 2005; Meagher 2010). This chapter contributes to this literature with a particular focus on networks of friendship and more informal, non-economic uses of social capital (cf. Moore 1990; Pahl 2000; Warr 2005; Ryan, Sales et al. 2008) among and across ethnic groups in Dubai.

### **Hometown associations and informal transnationality**

Dubai and the Gulf Arab states are built along strong lines of tribal solidarity based on ties of marriage and blood (Beblawi and Luciani 1987). This has, in large part, meant that there is a distinct division between locals and migrants. Vora (2013), for example, effectively demonstrates how the distinctions built against the migrant South Asian middle class functions to define and consolidate an Emirati national identity. Further sub-divisions along national, linguistic, religious, home village, caste and class lines are also apparent within the migrant community. Phenotypical differences such as skin colour and accent, as well as markers of cultural capital like residential neighbourhood and leisure activities further complicate the landscape (Vora 2008).

These distinctions or combinations of affinities are enacted and evoked by migrants to ensure the success of different agendas. Social networks, are, however, established most often through shared national and cultural identities.<sup>4</sup> As Meagher (2010: 159) points out, following

development economists and critical political scientists, in ethnically stratified and highly unequal societies, social networks might in fact reify divisions and foster ethnic fragmentation. This often appears to be the case in Dubai, where social networks around shared ethnic and national identity in fact reinforce divisions already instituted by the state and private capital. There are, however, important exceptions.

Membership of migrant or hometown organisations, often delineated along lines of caste, hometown or village, state or nationality is one way migrants cement values and relationships within a community. This avenue of network formation and sociality, however, is largely available only to middle-class migrants. This is a result in part of the longer-term nature of most middle-class migrants' tenure in Dubai, as well as the often family-oriented nature of many of these organisations' activities. This excludes most low-wage migrants whose status in the emirate is that of "bachelor" (even if they have a wife and children in their home countries). Single female migrants are also unlikely to join. Access and membership to such migrant organisations is conventionally through friendship networks, while some also require a membership fee. Many low-wage migrants are unaware of the existence of such migrant groups and are unwilling or unable to pay to join a primarily social or cultural organisation. The freedom of mobility and leisure time necessary to participate as active members of such organisations are also often unavailable to low-wage migrants.

Besides the Dubai Indian Association, formed in 1957 and one of the oldest community-based organisations, there are several Indian associations representative of region or sub-region, caste group or a combination of such axes of affinity. While a few of the larger migrant organisations are officially recognised by the Emirati state, there exist many more that function informally, with no fixed membership criteria or rules. Their activities are not monitored or officially governed. One of the primary purposes of many of these groups is to create a sense of community and solidarity to counter the sense of alienation that comes with migrating to a new country – a mandate similar to migrant organisations in other cities.

Many hometown associations have increasingly begun to focus their activities on the creation and upkeep of transnational connections with the home country. They become the "quintessential 'transnational' institution because they are a vehicle for a wide range of collective practices linking migrants to family and townspeople who stayed behind" (Fitzgerald 2004: 10). One way in which these links are maintained in the Indian case, is through non-resident Indian (NRI) investment. This strategy is especially

relevant to Indians in Dubai who know that the long-term reality will almost never involve permanent settlement in the UAE. The nature of settlement in the emirate for even skilled migrants is known to be somewhat precarious, as evidenced by the loss of jobs and large-scale reverse migration with the global financial crisis of late 2008–2009. Investing for an eventual return is seen not just as provision for the future, but also as a means of cashing into economic growth in India. The following section explores how forms of NRI investment have taken on notions of aid that extend beyond economic nationalism or familial obligations to embody more community-based care. In this way, hometown associations can be seen as supplementing the deficient of the sending state in catering for migrant welfare (cf. Meagher 2010). The informal and unregulated practices of hometown associations come about because of the failure of formal state structures to cater effectively for return migrants' reintegration.

The significance of NRI investment for India's economy has been extensively explored (Lessinger 1992; Walton-Roberts 2004; Singh 2006; Khadria 2007), with studies addressing in particular the impact of remittances on improving the economic status of migrants and their families as well as infrastructure-building capacities in the home state (Zachariah, Mathew et al. 1999; 2000; Zachariah and Rajan 2004; Osella and Osella 2006). The transnational links of Dubai-based Indian migrant groups can also be understood within such frames. Not just confined to capital investment and accumulation, remittances often take on community and capacity-building functions as well. These initiatives frequently assume the form of collective fund-raising to establish schools, hospitals and housing complexes for returnees. They also form loaning bodies that help with the initial financing of businesses that returnees are encouraged by state governments to set up, as a means of integrating productively back into the local community. Individual requests by members of the community back home for payment of college tuition or school fees are also often fulfilled. These serve the function of tying middle-class migrants to the home state and community, despite long physical absences. The political presence garnered through such remittance investments is also a means of performing long-distance citizenship.

To garner support and visibility for their activities, the rhetoric of altruism and obligation is prevalent in discourses of hometown organisations. Their activities are presented as a means of improving the lot of "their people". These exclusive conceptualisations draw on a sense of tightly woven community, where success is judged against those of other towns and regions within the same state. This also means that help

is highly exclusionary, rendered only to those within the same district, religious community or caste group. Most aid projects are financed through ad hoc donations or specific fundraisers held in Dubai. They are one-off, temporary modes of care focused on local-level projects that result in highly tangible consequences. Although they involve significant time and organisation, many such capacity-building initiatives are not part of a sustained programme of transnational aid. The provision of aid to marginalised communities in the home country also reveals a neglect of low-wage populations in Dubai.

Low-wage migrants in Dubai are sometimes included as donors rather than as recipients in the above-mentioned initiatives. Elitist notions of superior economic knowledge and cultural capital assume that low-wage migrants do not possess sufficient knowledge or ability to invest their savings effectively. Schemes are thus set up in which the resources of a group of low-wage migrants are pooled together and a sizable investment and returns made. While many of these investments are carried out informally, based on networks of trust and friendship, some migrant groups in Dubai have established formally registered investment companies that carry out large-scale infrastructure-building projects in the home state. These are, however, typically secondary functions of community-based migrant groups, which are primarily engaged in the maintenance of cultural markers and social network building.

These efforts can also be seen as the logics of neoliberalism entering the transnational spaces of care and aid. With equity shares in such projects starting from ten rupees, even low-income migrants with meagre wages are encouraged to participate in networks of transnational capital investment. Within this rhetoric of ethnic solidarity espoused by paternalistic middle-class migrants, the spirit of entrepreneurialism and sound management of money is encouraged. The “good” working-class migrant is thus defined not just by his (highly gendered) ability to be a contributing member of his community, but also his ability to be cognizant of sound investment practices. These forms of transnational care, aid and collective investment by migrant groups are especially common among organisations composed of migrants from Kerala and India more generally. Given the longer trajectory of migration to the Gulf from that region and subsequent return migration, it is not surprising that such networks and strategies of transnational care have been more fully developed in that context. The dependence of Kerala’s state GDP on remittances and the large numbers of Gulf returnees necessitates the development of transnational investment and infrastructure-building



schemes to reintegrate capital and human resources back into the state economy effectively.

Migrant groups also provide more short-term and practical forms of assistance, for instance by providing monetary support to new migrants starting up in Dubai, dispensing practical advice on getting a job, navigating the competitive rental market and the process of obtaining a driver's licence (which can be an especially fraught process for Indian drivers' licence holders). These forms of "informational and instrumental support" (Ryan, Sales et al. 2008: 674) are extremely valuable for new migrants, enabling them to embed themselves quickly within the local landscape. Again, it is important to note that this avenue of information is largely restricted to skilled migrants; many low-wage migrants arrive in Dubai without the knowledge or ability to access appropriate networks to negotiate their way effectively in a foreign city.

Hometown organisations also play a significant role in middle-class migrants' recreational activities. Muthu, an Indian IT worker, described how an elder member of the Nagarathar Sangam, an Indian informal community association that was established in Dubai about 20 years ago, explained the place of the organisation in migrant life to him:

He said, when he first came here (to Dubai), the people working here showed him something. See this is a camel. Here camels are available. Here too, you will work like a camel. They'll suck everything from you. You'll become a camel and they'll send you like that. You can go and die in India. Or maybe retire or something.

This was the narration given. Why did he tell us – it is like this, the life in Dubai?

And, so we have this kind of organisation, so that we can socialise. So just come, don't become donkeys or camels!

Explicit here is the how migrant hometown organisations position themselves as providing a form of community to the highly rationalised working lives of migrants who come primarily to accumulate capital and for a different quality of life than in their home countries. However, the ability to access such social networks is dependent on the migrant's access to unsupervised time and spare money for leisure activities. These are resources less available to low-wage migrants. These institutionalised class- and status-based exclusions generate an impetus for the development of more organic informal working-class networks.

## Social networks of repair – the informal NGO

### Repair and mediation

Hometown associations are generally concerned with community-building and welfare issues of skilled and middle-class migrants to Dubai, as well as in transnational modes of care that involve infrastructure building in their home states and districts. The social welfare issues of low-wage migrants, who are frequently in greater need of immediate assistance, are undertaken predominantly by faith-based and secular charities and informally organised NGOs. Their activities often take on the role of “repair” (Thrift 2005) in the sense that they step in to play a mediatory and restorative role when relationships between employer and employee break down. In a system where the social welfare and legal status of the migrant is almost entirely dependent on the employer, the undertakings of these mediatory organisations are difficult and delicate.

The role of NGOs, charity groups and faith-based aid groups is one that is necessitated by what Roberts and Portes term the “absent state” (2005: 61). It is where “free market reforms result in the central state playing little or no role in the lives of low-income populations as employer or as regulator of labor and living conditions”. This, for Roberts and Portes, creates a climate where “other mobilizing structures become more important ... particularly NGOs”. In Dubai, a neoliberal logic of privatisation in dealing with its migrant workers means that the state assumes minimum responsibility for their welfare. The *kafala* system of sponsorship legitimises this neglect through ultimate responsibility for the migrant being bestowed on his or her employer. The state largely abdicates responsibility, as is evidenced by the lack of infrastructure to deal with migrants who fall outside their prescribed places within the labour regime. It was only in 2007, for example, that the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children was set up to house abused FDWs and other trafficked and abused women and children. This facility, the only one of its kind in the UAE, cannot cope alone with the volume of mistreated women needing shelter. Representatives of sending countries are also largely “absent” – either disinclined, or unable, to deal with the sheer volume of migrant issues with which they are presented daily. Although the Indian embassy, for example, ran a shelter for Indian runaway domestics and other abused female migrants, it proved inadequate in coping with the scale of abuses. It is here that non-state actors step in. Their informal practices of care

and “repair” are necessitated by the shortcomings of state actors (both foreign and Emirati). However, they are also limited by formal governance structures.

One of the most significant factors that hinders the work of charity groups and NGOs in Dubai is that they are often not formally recognised by the state, and no legal mandate allows for their existence. They carry out their activities in a highly informal manner, with locally based migrant volunteers forming the mass of their workforce. Their activities in relation to the welfare of low-wage migrants are not overtly welcomed as these acts of “care” can be interpreted as signalling a failure of the state to cater for migrants’ welfare. Already sensitive to the international media’s criticisms of its treatment of low-wage migrants, an acknowledgement that these migrants need help because of a breakdown or absence of state mechanisms could be seen as an even greater acknowledgement of neglect. This leads to a situation in which the presence and activities of charities and NGOs are known and to some extent monitored, but very infrequently, if ever, formally recognised or lauded. One consequence of this is that the activities of such organisations can at any time be halted and deemed illegal. They therefore “go to great lengths to stress their apolitical nature” (Davidson 2008: 212), emphasising that their activities merely address everyday migrant needs rather than act as a larger systemic critique of the governance model of the emirate or larger state.

Organisations that have brought unwanted public attention to the emirate through their activities have faced reprimand. City of Hope, an independently run shelter for abused women and children, was closed down after its founder drew international media attention to the unsympathetic ways in which domestic violence and human trafficking are dealt with in Dubai (Worth 2008). She now seeks political asylum in the United States, after herself being accused of engaging in trafficking the women and children in her shelter. Less international visibility does not mean, however, being granted a free reign in activities. The Dubai police also regularly questioned the head of the humanitarian organisation that I spent time with in the course of my fieldwork. The organisation’s cooperation with international human rights agencies in their investigations was viewed with suspicion. NGO workers and volunteers had to contend with surveillance and the constant threat of deportation, should their acts of aid be deemed politically contentious. The Dubai state is not unusual in monitoring such non-governmental activities, but its selective tolerance and censure of such organisations belies its simultaneous dependence upon them without wanting to acknowledge the need for

their presence. Buckley (2013) describes an Indian female doctor who undertakes intermediary consular work for low-wage migrants, and whose activities are monitored by police. She suggests that this mode of selective tolerance is not to replace a retreating state, but an extension of the privatised arrangements that govern migrant lives in Dubai.

The charity groups and NGOs that I discuss here are all Dubai-based, although some might have transnational links to India or NGOs in other countries. However, they are all typically funded by migrants in the UAE, unlike many NGOs in the Global South that are financially backed by transnational NGOs in Europe or North America. This shapes the very grassroots-level care that they undertake. Much of the work of these charity organisations, NGOs and faith-based groups involves the collection and distribution of resources such as money, clothing, toiletries and everyday provisions to low-wage migrants. Many of them work through donations via word-of-mouth or online networks and make regular weekly or bi-weekly trips to labour camps to distribute daily necessities like towels, soap, toothbrushes and canned food. These organisations often also raise funds for the payment of *diyya* or blood money for when a labourer has caused a death, for instance, in a traffic accident. Most low-wage migrants cannot afford the *diyya* of 200,000 dirhams (for a male death) and 100,000 dirhams (for a female death) and face imprisonment as a result of non-payment,<sup>5</sup> unless an NGO or charity puts up the money on their behalf.

Charity groups and NGOs also mediate between disgruntled employers and employees, usually on behalf of a disempowered low-wage migrant. Ashia, for example, was a Somali female domestic working for a Lebanese family in Dubai. After she fell at work and was hospitalised for injuries, her employers refused to pay her hospital bill, although the law mandates that employers should take on all health-care costs of their employees. In addition, they wanted to repatriate her without proper compensation and before her contract ended, as she required a long rest period after the fall and would thus be unable to work and unproductive in their home. In this case, a social worker belonging to a humanitarian organisation employed a series of strategies including threatening to involve the police, shaming the employer through informing the media and repeatedly hounding and harassing the employer into accepting responsibility. These strategies are especially effective in circumstances where employees have been injured in the course of work and abandoned when they ceased to be productive or useful. In this case of Ashia, her employers were shamed into paying for her hospitalisation and subsequent care. They also compensated her for the time she would not

be able to work as a result of her injury. While these tactics are sometimes successful, the need for them points to a failure of a system where ultimate responsibility for the migrant lies with his or her employer. It is also an indication that the enforcement of such laws is inadequate. Informal and innovative interventions by social workers compensate where the legal system fails.

In the course of my fieldwork with a humanitarian organisation in Dubai, each week would regularly bring on average three new instances of aid needed by low-wage migrants who had been injured at the worksite, in a traffic accident or, in the case of domestic workers, in the employer's home. I came across the majority of these cases in my weekly visits to Rashid Hospital, a large government-run facility in Dubai. Employers "dumped" their employees at a hospital and would perpetually be unavailable when contacted to pay for their hospitalisation or repatriation. Low-wage migrant employees were often unable to, or uninformed about how to, agitate for their rights. Many are unaware of the nature of the companies or individuals they work for, and not in possession of either a contract or even their passports. Even determining the exact name of the injured employee's company is often a problem, especially when workers' experience memory loss as a result of a head injury. This neglect of wounded employees was more common among smaller companies and firms. Large construction companies such as Al Habtoor or state enterprises such as Emaar were more likely to look after their employees. Some injured and abandoned FDWs were also often unable to provide a full name, phone number or address for their employer, never having been allowed out of the home or to use the telephone. Low-wage migrants were also often injured outside their workplaces, for example in traffic accidents.<sup>6</sup> One such incident involved an Indian construction worker who had been found unconscious by the side of a road. He did not have any documents on him and could not remember whom he worked for. Besides a vague recollection of living in a labour camp, he could not recall even the names of his family in India. Volunteers for a charity organisation trawled through labour camps with his photograph before they found co-workers who could identify him. These ad-hoc and informal methods, as utilised by the charity, prove important in situations where formal channels do not work. The labour- and time-intensive nature of such methods also means that the police or other state authorities are unlikely to utilise them. It is within these spaces left uncolonised by the autocratic state that NGOs and humanitarian organisations thrive.

### **Building trust**

Many charity groups and NGOs work hand-in-hand with hospital nurses, doctors and case-management officers to ensure that employers are informed and meet their obligations to their migrant employees. The presence of charity groups and NGOs and their assistance to hospital patients are always on an informal basis, through a familiarity built through repeated visits and established routines. It is this informality and lack of bureaucracy that draws many volunteers to help. "I didn't want to be part of a big organization with lots of administration", stated one social worker. For her, not having to follow a set procedure allowed for more personalised attention to individual needs on a case-by-case basis. The flexibility of not having to negotiate red tape often means that help is more efficiently rendered. This also means, however, that relationships between NGO workers and institutions are not formalised through written agreements. Neither do volunteers receive remuneration or official acknowledgement for their work. The physical and symbolic space within which volunteers work is only that allowed for by institutional actors such as police or hospital staff. Gaining access is often hard.

The relationships and networks necessary for "repair" work (Thrift 2005) are built over years, as described by one of my informants from a humanitarian organisation. He spoke about how they had initially, through repeated visits to Rashid Hospital, built mutually trusting relationships with nurses working in the wards there, through whom access to patients is mediated. "When you're doing (this) on a long-term basis, you should establish some friendship, some relation that you should respect them, and they should respect you". This was made somewhat easier by the fact that many of the nurses working in public hospitals in Dubai are from Kerala (Percot 2006; Percot and Rajan 2007). Many of the humanitarian organisation's volunteer workers were from the same state, and the ability to speak a common language and knowledge of a shared place of origin often made relationships easier to cultivate. As a way of opening up this shared space of affinity, volunteers would ask nurses which part of Kerala they had come from and describe where they were from, or share stories of relatives who lived close by in the same district. These informal means of establishing trust were based loosely on the notion that someone from "our area" was trustworthy. This formed the basis on which relationships were initially built. Volunteer social workers were thus strategic in choosing to approach nurses from Kerala rather than Filipino or Arab ones when seeking information

about patients. Trust was an important intangible component of the social capital that social workers utilised to negotiate their way around even the restricted zones of the hospital, gain access to patient records and bargain for reduced hospital costs. As Giddens highlights, trust in modern societies is no longer a given based on local community or kinship networks, but becomes a project that needs to be “worked at”. It demands the “opening out of the individual to the other” and has to be “won” through “demonstrable warmth and openness” (Giddens 1991: 121). Face-to-face interactions, in addition to the sharing of personal information about family background, help to build networks of trust between social worker and hospital staff. This “mutual process of self-disclosure” (Giddens 1991: 121) is further enabled through a shared place of origin and common language, especially given the stratification of Dubaian society along lines of nationality. Despite the institutional setting of the hospital, relations between staff and volunteers was characterised by an informality and ease of interaction that enabled the bending of bureaucracies. Purely trust-based relationships such as these are more likely in an informal atmosphere, where social divisions are less codified, in contrast to how governance structures intensely formalise relations in the public sphere (Misztal 2000: 208). The emotional identification and sociality within the intimate and informal interactions of family, kin and friends were thus also enacted within the spaces of the hospital. It was this atmosphere of informality that enabled the temporary transgressions of structural boundaries of race, nationality and bureaucracy.

It was paramount for NGO and charity group volunteers to form productive relationships with members of the case management staff of the hospital. These staff members were ultimately responsible for contacting employers and tracing those of migrants who had been admitted anonymously. Surprisingly, for a state with such a high proportion of migrants, they are “believed to be the only programme in the country that caters for the financial, administrative and long-term medical care for patients who cannot afford to pay” (Bhattacharya 2008: 5). Because there are only small numbers of full-time staff employed for these tasks, they rely heavily on the assistance of NGOs and humanitarian organisations. It is also social workers who often had better-established local level links with the community, and thus had better success in tracing the identities of anonymously admitted patients. This is a significant task as, in Rashid Hospital alone, there are at any one point, “30 patients in long-term care without proper identification, who have been there from six months to four years” (Bhattacharya 2008: 5).

During my fieldwork period, a South Asian man was found unconscious and admitted to Rashid Hospital with no identifying documents. Members of the humanitarian organisation whom I spent time with determined his identity and contacted his family and employers through a series of innovative measures. With literally only the clothes the migrant wore to help to identify him, volunteers tracked down his family in Andhra Pradesh using the bespoke tailor's tag on the shirt he had been found wearing. Through them, they then contacted his local employer in the UAE, who had been completely unaware of his whereabouts until then. Cases such as this are commonplace rather than remarkable.

In a state with a high percentage of transient residents and undocumented migrants, the privatisation of migrant welfare has meant that when employers (*kafeels*) abdicate responsibility, the state has few resources and little compulsion to take over. Public institutions such as hospitals have not developed adequate resources to deal with situations that involve establishing access to networks beyond state borders, such as in the instance described above. NGOs, humanitarian organisations and charity groups have thus taken on a transnational mediatory role, working largely on an unregulated and informal basis. The establishment of informal networks with NGOs, charities and medical institutions outside the UAE has also been useful in the repatriation of many low-wage migrants, especially those requiring long-term or palliative medical care. This often requires acquiring specialised knowledge about medical institutions in less urban and developed parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East that are able to treat patients with specific ailments. Humanitarian and charity organisations are also involved in the retraining of injured migrants who can no longer perform strenuous physical work. This involves maintaining links with various rehabilitative institutions in migrants' home countries and regular monitoring through informal visits, calls and texts. These informal transnational links and activities of humanitarian organisations function largely outside state regulations, and are more able to provide specialised forms of care that are attuned to the individual migrant's long-term needs. On the other hand, welfare provided by employers typically focuses on rationalised outcomes of short-term rehabilitation, with the aim of restoring only the capacity for productive labour. The neoliberal system of "flexible work" under which migrants typically labour perceives them as disposable, and does not cater for their long-term needs. It is discourses that work outside neoliberal logics which allow for more sustained conceptions of care.



As part of their mediatory function, humanitarian groups also perform middleman/middlewoman roles between embassies and migrants.<sup>7</sup> They aid in arranging for “out-passes” for illegal migrants or visa over-stayers wanting to return to their home countries, and raise the money needed for plane tickets. They are also integral in directing abused female migrants to safe houses in embassies, sometimes themselves volunteering to house them in the event in which such shelters are full. Social workers are also instrumental in ensuring that the bodies of migrants who die while in Dubai are quickly repatriated back to their home countries and reunited with the family of the deceased (or, as in the case of Edna in the opening vignette of this chapter, buried appropriately). This process is only reluctantly and rarely taken on by the employers of deceased low-wage migrants. Many have little knowledge about handling repatriation of bodies or negotiating the intricate geographies of India, Pakistan or other countries from which low-wage migrants originate. This is often a complicated matter as many migrants come from small towns or little-known villages, and have kin who rarely travel to large metropolises. Arranging for the collection of the deceased’s remains can be fraught with difficulty.

The sending states’ representatives in the emirate are similarly unable to deal with the volume and complexity of migrant issues, further opening up the space for non-governmental organisations to function. The Indian Embassy in Dubai, for example, is usually unable to deal effectively with the volume of migrant issues and relies heavily on humanitarian associations and charity organisations to aid in tasks such as the repatriation of bodies of deceased back to their home state. Given the frequency of suicide and death on dangerous worksites, it is a task that requires sizable resources. NGO members estimate that, on average, they repatriate three bodies a week back to South Asia. Only a small percentage of these migrants died of natural causes or long-term medical conditions. NGOs and humanitarian organisations are typically more sensitive than state officials in the handling of the delicate matter of death, especially of a death that is unexpected and of the main breadwinner of the family. A member of the humanitarian group usually accompanies the body and ensures that it reaches the deceased’s rightful family. Volunteers also have built up alliances with embassy officials, local police and hospital staff through relationships developed over several years, which significantly speeds up the legal formalities of repatriation of bodies. The issue of speed is especially important when repatriating bodies of Muslim migrants, as it is customary to begin processes of burying the dead within 24 hours. Despite such efforts, there

are still regular instances where low-wage migrants' bodies lie in mortuaries in the UAE for months without being repatriated. In many of these cases, members of charity organisations arrange for cremation or burial in Dubai, as was the case in the opening vignette.

This chapter thus far has discussed informal migrant community and charity networks in the context of the failure of the state in the context of migrant welfare. In these framings, the importance of local, Emirati connections should be highlighted. It is often through local influence and legitimacy that authenticity is conferred on NGO workers and facilitates the formation of networks of care. This can be seen as a form of "linking" social capital – where "friends in high places" can make possible access to typically closed networks (Pieterse 2003: 31). These types of interaction take place between migrants of different nationalities as well as between locals and migrants – in instances of networks of care transcending entrenched cultural divisions. A volunteer described how it was with the initial help of Emirati hospital staff that he built up relationships and networks with the local police, embassies and other agents with whom he had to deal, especially in the repatriation of bodies of the deceased. "With the help of hospital people I started making relations with everyone. They are locals, no? So officially they can call and they will tell, that I'm coming. This is the way I made the relations". Legitimacy is initially established through claiming a close link with a local Emirati with official status within the formal bureaucracy. Again, the informality of such relations is significant. Migrant volunteers are able to insert themselves into official networks where trust levels are high, and establish more sustained interdependent relationships with state actors. "You see, with these things, you cannot go straight. Sometimes, you will tell, you are from the hospital, sometimes you will say you are from the consulate. It was a game, like that. But later, everyone will come to know exactly what you are. Then they will come to appreciate you and come to help you". The careful negotiated manoeuvring required in establishing relationships was also part of the "work" that volunteers undertook in the establishment of trusting relationships and disarming suspicion with Emiratis and officials.

These complex networks of relationships needed constant monitoring and vigilant maintenance; they required regular affective work. An NGO worker described how a fellow volunteer, in misjudging his relationship with particular members of the media, damaged the good relationship that had been established with the Indian consulate. The volunteer had been asked by a reporter from a Malayalam newspaper what he thought of the recent visit of Venu Rajamani, the then Indian Consul-General

in Dubai. Unaware that he would be quoted, he had replied that the visit had been of “no use” (in terms of improving migrant welfare). This report upset Indian consular officials, who were subsequently less cooperative with volunteers. The relationship between the NGO and consulate then had to be carefully rebuilt. Trust, as a basis of social networks, is a “project” that needs to be constantly worked on and actively maintained (Giddens 1991).

### **Inclusive and exclusive networks**

In Dubai, where nationality is the primary marker of difference, strong networks across nationalities and ethnicities are common within the sphere of welfare and aid. With Edna in this chapter’s opening vignette, for instance, volunteers from a predominantly middle-class Indian organisation arranged a Sri Lankan domestic worker’s funeral. Cross-cultural networks were also utilised when social workers accessed official Emirati networks. This was also reflected in the humanitarian organisation with which I conducted most of my fieldwork in Rashid Hospital. It was highly inclusive in terms of membership. Volunteers came from various socio-economic, national and religious backgrounds, in contrast with most research on social capital, which “tacitly assumes or overtly focuses on cultural boundaries” (Pieterse 2003: 46). In highlighting elements of “bridging capital”, these examples show how inter-ethnic ties are productive to migrants in gaining access to “diverse resources beyond their homogeneous networks” (Pieterse 2003: 39). In the sphere of aid and welfare, it is low-wage migrants who benefit most from access to inter-ethnic social capital and networks outside their socio-economic strata.

Conversely, the cementing of cultural boundaries through social capital was also evident. Many faith-based charity groups and NGOs collected and distributed aid around affinities of nation and religion. Charity groups linked to particular churches or religious organisations would often channel their aid efforts to, or raise funds for, members of their congregation or migrants of the same faith. Many Roman Catholic Filipino or Sri Lankan FDWs, for example, turned to their church parish or charity for help in the first instance, when they needed money to send home, or when they were unhappy about relationships with employers. Radio and television stations catering to a particular community or linguistic group would also broadcast appeals for help on behalf of members of their own community. NGOs, too, would typically approach donors of the same nationality as those in need of aid. When an Iranian technician was injured and in a coma, volunteers approached

a wealthy Iranian couple. They were asked to fund his medical expenses both in Dubai and when he returned to Tehran. It was an unarticulated assumption that solidarity and sympathy would be greatest among those who came from the same place. The couple's better knowledge of hospital costs and medical care in Iran were more practical reasons for this approach. Here, the impetus for care draws on feelings of nationalism and exclusionary ideas of race than more inclusive humanistic understandings of aid, reinforcing nationality or place of origin as the most important marker of identity.

While much of the work of humanitarian organisations and charity groups has been portrayed favourably thus far, it is important to note that the extension of care and aid networks can also be exclusionary, with morally loaded discourses attached to the provision of aid. As a result of the informal way in which they operate, in most situations, it is individual volunteer social workers who determine if a migrant receives aid, help or monetary assistance. Decisions are rarely committee-based and do not necessitate formal approval from heads or leaders. Discretion in terms of the extent and type of aid and care given is often left up to the individual. This sometimes results in paternalistic practices and the conditional extension of care.<sup>8</sup> Volunteer workers, for instance, were reluctant to help find jobs or to help runaway domestic workers who wanted to continue to stay in Dubai to undertake freelance work. These women were unwilling to return to their home countries without having saved enough to repay the debts they had incurred in coming to Dubai. Some NGO workers were unwilling to help these migrants in any way. What they considered "illegal" practices of overstaying were discouraged, whereas undocumented migrants and runaways who expressed a desire to return to their home countries were aided in processes of attaining an 'out-pass', helped with the payment of airfare and even provided with temporary residences while awaiting their return flights. This imposition of a moral discourse necessitates the exclusion of certain migrants from social networks of care and repair. Consequently, notions of what it means to be a "good" migrant are reified.<sup>9</sup> This normative discourse of legality could also be to do with the compulsion to act within the confines of state legislation. In this way, the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in terms of (il)legality and (il)licitness that the state legitimates shape the organisation's ethical imperatives, and the type of aid provided reifies the receiving state's conceptions of desirable migrant behaviour. Attempts to challenge these categorisations may result in a ban on activities. Here, the complementary relationship between informal and formal spheres of urban society is evident (Misztal 2005).

Although functioning informally and outside the boundaries of the state, NGOs and humanitarian organisations' practices are still shaped by institutional structures such as legal conceptions of licit behaviour. Informality does not, then, imply a complete negation of formalised structures associated with the state, but the practices and functions that are still shaped by it (Roy 2005).

Given the impossibility of campaigning for rights such as citizenship, and the danger of engaging in any form of political activity (due to the threat of incarceration or deportation), NGOs, humanitarian organisations and charity groups are not overtly political; they are not, for instance, involved in public calls for more equitable rights for migrants.<sup>10</sup> Instead, their role is limited to the day-to-day dealing with migrant welfare issues neglected by the state. Their mandate in helping and caring for low-wage migrants can be seen then as what Ong (2006: 212) terms "biowelfare". She describes this as a call to civility grounded on "basic cultural values about moral worthiness" as opposed to "an abstract rights discourse". She goes on to say that the discourse of "biowelfare" might foster more inclusive forms of care, bypassing if not displacing forms of "ethnoracialized stigma of...alien and illegitimate bodies" (Ong 2006: 215). Based on ideas of compassion and responsibility, this discourse of "biowelfare" is perhaps more prevalent as an ethic of care in non-Western autocratic states such as Dubai, where a rights agenda is still in its developmental infancy. It appeals to more basic tenets of morality and altruism rather than an established code of human rights, which may in some instances be seen as a Western imposition (Cheah 2006). This more organic emergence of care points to possibilities where respect and recognition of the racialised (and classed) Other is based around everyday embodied encounters, rather than instituted through formal frameworks of law and governance. In the absence of more formalised modes of care in Dubai, these acts of care and aid create a more liveable city.

### **Working-class solidarity**

This section examines working-class networks as a form of collective strategy of migrant agency. They function as practical coping strategies used in negotiating the marginalised conditions under which low-wage migrants live and labour. Through discussions of low-wage migrants' social networks, this research challenges their consistent conceptualisation as "victims". Although they are regularly marginalised by official state practices as well as everyday discriminatory behaviour, low-income

migrants have developed strategies to cope with structural disadvantage. The subversive nature of such networks, however, should not be emphasised. Low-wage migrants' utilisation of social networks functions merely as a coping strategy; it is not enough to overcome entrenched social divisions in Dubai.

### **Male family and friendship networks**

Studies of immigrant social capital that emphasise "dense networks as a resource" (Portes 1998: 13) are relevant here to analyses of working-class male solidarities. Reflecting the everyday close physical and bodily contact of low-wage males within labour camps and worksites are the tight social relationships and networks that form within those spaces of enforced intimacy.<sup>11</sup> Chapter 5 described the ways in which male migrants engaged in collective practices of illegal alcohol consumption and the sharing of confidences around debts and the family left behind. This section compounds those understandings of male friendship networks in examining how social networks are utilised for more tangible outcomes, such as hunting for jobs or borrowing credit. These examples act as counters to the majority of discussions of male friendships that characterise them as lacking the intimacy of their female equivalents (cf. Walker 1994; Vogl 2004: 193).

The productive employment of transnational friendship networks between male migrants in order to negotiate job and visa applications and to aid with the initial settling in to the receiving country is a strand of migrant male experiences that has been well documented (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Ryan, Sales et al. 2008; Datta, McIlwaine et al. 2009: 862; Khalaf 2010; Kathiravelu 2012). For Gulf migrants, this is an important aspect of the migration process, with networks in the home country enabling migration routes and those in the receiving state assisting in migrants' integration into the adopted community. However, these networks are often portrayed as exclusively positive and productive to the newly arrived migrant (see, for example, Shah 2000). What are neglected are the ways in which such networks are also often avenues of misinformation and exploitation (cf. Lindquist 2012).

Low-skilled migrants whose family members or friends had negotiated their migration to Dubai often relied on those same social networks of kin and friendship in the initial settling-in period (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Khalaf 2010). This mode of chain migration usually involves an initial period in which the new arrivals are economically dependent on the relatives who arranged their migration. Household expenses and accommodation are shared, until the new migrant has saved enough to

move out. Relatives also pass on skills and trades as well as intangible cultural knowledge about how to work and live in the foreign environment of the UAE. This might involve showing the newly arrived migrant workers areas of the city where they can buy provisions, pointing out places of worship and introducing them to networks of friends. The importance of such practices of initiation and familiarisation should not be discounted, as most low-wage migrants do not have the institutional resources that are available to many middle class transnationals. Despite their efficacy, these networks can also be exploitative, with more established migrants at times withholding wages for months or years from kin whose migration they negotiated (Khalaf 2010: 111).<sup>12</sup> Exploitation by kin is also a practice that is common among unrelated migrant men and freelance domestics in Dubai, as is later discussed. This often compounds already exploitative debt bondage circumstances under which many migrate. The agent who enables physical mobility is often also the one who negates access to capital that is the route to social mobility.

With Dubai's increasing embeddedness into the global economy, modes of employment and recruitment of labour have become more bureaucratic and structured. Large construction companies, which represent the majority of employers in Dubai, are now more likely to follow established routines of recruitment through agents and partners in sending countries like India, Pakistan and China. This presents impediments to the utilisation of informal social and family networks as described by Khalaf and Alkonaisi (1999). Despite this increasing standardisation of employment procedures, a significant proportion of low-wage recruitment still employs exploitative informal social networks.

Vengadesan's mode of finding work, for example, is typical of how informal practices are prevalent in Dubai's low-wage sphere. A South Indian casual labourer, he shared a room with eight other Tamils, all irregular migrants (overstayers or on "free" visas). Working freelance and not being tied to a particular employer, they had constantly to solicit for jobs. If they did not find work, they would simply not get paid. They had developed a practice of taking on a job only when it would ensure work for the entire roomful of men. This allowed them to be together at the worksite but also enabled better collective bargaining rights for higher wages (cf. Ergun 2008). This mode of sharing is particularly prevalent among irregular migrants whose access to work is precarious and sporadic (Pessoa, Harkness et al. 2014). Here networks are collectively productive, allowing migrants more control over their labour than would have been possible as individual agents.

On numerous instances, I was confronted with how important and significant friendships between low-wage migrants were in multiple

aspects of everyday life. Many had heard about or been offered jobs through friends in Dubai (although of course this had also led to some of them being misled or cheated). It was also common to move on to better-paying or easier jobs through recommendations of friends. Sassen (1995) describes this mode of recruitment through “the power of network chains...where entry level openings are frequently filled by contacting kin and friends in remote foreign locations rather than by tapping other available local workers”. These friendship networks function as the most reliable source through which upward social mobility in Dubai is accessible to the low-wage migrant.

Low-wage migrants’ friendship networks were also extremely important in matters of personal finance. Non-payment and late payment of wages were commonplace. In these instances, borrowing cash from fellow migrants was both a means of survival and a way to keep remitting cash back to family in the home country. Rotating credit unions were another means through which networks helped deal with financial obligations. These economic networks were most often composed of five-to-seven low-wage migrants, and loosely formed around ties of friendship, common village of origin and shared language. Through the pooling of capital, these migrants had access to large lump sums of money that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. These were especially useful when paying for the dowries or marriages of family members in home countries, and maximised remittances by sending them in bulk. In specific instances of need, friends would organise a “collection” of funds. An informant working as a messenger for a local company described how during the amnesty period in 2007, ten of his friends put money together to buy air tickets for two men to go back to India. These informal modes of raising capital and consolidation were especially significant to migrants who had little access to loans from financial institutions such as banks.

Social segregation of migrant groups can, in cases such as this, be productive, strengthening network ties through “nets of reciprocity and help” (Roitman 2006: 115). This form of bonding social capital was more likely to be based on friendship between migrants who were culturally similar – most were working class and usually from the same state or even hometown and always spoke the same mother tongue. Here, possibilities for transcending boundaries of class, nationality or ethnicity were limited.

Although ties of friendship may be strong and established over many years spent in close proximity, they are relatively weak as they do not usually surpass hierarchical boundaries. There are, however, exceptions. Jairaj, a waiter in a hotel, describes how a woman from Bangalore working in a senior position in the same establishment took an interest



in him and assisted him when he was in a very junior position. When he was going back to India to see his family after three years, she gave him 500 dirhams and said, “Here, go buy a sari for your mother”, as she knew that he couldn’t afford to buy gifts. She also aided him in repaying debts as well as recommending him for a more senior position at their place of work. The workplace was perhaps the most frequent site for the formation of such boundary-crossing friendships (cf. Cronin 2014).

Similarly, low-wage migrants in my study whose employers had significant influence or *wasta*, through association could also claim valuable social capital.<sup>13</sup> Through their employer’s connections, low-wage migrants could secure employment and promotions for family members and friends. This form of bridging capital was especially important when initiating a transfer from a job before the contract had officially ended. Employees leaving a job before completely fulfilling their contract would usually get a stamp on their passport barring them from future work in the UAE. A potential employer with enough influence, however, could arrange for a transfer without any such penalty being incurred. Access to local Emirati networks or networks of migrants who have *wasta* through association was also extremely useful for the quick extension of visas, the removal of an immigration blacklist or getting a coveted job.

These discussions of informal low-wage networks add to an emerging strand of research (see Pahl 2000; Chambers 2006; Ghandi 2006; Amin 2009; Kathiravelu 2013) on “the significance of friendship as the measure and lubricant of contemporary social ties... in the post-individualist and post-collectivist society”. Drawing from Derrida’s (1997) conceptualisation of hospitality, this literature identifies friendship as mediating social ties and obligations in new ways that inform the politics of community (Amin 2009: 12). Social networks of friendship are indicative of a wider collective urban ethics of care that is based on mutual respect.

intimacies of friendship ... are frequently animated by an ethic of care and responsibility that requires treating participants as friends; valued for what they put in, being there through adversity, behaving with mutual respect and reciprocity, acting as equals, and cultivating relationships rather than taking loyalties and expectations for granted. (Amin 2009: 12)

Relations between low-wage migrant men enacted just such an ethic of care that depended on shared affinities of nationality, class and ethno-linguistic status – preconditions for high levels of mutual trust. These tight friendships were integral in coping with marginalised migrant life

in Dubai and stemmed from shared conditions of living and employment, which facilitated the formation of close bonds. Because these friendship networks were typically between migrants who were similarly placed in the larger social order, they represent exclusionary forms of community or “negative solidarity” (Komter 2005). Although they act as metaphors of belonging to a shared collective that is not explicitly political, they reify established differentiations and hierarchies in Emirati society (Bottero 2005: 159). We should thus caution against the “danger of overstating the mould-breaking qualities of friendship, for at most times its intimacies sustain the already known, similar or familiar” (Amin 2009: 13). Most frequently, these friendships do not retain the capacity to generate new forms of social belonging, but reinforce established affinities. *Informal* bonds of friendship here are shaped by more *formal* affiliations of nationality, class and gender.

### Collective dissent

Most low-wage migrants are acutely aware of their precarious position in Emirati society, and rarely contest the conditions under which they work and live for fear of being deported and banned from re-entry. However, in the past few years, there has been an increasing number of mass protests and riots by construction workers organising against unreasonable working conditions and non-payment of wages and demanding pay rises to cope with rising living costs in the UAE. Out of the recent spate of strikes, one that received significant media attention was that that involved thousands of workers from Arabtec Construction, who were building the Burj Khalifa tower, now the tallest building in the world. This dispute eventually ended in an “agreement” that was reached between striking workers and management (Agence France-Presse 2007), rather than a mass deportation, which was interpreted as a successful outcome.

Another such episode of unrest that I came across during my fieldwork in Dubai involved 4,000 South Asian workers from a single labour camp. Many of the circumstances behind the incident were related to me by Mr Shiva, a social activist for issues of migrant labour in the UAE. Mr Shiva had got “the first call”, as he put it, from striking construction workers at a labour camp. He runs a Telegu-language radio station from the emirate of Sharjah, which is broadcast around the UAE and to other Gulf states.<sup>14</sup> He had previously been involved in settling labour disputes for Telegu workers and this had established his radio station as a call centre of sorts for low-wage Telegu migrants in distress. It also functioned as a “help desk” during the 2007 amnesty for illegal workers,

dispensing advice on where to obtain out-passes and raising money for flight tickets to India on behalf of low-wage migrants. In this particular instance, the protesting workers had been rounded up and brought to a holding centre in Abu Dhabi. From there, one of them had called in to the radio station from his mobile phone. Upon hearing of the situation Mr Shiva immediately informed his contact in the Indian embassy who proceeded to intervene on behalf of the 4,000 Indian migrants who had been arrested. With the idea of deporting all 4,000 protestors being untenable, the situation was brought to a form of conclusion by the dismissal and deportation of eight men who were identified as the principal agitators of the strike. The other 3,992 were sent back to their camp and subsequently returned to work. Employing established networks of communication, the potentially explosive issue was resolved quickly and in the interests of the majority of the unhappy labourers.

For the most part, these strikes have been interpreted by the Western media as reactions against the tyranny of employers and an uncaring state that turns a blind eye to labour abuses. Whether they are indeed indicative of a building widespread resentment, or merely isolated incidents, this form of collective bargaining is another form of social network building that has resulted in productive and positive outcomes for marginalised populations. It has led to not just to an improvement of working conditions, but has also made employers aware of the latent agency of low-wage migrants. Their ability to organise collectively to cause large delays and multi-million dollar losses now marks this group as a previously unreckoned threat. The collective dissent of migrants can be read as “tactics of resistance” (de Certeau 1984), by which they appropriate the “place” of the powerful, and their efforts are restricted to an unstable “space” that is surreptitiously seized. These are simultaneously “*reactions* to their marginalized condition and *productive* of new forms of political belonging” (McNevin 2009: 11), where a “survival strategy” becomes political (Escobar 1995: 187). Though migrants foremost wanted their wages paid, the strike is also a statement of group solidarity on behalf of fellow low-wage labourers. Despite the lack of a developed discourse around rights, collective organisation around self-interest has resulted in productive outcomes for this marginalised group.

As a result of the success of these strikes, many emboldened low-wage migrants started appealing to employers to raise their wages and improve working and living conditions. Utilising largely non-violent means of written requests and threats, many of these collective bargaining attempts have met with some success. Their efforts were aided by the fact that low-wage labour was becoming increasingly difficult to attract

to Dubai, given the weakening dirham and growth of the job market in India and other sending states. Employers were aware of the need to grant concessions in order to retain their employees, who perhaps unknowingly tapped into a neoliberal discourse of competition.

The instance of the 4,000 striking labourers quoted above shows the multiple productive informal networks that exist simultaneously among low-wage migrants, between migrants and social workers, and social workers and embassy officials. It is an effective example of the solidarity across difference that this chapter highlights. It also emphasises the agency of low-income migrants displayed through collectively dissenting and dynamically tapping into available social networks. Finally, it foregrounds the importance of networks and channels of communication between state and non-state actors (such as NGOs and media agencies) in resolving labour issues. The informal nature of these networks and interactions was key in the achievement of productive outcomes that were difficult to achieve through more formal modes of mediation and governance.

### **Freelance domestics' transient networks**

Social networks should also be considered in terms of geography. As the previous chapter highlighted, everyday geographies of the city shape migrants' lives in significant ways. Quotidian mobilities also affect access to social capital and networks. Public buses used by domestic workers were spaces in which informal networks developed between low-wage migrants of different nationalities. These women used the time and space of bus journeys to share information that extended their productive networks. "Weak ties" such as these are best suited for exchanging information, and have are a characteristic of male networks (Fitzgerald 2004). Here, freelance domestics with wide mobilities have a similar propensity for forming such ties.

Public buses in Dubai are used almost exclusively by low-wage migrants like domestic workers, waiters, cleaners and construction labourers. At prices ranging from 1.50 to 2.50 dirhams per trip, they are the cheapest, although not the most efficient means of transport in the emirate.<sup>15</sup> Public buses are rarely used by middle-class migrants and almost never by locals, as car ownership is ubiquitous among those classes. Although the price of vehicles and fuel are relatively inexpensive for the middle class, buying a vehicle is still not affordable for low-wage migrants. Public buses are notoriously unreliable and infrequent, and thus there are often long waiting periods for a bus. Long bus journeys, from one end of the emirate to the other, are also common for freelance domestics, most

of whom work in the newer areas of Jumeriah and Jebel Ali, or within one of the gated communities at one end of Sheikh Zayed Road, which runs the length of the emirate. Most live in the older and less expensive districts of Karama, Deira and Bur Dubai, towards the other end of the peninsula. The long journeys that they have to undertake as part of their work commute are usually at the same time every week, fixed around cleaning schedules of particular homes. It was thus common to encounter the same passengers on the bus week after week.

On the journey to Satwa one warm afternoon, a phone rang, filling the bus with the melody of a pop song. Others in the vehicle, catching a quick nap or busy on their own phones generally ignored the phone call. The Filipina domestic whose phone it was, after a short and loud conversation, turned to the rows of women in the seats behind her and started asking if anyone would be interested to take on a job in one of the high-rise condominiums on the Palm Jumeirah. There was some discussion among a group of interested women and phone numbers of prospective employers were exchanged. These instances of informal exchange and interaction were common on bus journeys in Dubai. It was common to hear exchanges on how to deal with difficult employers, obtain information on newly available jobs and even receive recommendations for work-related ailments. Gossip and complaints about employers were also commonplace. These everyday interactions formed an informal support and knowledge network, based on loose ties of friendship.

While most interactions appeared to take place between domestics of the same nationality, for example, Filipinas exchanging information with other Filipinas, friendships and also developed between Filipinas and Sri Lankans.<sup>16</sup> The majority of freelance domestics in Dubai are predominantly of these two nationalities, with Indian and Indonesian FDWs usually working exclusively as live-ins for individual households. Sri Lankan and Filipina migrants also usually possess a reasonably good command of English, which facilitates barter and exchange. Conversations are mediated and supplemented through the sharing of sweets, fruit and beverages, especially welcome in the hot summer months. The gender-divided seating arrangement in buses also meant that FDWs sat together in the first few rows reserved for female passengers.

For freelance FDWs not tied to any agency, these informal meetings are an important means of maintaining a regular income, as the number of jobs they do can fluctuate for a variety of reasons over which they have little control. Knowledge of job possibilities is an extremely important factor in securing regular work. This avenue of potential work, however, only supplements employer networks and recommendations,

which have been pointed to as the most effective means through which most freelance FDWs secure multiple jobs (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 56). For FDWs and irregular migrants who negotiate work and pay on a job-by-job basis, their income depends on their ability to exploit the networks to which they belong and establish new ones, whether with fellow migrant domestics, or employers. Trust was foregrounded as an important component in these situations. FDWs who, for instance, had won the confidence of employers, retained their jobs despite announcing that they were going freelance and leaving the maid agency by which they had initially been employed. Freelance work usually entails better pay for the domestic, although she is no longer protected by regulations on work imposed by the agency. In these dealings and relationships, the boundaries between private/unstructured and purely economic/structured relationships become blurred. This muddying of margins between formal and informal spheres can work to the advantage of freelance domestics who are then not tied to a particular employer and are better able to dictate their own terms of employment.

Chapter 3's discussion of "co-ethnic exploitation" (Velayutham and Wise 2009) first raised the issue of how networks used in seeking employment can be detrimental to low-wage migrants. This is also prevalent in the sphere of domestics. Freelance FDWs sometimes take other newly arrived migrants under their wing. They work as "employees" on jobs that are solicited by the more experienced domestic. These newly arrived women migrants accept a lower wage than they could have made on their own, in return for being taught "the ropes". Skills such as how to clean and how to advertise and attract new clients are passed on, in addition to the new migrant often being provided with a place to stay. More experienced FDWs often exploit this dependency by grossly underpaying these women, who arrive unaware of market rates for domestic work. Most of these women "protégés" are often family members who have been "brought over" by the "sponsor" who will also employ them. This makes breaking out of an exploitative relationship even more difficult. Although networks are most often established between migrants of the same nationality and ethnic group, exploitation is also often along these very lines of affiliation. This form of exploitation betrays expectations of trust and solidarity that underpin such relationships. The friend who is also an "agent" inhabits an ambiguous position where opportunity and social mobility are proffered conditionally. These examples of "co-ethnic exploitation" add to the imperative not to see low-wage migrants merely as victims. They inhabit multi-dimensional positionalities of exploited and empowered exploiter, often even simultaneously.

## Limits of care networks and spontaneous care

One humid summer evening in June I had arranged to meet Vengadesan at our usual spot, across the road from the Hyatt Hotel in Deira. It is about a 15-minute walk from where he shared a room with 16 other Tamil low-wage migrants.

Stamped on the side of the building next to where I waited on a busy intersection, was an enormous poster of Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Khalifa, the former's face set in a look of grim determination and the latter softly benevolent. Between them sat a depiction of the then yet-to-be completed Burj Khalifa tower, now the tallest building in the world. This picture was typical of the photographs scattered around Dubai of Sheikh Mohammed, Sheikh Zayed (commonly known as the founding father of the UAE), and the Crown Prince of Dubai, Sheikh Hamdan. For Vengadesan and low-wage migrants like him who populate this bustling section of Deira, it is a constant reminder of the all-seeing eyes of the state (and its rulers).



Figure 6.1 The poster

*The poster*

Vengadesan was a Tamil construction worker who was living and working without a valid visa in Dubai. Even though he had constantly to negotiate his irregular status by not drawing police attention to himself, Vengadesan was always candid with me and willing to share his experiences and thoughts openly. He was a small, dark-skinned man with thick, neatly parted, jet-black hair and a moustache to match. He turned up for our meeting as always, with a clean pressed shirt and trousers. Also, as usual, he was a few minutes late.

A few streets away from where we met in Deira is a collection of streets and shops called the "Tamil Bazaar", so named because of the plethora of Tamil restaurants and grocery shops, and concentration of Tamil migrants living in the vicinity. There are also row upon row of mobile phone stores and car repair workshops in the area. Inconspicuously slotted across the road from a shop, selling tourist knick-knacks and souvenirs, and a Western Union is a brothel. To the unknowing tourist eye, it can be mistaken for one of the numerous shabby motels in the area. It is a squat five-storey, dirty grey building with only a small doorway entrance. I was told by a few of my informants that the women there have never seen the street outside. Rooms are cordoned off into sections by curtains, with four or five women held in one room. It is there that they sleep, eat and work, constantly policed by an army of pimps and guards. One of my informants who lived nearby claimed he regularly saw different sets of women brought in and out during the early hours of the morning. He explained that it is a strategy to ensure that women held captive inside do not get too familiar with a particular space. It also provides variety to "customers". To go in, you pay 10 dirhams to the guard at the door, and whatever the quoted price is for a "session" with one of the women inside. At the time, I was told that 20 dirhams bought time with a sex worker from China and 50 dirhams for a woman from Kerala. "Customers" who frequented this particular establishment were low-wage migrant men. Occasionally, some of them splurged a significant proportion of their month's wages to spend an entire night with a sex worker. In a city that is overwhelmingly populated by men of "bachelor" status, sex workers constitute an "invisible" and illegal workforce catering for a demand that is unacknowledged but reluctantly tolerated by the state.

During this particular meeting with Vengadesan, we had walked past the brothel near the Tamil Bazaar while looking for a quiet space to sit and talk. I took the opportunity to initiate a conversation about sex



workers and “dancing girls”, a topic we had discussed in earlier meetings. Vengadesan was matter-of-fact in acknowledging that while some women came to Dubai in full knowledge that they would work in the sex industry, many were also misled when brought to the emirate, convinced that they would be waitresses or domestics. Behind his nonchalant acceptance that the coercion and trafficking of women was an acknowledged, everyday part of life in Dubai, there was a hint of compassion in his tone. This prompted me to ask if he had ever tried to help any of these trafficked women – when he encountered one of them on his visits to a brothel.

They cry and beg me to take them out (of the brothel). Take me away! I'll come with you, they say. But it is very difficult to take them out with their pimps there.

I'll give them some money, about 100 dirhams or something. If they manage to come out (of the brothel), we buy them phone cards so that they can call and speak (on the phone to their family overseas).

What help can we really give?

Despite strong networks of aid, repair and friendship, low-income migrants rarely possess enough social capital to alter their circumstances or break out of the structures of violence that tie them to their marginalised and often exploited positions. Vengadesan's last rhetorical sentence articulated precisely that inability to aid another from a similar and marginalised class position. Because of entrenched divides along lines of race, nationality and immigration status, social networks typically reify divisions. Access to social capital that can engender structural change is rare. The pervasiveness and rigidity of formal structures of socio-economic power that shape such interactions preclude any acts of informal care. In engaging in economic (and sexual) relationships with trafficked sex workers, low-wage migrants in fact perpetuate practices of exploitation.

A few weeks after that meeting, I received an early morning telephone call. On his way to meet a friend, Vengadesan had been approached for help by a distressed Sri Lankan domestic worker who had run away from her employer's home, unhappy with the manner in which she had been treated. She did not have her passport, any identification documents or money with her and had hitched a ride to Naïf Park in Deira, where she had chanced on Vengadesan in the early hours of the morning. Both of them spoke very little English, the only language they had in common,

and so it was difficult to obtain details of her predicament, but it was clear that she did not have any friends or acquaintances in Dubai. She rejected my offers to bring her to the Sri Lankan embassy, or mediate with her employers, vehemently insisting that she didn't want to be deported but wanted to find work to clear the debt she had incurred in coming to Dubai. Vengadesan finally brought her to Karama, (a predominantly working-class area) and deposited her with another Sri Lankan woman freelance domestic worker. "They'll look after their own", he explained. It was understood that the freelance domestic in Karama would find her work and provide her with a place to stay.

Another such instance of spontaneous aid involves Mohammed, a driver for a company owned by an Emirati. He has lived and worked in the UAE for the past 25 years. He is from India and was articulate about the dramatic changes he had witnessed in the emirates in his time there. He related to me how, in the course of driving across the emirate for work, he often picked up and gave lifts to unhappy domestics who had run away from their employers' homes. The fact that he was usually alone in the vehicle making deliveries made helping these women possible. He would usually come across distressed domestics in the early hours of the morning or during the mid-afternoon siesta break. Most women he gave a lift to would have walked out to Jumeirah Beach Road (a wide main road) from one of the large villas on the side streets. They would try to hail a passing vehicle down to bring them to the other side of the emirate, where most low-wage migrants live. Just as Vengadesan did, Mohammed too would endeavour to find other women of the same nationality or background who would be willing to assist these stranded women. Some runaways had friends to whom they could turn for help. Mohammed's role would then be merely to get them to their destination.<sup>17</sup>

These spontaneous acts of care can be seen as an "encounter", in which interaction is characterised by high levels of informality and functions outside institutional contexts (Misztal 2005: 187). Although accidental and momentary, the acts of care described above go beyond the social norms and rules of politeness that characterise everyday encounters with strangers in the city, but depend on trust and a belief in the kindness of strangers. These acts or gifts of care exhibit the possibility to dissolve boundaries and promote a wider "recognition" of humanity in a culturally and ethnically differentiated population (Wise 2007). Such possibilities however, are not always fully realised. Beyond initial or small acts of aid, migrants such as Vengadesan and Mohammed felt unable to provide more long-term help to runaway domestics or trafficked sex workers.

The expectation and commonplace understanding that help and solidarity in an “encounter” would be more readily demonstrated by a migrant of the same cultural and socio-economic background was prevalent and permeated everyday interactions in the city. Mohammed and other low-wage migrants who performed everyday acts of care were quick to emphasise their impartiality in helping anyone who required assistance. “The blood that runs in all our veins is red”. However, they also admitted that most communities “stick to themselves”. This is reflected also in the strategies of NGOs that sought monetary aid from donors of the same nationality as aid recipients. Low-wage migrants, too, were more likely to rely on and seek out networks comprising other migrants of the same nationality and/or ethno-linguistic group. This emphasises the pervasiveness of a governance system that perpetuates divides along lines of nationality and class. The institutionalisation of such a hierarchy discourages the formation of solidarities based on mutual recognition and respect of the differentiated Other.

In the above discussions of spontaneous assistance and help rendered across working-class, marginalised and illegal populations, hierarchy, in terms of freedoms to mobility accorded is a significant differentiating factor. Among illegal labourers, such as Vengadesan, there is an understanding that although they have overstayed their visas, and face deportation if caught, they are nevertheless in a more desirable position than trafficked women held in virtual imprisonment against their will, and often forced into sex work. They have control over what work they do as well as their everyday mobilities – where they live, eat and spend their leisure time. Trafficked women have very little or no access to social networks, because of a restriction of mobility. In many instances, FDWs and trafficked sex workers are kept in relative isolation for the entirety of their stay in the UAE and allowed contact only with their employers or traffickers/pimps and other women in similar circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter adds to our understandings of the urban through examining social relations in the city. In particular, it interrogates how informal social interactions both perpetuate and subvert modes of control and hierarchy that are entrenched within Dubai’s social landscape. Informality here occupies spaces of social interaction not yet colonised by a neoliberal logic. The discourse employed by the state institutionalises hierarchies and thus interactions between strangers in the city. In Dubai, an ethic of care functions only outside such formal

relationships. This chapter is then also an illustration of how neoliberalism is not monolithic, leaving certain spaces untouched.

This research on social networks contributes to our understandings of how immigrant labour markets work, through exposing how they often function in an informal manner and are highly dependent on the agency of the migrant. In discussing social networks of low-wage migrants in Dubai, this chapter challenges their consistent conceptualisation as victims. Although regularly marginalised by official state practices as well as everyday discriminatory behaviour, low-income migrants have developed strategies to cope with such disadvantages. However, despite the utilisation of social capital as a productive coping strategy under marginalised circumstances, it is clear that it cannot subvert entrenched social divisions.

Proximity and access to mobility were two key determinants among low-wage migrants in the ability to access social networks, and thus, productive social capital. Male labourers and FDWs who worked on a freelance basis and did not live within the confines of a labour camp or employer's home had far more flexibility and access to social networks to help in coping with the daily demands of marginalised migrant life or in accessing avenues to social mobility. Living in shared accommodation with other migrants also provided both a wider knowledge base of coping strategies and ready support systems in times of financial and emotional distress.

This chapter also shows how informal care can exist across registers of nationality, class and language even where formal structures of segregation are pervasive. This was particularly apparent in the ethic of care of humanitarian organisations and informal charities. Care, as we have seen, also often depends on shared structural affinities, as they were often a de-facto basis on which trust and solidarity were assumed. Having prior contacts with other migrants from the same village, town or community prior to arrival in Dubai was also a key factor (Gamburd 2009: 66) in migrants' easy assimilation into daily life in the city-state. Inter-ethnic and inter-class friendships and affiliations also emerged as important lines along which relationships of trust were formed. Acts of care practised across and within ethnic and national divisions indicate that racial exclusion and intercultural collaboration simultaneously co-exist (Noble 2009: 487). Social networks in the city both reify and transgress existing structural differentiations and hierarchies.

The chapter has attempted to provide an alternative reading of Dubai as an "uncaring" space, and in doing so, has implications for understanding everyday lives of migrants in other GCC states, with similarly

large foreign populations and exploitative labour laws. In this context, more differentiated and grounded investigations of the everyday are necessary to balance top-down analyses and popular media discourses that portray the city in one-dimensional ways. This chapter also demonstrates that the moral obligations of care of fellow human beings has not been completely lost in moves towards a more globalised, neoliberal “society of strangers” (Komter 2005: 177). Even within a highly rationalised space like Dubai where the interests of private capital are conceived as paramount, and divisions that privilege citizens are entrenched in law, everyday forms of care characterise the lives of many marginalised migrants. The networks and practices through which care exist are suggestive of the emergence of social conditions that facilitate “hopefulness” (Hage 2003; Amin 2006) in contemporary cities.<sup>18</sup>

Following Thrift (2007: 215), this chapter has addressed the political imperative to “pursue a conventional macropolitics of urban care which draws on the deep wells of caring and compassion that currently typify many cities, the result of the often unsung work put in by the employees of various welfare systems, all manner of voluntary workers, and the strivings of an army of ‘carers’”. In addition to showing Dubai as a “caring” place, this chapter is also a limited acknowledgement of the work of the many social workers, volunteers and caring individuals who live in Dubai. They are the people who are frequently overlooked in the rapid pace of city life, not the least because they often work quietly and silently in the margins.

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# 7

## Conclusion

This book interrogates the everyday experiences of migrants who labour in Dubai and the structures that shape their stories through neoliberalism as a conceptual frame to understand processes of city-building, labour migration and migrant lives. In doing so, it goes beyond analyses of neoliberal development that examine only its global centres of development or adoption by powerful global institutions (cf. Stenning, Smith et al. 2008: 229). In employing a localised ethnography of the everyday lives of labour migrants, this book provides a grounded and nuanced assessment of engagements with processes of neoliberal development. This exploration of neoliberalism has been undertaken through a variety of empirical frames: popular discourses and representations of Dubai that work as powerful metaphors of international resonance, the layered structures that shape the relationships migrants have with receiving and sending states, low-wage migrants' construction of subjectivities under marginalised circumstances, the polarised socio-spatial relations in the city and, last, informal migrant networks. Although the impossibility of a totalising narrative is acknowledged, together, they form a wide-ranging picture of neoliberalism's engagement with labour migrants and the processes of labour migration in Dubai.

Low-wage migrants in Dubai form the largest proportion of the population, and, as this book has demonstrated, a significant part of the urban landscape. They do not just physically build the fast-growing infrastructure of the emirate, but are active agents in the social and spatial processes that mark the city in visible and invisible forms. In this way, migrants in Dubai are engaged in processes of city-making, just as the urban environment of Dubai shapes migrant subjectivities, opportunities and affect in important ways. These co-dependent relations, under conditions of neoliberal development, have been shown

to engender not just everyday structural violence and inequality, but also alternative discourses of growth, empowerment, and possibilities for care, conviviality and friendship that exist outside the formal sphere of neoliberalism. In this short conclusion, I reiterate Dubai's significance as a case study for processes of urban development and migrant experiences under conditions of neoliberal globalisation. The city-state embodies geographies of extremes but simultaneously functions as a space of the everyday urban ordinary; quotidian processes of neoliberal development are concentrated and intensely apparent in the emirate. The second part of the conclusion highlights a few key contributions of this book, drawing from findings across various chapters. These three conceptual points are suggested as shifts in framings or perspectives within the larger scholarly literature and policy realm.

### **The continued relevance of Dubai**

At the commencement of this project, when I announced to colleagues and friends that I was going to study contemporary urban Dubai, the response was often one of incredulity mixed with curiosity. Known across most of the developed world for its extravagant architecture, decadent lifestyles of Western expatriates and rich Arab sheikhs, Dubai was seen as an otherworldly space. My research there was perceived as akin to the exploration of a frontier land, particularly within a context in which there were few up-to-date academic analyses of the emirate. Perhaps perceived as politically insignificant, the emirate and the larger federation were peripheral spaces in many scholarly readings of the urban.

There is now far more research on the region, and about Dubai in particular, partly as a result of its rapid expansion in terms of material landscape, but also as a metaphor for Arab exceptionalism. Migrant rights issues in the GCC zone have also received significant attention, both from human rights agencies and in academic readings of a phenomenon that marks the region uniquely. Its peculiar mode of autocratic yet economically liberal governance has been assessed in largely favourable terms and even emulated by neighbouring states. With the implications of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) still evident across the world in real-estate crashes, massive job losses, popular movements against inequality and widespread austerity measures, Dubai too seemed at one point to have lost its sheen. The excitement previously associated with the city-state had dimmed. Dubai was no longer special. It, too, had not escaped a global recession.

Today, the emirate has effectively bounced back from the recession of the late 2000s. There seems to be little change in its pace and mode of urban development, and the GFC is a distant memory. Migration continues unabated, protests by marginalised migrant workers are still a feature of city life and prices for real estate continue to rise with Dubai re-emerging as a regional safe zone for global capital. In its capacity to endure these cycles, the small emirate of Dubai has taken on a significance and resonance beyond its physical size. As scholars of the post-colonial, we must take this seriously.

*Migrant Dubai* is of the city-state that existed and continues to exist between those two extreme discourses: of exception and the ordinary. It is a snapshot of a particular window in the emirate's trajectory of development. Dubai is a space of extremes, but also one that resonates with global processes in cities across the world. The large proportion of labour migrants and the rapid pace of neoliberal restructuring render such processes exceptionally obvious in the emirate. It is precisely because of the intense nature of such processes that the city-state is an apt case study for trends replicated (to various extents) across the world. Dubai, then, is not unique. However, it embodies particularities that arise out of its history, geopolitical positioning and non-democratic system of governance, as this book has demonstrated.

## **Key contributions**

This book makes four important contributions through the study of international labour migration and city-making within a context of neoliberal globalisation and development.

### **Expanding conceptions of neoliberalism**

First, this book expands applications and analyses of neoliberalism. The study of Dubai, the UAE and the Gulf has traditionally been categorised under area studies or international relations. This book brings them into mainstream research on contemporary globalisation and neoliberalism in an interdisciplinary drawing-together of strands from sociology, geography, cultural studies and anthropology. This undertaking has shown that analyses of neoliberalism in the Middle East can go beyond discussions of International Monetary Fund (IMF) interventions situated within a development discourse. It instead addresses more grounded and localised processes, for example, of individual governmentalities, remade subjectivities (Chapter 4) and everyday exclusions in terms of mobility (Chapter 5). The ethnographic approach that this book adopts

is integral in understanding *how* such specific engagements with neoliberalism develop and function at everyday levels. In this way, analyses of neoliberalism also go beyond statist and top-down readings.

Gulf states, generally conceived as illiberal because of their non-democratic, authoritarian regimes, are shown to be an important part of shifts taking place across the globe. They, too, are implicated in economic restructuring, freeing up markets and privatisation – processes that have significant consequences for labour. In situating the analysis of neoliberalism in what has traditionally been considered a more marginal space such as Dubai, this book questions the dominance of “Western” theorisations of the phenomenon. In examining Dubai as an example of neoliberal development in the non-Western world, this book disrupts conceptions of neoliberalism as monolithic and foregrounds the importance of readings from new global centres of power. Despite its smallness, Dubai is also indicative of international shifts and the expansion of global cities to areas outside established nodes in North America and Western Europe. In demonstrating that “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 2) adapts and functions together with inherent structures in individual contexts, this book demonstrates how urbanised change is non-uniform, varied and sporadic.

In Dubai, neoliberalism as an economic strategy is largely state-led. This is foregrounded in Chapter 2’s discussion of Dubai’s popular characterisations as a corporation, headed by a CEO sheikh. Largely a manifestation of its autocratic governance regime inherited from a tribal mode of politics, this mode of neoliberal development has resulted in a system in which the boundaries between private and public are extremely blurred. This creates a situation where the valuing of private capital interests also augments the dominance of the state (cf. Ong 2006). In fact, Dubai as a case study demonstrates that neoliberalisation functions through highly regulated state practices. This has been shown to be a characteristic of a top-down, state-led neoliberalism that is increasingly apparent in other countries in Asia and the Middle East. Unlike in many of those contexts, however, in Dubai, the minority Emirati citizenry has generally been protected from the negative and marginalising effects of neoliberal restructuring, such as the increasing precarity and lack of protections for labour and the diminished welfare state. They remain privileged recipients of state welfare and an improved standard of living. It is, then, low-wage international labour migrants in the city-state who are subject to the competitive pressures of neoliberal discourses as well as the bottom end of polarising effects.

Finally, this book has shown that there are spaces in neoliberalising cities that exist outside neoliberal logics, but are, nevertheless, shaped by them (Chapter 6). Both competing logics co-exist within the space of the city and, together, generate the necessary conditions for informal networks and solidarities to develop. These are important to migrant workers in order help them cope with their marginalised circumstances. They also suggest that possibilities for resistance to entrenched hierarchies exist. These findings diverge from most conceptualisations of Dubai, which depict it as a completely rationalised and uncaring place. This has implications for the study of other neoliberalising cities and states. More grounded research of everyday processes is necessary to foreground such latent possibilities of care, and quotidian spaces that exist outside neoliberal rationalities. These affective landscapes provide the most important clues to the everyday lived *quality* of such neoliberal spaces.

### **Extending international migration literatures**

Second, this book contributes to contemporary research on international migration. South-South migration is an important, but understudied, component of globalisation that is a mode of international mobility that involves very different dynamics to the vast majority of migration that has been researched, that is, from the Global South to North. South-South migration is typically circular and involves the maintenance of strong links with families and communities in the home country, in terms of economic remittances and debt bondage, but also through more affective ties (Chapters 4 and 5). This is especially true for low-wage migrants, who typically cannot remain for long periods in the host country and have little possibility of attaining permanent resident status. They remain “guest workers”, whose attachments to recipient countries are mediated through precarious employment (Chapter 3). Studies of South-South migration need to take into account the differentiated ways in which recipient countries deal with temporary migrants. Like countries in the Global North, they, too, have tiered migration regimes. However, low-wage migrant welfare is relatively neglected and often abused in regions of the Global South, as this book has shown. In these situations, the discourse of migrant rights is typically less developed and the implementation of laws more lax. The marginalised circumstances under which migrants labour and live have implications for the formation of migrant subjectivities (Chapter 4) and coping strategies (Chapter 6). These need to be more extensively explored within the context of South-South migration, especially in regions where migrant labour is a significant part of socio-economic systems.

Further, this book explores low-wage male migrant experiences, which have been relatively neglected as a result of a focus on the feminisation of migration, especially in studies of low-skilled and temporary forms of migration. The existing literature that discusses this mode of international labour migration needs to look beyond experiences of female domestic workers. The large numbers of male low-wage migrants employed in industries such as construction and hospitality have largely been overlooked, although they form a significant proportion of international labour migrants. This research, primarily interested in experiences of migrant men, seeks to balance such perspectives. It interrogates specific conceptualisations of low-wage male migrants as sexual and moral threats (Chapter 5), emasculated “boys” or productive machines (Chapter 4). Research on male migrants’ experiences provides important understandings of the construction of hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and male friendships. This research also understands how male and female migrants are subject to different regimes of control by the state, employers and their family at home. These differentiated understandings are important not just for local and international governance outcomes, but also in the potential conceptualisation of migrant-dominated urban spaces as safe and convivial zones of interaction between and across gender lines.

Third, this book expands reductive conceptions of low-wage and marginalised migrants. Reflecting depictions situated in other parts of the world, low-wage migrants in Dubai and the Gulf have been consistently seen as victims of capitalist exploitation. This study acknowledges that they are regularly subject to exploitative and unjust practices, but rejects these one-dimensional conceptions. It portrays migrants as possessing agency, and capable of challenging and developing strategies to cope with exploitative practices (Chapter 6). In the same vein, the book also demonstrates how low-wage migrants articulate empowered subjectivities and narratives as a result of being embedded within a neoliberal space of exclusions. They reinterpret their marginalised circumstances for productive outcomes such as self-respect and recognition (Chapter 4). In doing so, this book gives voice to and grounds the experience of low-wage migrants. It also provides balanced perspectives in unpacking the structures that contain low-wage migrants at the bottom of multiple vectors of disaffiliation and discrimination (Chapter 3). This book understands exploitation from the perspective of migrants, who often bear the biggest costs in migration. It looks beyond material outcomes and understands the emotional costs of commodification, separation from family, insecurity of employment



and the erosion of dignity and respect (cf. Stenning, Smith et al. 2008: 241). These more intangible effects are often overlooked in studies of labour migration.

This book also argues that migrants themselves are implicated in the perpetuation of unjust practices and mistreatment, as discussions of co-ethnic exploitation (in Chapters 3 and 6) show. This again challenges unitary depictions of them as victims. Contemporary research on labour migration must acknowledge that low-wage migrants' positions can thus be ambivalent – they can simultaneously inhabit the role of victim and exploiter – both benefitting and suffering because of practices such as debt bondage. The complicity of the migrant in reifying exploitative structures and subverting strategies by states points to the need to understand better the self-regulating mechanisms at the scale of the village or hometown (Lindquist 2012).

*Migrant Dubai* does not assume to speak for the marginalised migrant, but shows multiple subjectivities and facets of him and her, widening readings that conceive of them in unitary terms. This coheres with the political aims of this work, which aims to avoid the replication of reductionist conceptualisations that mirror dominant political framings of neoliberal states and reify structures of inequality, while denying possibilities for more equitable outcomes can exist.

### **Social justice outcomes**

Finally, this book suggests possibilities for enacting better social justice outcomes for low-wage migrants. In doing so, it points to structures and solutions beyond and below the level of the state as the most productive avenues for the regulation and protection of low-wage migrant rights and welfare.

International labour migration offers possibilities for workable and practical forms of social justice. It is a powerful mechanism that has provided opportunities for individuals to realise their right to lead lives that they themselves determine to be good ones (Sen 2009). Migration has repeatedly been shown to enable social mobility and offer better chances to break out of the cycle of poverty, also as demonstrated in Chapter 2. This possibility has been an incredibly potent driver for potential migrants for centuries, and one that can be harnessed to create more equitable outcomes. However, for international migration to be a feasible avenue for social justice, it must be regulated and monitored to ensure that low-wage migrants are not exploited and the barriers to social mobility are removed. This book has demonstrated that the problem of low-wage migrant exploitation is a transnational

social phenomenon and needs a paradigm shift in order to be addressed effectively. It should not be conceived of merely as a responsibility of the receiving or sending state but acknowledged as intrinsically to do with the exploitative structures that transnational capital engenders. The nation-state alone, in this instance, is unable to guarantee migrant rights. This book thus argues that a transnationalisation of rights is an appropriate supranational solution (Chapter 3). A broader international framework ensuring accountability from both sending and receiving states, and greater participation by transnational actors such as the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and UN (United Nations) is needed in calling for such a paradigm shift.

A transnationalisation of rights discourse offers possibilities to challenge inequalities instituted by neoliberalism (Harvey 2005), through dismantling existing structures of subordination. However, these conceptions of rights might be less likely to be adopted within non-Western contexts such as Dubai, where there is often suspicion of democratic ideas seen to originate from the “West” (Cheah 2006; Ong 2006) and less political or civil-society space to start such discussions. In such situations, this book has argued that localised and grounded understandings of dignity, respect and humanitarian aid are more productive in achieving equitable outcomes and ensuring migrant welfare. Local NGOs, migrant welfare groups and charities may thus be better placed than state agencies to translate rights discourses into the everyday issues of injustice and marginalisation that low-wage migrants regularly encounter. The regulation of migrant rights then, requires a solution that combines local grassroots level initiatives, as the discussion of social networks in Chapter 6 demonstrates, together with the efforts of supranational organisations highlighted in Chapter 3. In the context of international migration, then, the potential for better justice outcomes emerges from outside the state. These local forms of care, together with a transnational rights structure, currently present the best possibilities to ensure social justice under globalised conditions of neoliberalism.

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# Notes

## 1 Introduction: Situating Dubai

1. The terms Global South and North are acknowledged to be problematic, as they do not take into account social and economic variations within states or regions. However, they are used as broadly indicative of geographical regions where disadvantage and poverty are more common (South) compared to where privilege and opportunity are more available (North).
2. The Gulf refers to the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE.
3. This book, however, draws only on interviews with migrants living in the emirate of Dubai although they may have worked in other areas.
4. The lack of a tradition of civil society can be seen as a partial explanation for the current apathy towards participation in civil-society processes and the willingness to let leaders make unilateral decisions.
5. Hereafter referred to as Sheikh Mohammed.
6. The conventions of Emirati citizenship and their implications for relations between nationals and migrants are discussed further in Chapter 3.
7. Other states without a past with of slave-keeping, however, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, also have a high dependency on migrant domestic workers, so drawing a direct correlation would be incorrect.
8. Labour camps are segregated by gender.
9. Interviewees who were not of South Asian ethnicity were predominantly volunteer group workers, entrepreneurs and civil servants.
10. Because of the mixture of languages used even in one interview, the original language of individual quotes throughout the book is not specified.

## 2 Dubai as Metaphor: Corporate Entity, Global City, Hope and Mirage

1. Accessed 5 January 2008.
2. See Davidson (2009) for a detailed discussion of the UAE's moves towards more democratic forms of governance and his critiques of this as more performative than indicative of any real change.
3. Similarly, Vora (2013), in a critique of Eurocentric anthropological approaches, points to the limiting nature of conceptualisations of citizenship using Dubai as an example of how long-term residents claim affective and non-legal modes of belonging to the Emirate.
4. See [www.dubaiworld.ae](http://www.dubaiworld.ae).
5. My italics.
6. See <http://www.falconcity.com>. Retrieved 15 March 2015.
7. It is not just through transnational actors and discourses that desires and subjectivities of consumption manifest. The changes in India post-

liberalisation in 1991–1992 have also generated shifts in public consciousness that have implications for potential migrants. “As the neo-liberal reforms progress, supported as they are by vigorous rhetorical campaigns by business and government, increasing numbers of people find themselves being inexorably drawn towards the seductive discourses of the marketplace, and whether intentionally or not, have begun to replicate the language and/or the practices of neo-liberal ‘life’” (Scrase 2006: 3). This discourse of neo-liberalism in India legitimates feelings of envy and desire that prompt potential migrants to become mobile. This combination of factors is what Ali (2007) refers to as the “culture of migration”.

### **3 Migrants and the State: Structures of Violence, Co-ethnic Exploitation and the Transnationalisation of Rights**

1. The opening of the Dubai Foundation coincided with the closure of the City of Hope, which had been privately run by Sharla Musabih. She had become the subject of negative publicity and charges of people smuggling in late 2008. Sharla is now a political refugee in the USA, claiming that she was persecuted for the social work activities she carried out in the UAE.
2. The restriction of the mobility of women under the guise of “care” is a theme that is taken up more extensively in Chapter 5.
3. This is perhaps ironic, as many former slaves from Africa have been naturalised as Emirati citizens. However, this is also testament to how entrenched current social divides are.
4. <http://guide.theemiratesnetwork.com/living/visa.php> Retrieved 9 December 2008. Other countries, such as Singapore, that are also highly dependent on migrant low-wage labour, practise similar forms of discrimination that restrict family unification based on income level and visa category.
5. This is equivalent to about US\$160–US\$540 based on an exchange rate of 1US\$ = 3.7AED.
6. Examples of this are provided in Chapter 6.
7. Domestic workers are not protected under labour laws as their employment is within the private domestic sphere, and thus conceived of as beyond the jurisdiction of the state. This is also common in other states with large numbers of foreign domestic workers, such as Singapore.
8. There is international acceptance of the terms, “irregular migration” and “migrant workers in irregular status” in place of “illegal migration” and “illegal migrant workers”. The former terms do not criminalise migrants and are also more comprehensive in capturing different dimensions of irregularity (Wickramasekara 2008: 1248).
9. Middle-class homeowners who also do not want to incur the visa and administrative costs of hiring a domestic worker legally resort to hiring domestics illicitly.
10. This estimate was made prior to the GFC, after which labour flows into Dubai would probably have declined.
11. When the global economic slowdown hit Dubai hard in 2008/2009, many low-wage labourers had their visas cancelled as construction on many large-

- scale projects halted. These migrants had to return to their home countries before the completion of the contracts they had been promised.
12. Organising as labour unions is illegal in the UAE – a violation of the rights of migrants to free association. However, in recent years, there have been strikes by low-wage construction labourers demanding wage increases and to be paid on time. Many of these, while gaining publicity for their cause, have not resulted in any real or sustained change.
  13. This is largely true despite the fact that there are also significant numbers of middle-class skilled South Asians in Dubai. British citizens of South Asian descent also complicate these equations of race, nationality and social class. In these cases, citizenship and social class often emerge as more significant than race in official spheres such as workplaces.
  14. Gamburd (2008: 17) posits that more Sri Lankan low wage migrants are choosing to work in Italy given opportunities for family reunification and permanent settlement, which are impossible in the Gulf. This was also the reason why some of my informants saw Dubai merely as a stepping-stone towards eventual migration to North America or Europe.
  15. *Hawala*, an informal system of money transfer, is widespread not only because it is quick, but also because it generally pays a premium exchange rate. However, with the introduction of a market-based exchange rate by the Indian government in 1993 and stricter regulation of capital flows post-9/11, it has become less popular.
  16. Recent literature (Krishna Kumar 2010) acknowledges that the entire regulation of international migration by the Indian state needs an overhaul, as current regulatory practices are inadequate in ensuring migrants' welfare.
  17. There are regulations regarding the amount that authorised agents in India can charge potential migrants but, again, regulation is problematic. Forty-four per cent of potential migrants did not know who their sponsors were prior to migration, 16 per cent were preparing to emigrate without employment contracts and among those who did sign contracts, only 37 per cent were aware of what the contracts stated. For details of this research see Rajan, Varghese et al. (2010).
  18. This translates to about US\$110 to US\$3,100 based on exchange rates of about 1US\$ = 45 Indian rupees.
  19. Issues of co-ethnic exploitation and friendship networks that enable migration will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 6.
  20. Indians own more than 11,000 UAE businesses; only local Emiratis own more (Krane 2009: 199).
  21. The management of female Indian migrants to the Gulf is the exception. Indian women migrating as foreign domestic workers (FDWs) and caregivers have to be above the age of 30 – a policy designed to protect younger and more naive migrants from the physical and sexual abuse that has been reported as widespread among migrants working in such positions. The implementation of this age cap, however, is not universally effective.
  22. They include the Migration of Employment Convention of 1949 (ILO Convention No. 97), the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention of 1975 (ILO Convention No. 143) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1990

- (MWC). ILO Convention No. 97 (which came into force on 22 January 1952) has been ratified by 42 member states, while ILO Convention No. 143 (which came into force in 1978) has been ratified by only 18 member states.
23. The work of NGOs and informal networks will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6. For description of a case of how an Indonesian domestic in the UAE was rescued from being stoned to death by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights see Keane and McGeehan (2008).

#### 4 Neoliberal Narratives: Migrant Self-Constructions and the Performance of Empowered Subjectivities

1. The characterisation of India as a “Dark” place is not new or unique to Adiga, and has been employed by sub-continental novelists since V.S. Naipul and Mulk Raj Anand.
2. For a discussion of the development of neoliberal subjectivities in the young professional Emirati population, see Kanna (2010: 106). He shows how in the space of Dubai – through state articulations aimed at local Emiratis – they begin to frame value in terms of “individual merit, entrepreneurialism, work ethic, and willingness to self-improve”. This, however, is perhaps applicable only to a small proportion of young Emiratis. Most desire highly paid civil service jobs and are reluctant to engage in private paid work. This is evidenced by the high levels of unemployment among locals, as discussed in Chapter 3. As opposed to neoliberal attitudes to international migration that other small and resource-poor states such as Singapore have undertaken (Ong 2006), Dubai does not encourage free-market competition for jobs and resources between locals and foreigners. Vora’s (2013) discussion of middle-class migrants in the UAE makes a parallel argument. Indians, through their economic affiliation with productive practices as business-owners and entrepreneurs, or as neoliberal consumers, conceive of themselves as “belonging” to the Emirati state.
3. In the context of the Gulf, Longva’s (1997; 1999) work stands out as one of the few academic studies that attempt to understand how the destination country system of governance impacts low-wage migrants. However, her work is limited to understanding migrants’ marginalised contexts, rather than the formation of low-wage subjectivities. Vora’s (2013) work also fits within this context, but the middle-class Indians in her sample have far more extensive, longer-term connections to Dubai.
4. Emasculation rather than demasculation is used here as it implies an active process of the deprivation of masculine markers of self rather than merely a lack.
5. Asian in this case is read as Indian, as they are the largest component of Asian men in the Gulf and UAE, by a large margin.
6. *Abayas* are long robe-like garments worn over other clothes by women. They are considered national dress in the UAE.
7. Hindi is only an optional third language in many state schools in Tamil Nadu, after Tamil and English. This preference is commonly attributed to the strong Dravidian sentiment in the state.
8. Other recent studies that deal with the importance of dignity at work include that by Hodson (2001) and Lamont (2000). They both develop frameworks

to understand dignity, looking at class and gendered aspects as well as how co-workers affect dignity in the workplace.

9. This is discussed in Chapter 5.
10. This implementation of strict routine corresponds to older conceptualisations of work where tasks are repetitive, work time is fixed and the trajectory of work life can be predicted. Low-wage migrants generally do not have access to the flexible economy of adaptable time schedules and continuous learning for which many white-collar workers are drawn to Dubai.
11. Somewhat ironically, low-wage migrants have access to an underground sex industry.
12. Middle-class workers in Dubai were more likely to emphasise the ease with which business and work is conducted in Dubai (as opposed to India) than a changed subjectivity or sense of self-worth: "You can access everything. There are no political problems here, there is no strife. That kind of headaches you don't have. It is a good place for business – that is the main thing". This was how relationships to the neoliberal discursive space of Dubai were often articulated.
13. This desire to narrate and perform masculinity in the migrant context (to both researchers and others) might be enhanced by migrant men's absence from the home context and thus inability to perform patriarchy there, as Osella and Osella (2006b) point out.
14. The relationship between work and the shaping of subjectivities has been widely researched. However, much of this has been of work cultures in post-industrial Western societies (Beder 2000; Casey 1995; Strangleman and Warren 2008). The impact of migration and migrant work on working-class subjectivities in the Global South is less known.
15. Critics of Weber point out that consumption is missing from his discussion of the capitalist work ethic and that he focuses exclusively on the production aspect.
16. Khalaf (2010) describes how migrant camel trainers similarly never visit the city's malls or shops, with their lives confined to the camel market. This was a strategy to avoid spending money as well as a result of the social distance they felt as low-wage migrants.
17. Chin (1997) reports how FDWs from Indonesia and the Philippines were also reluctant to tell their family and friends back home about their negative experiences in Malaysia. This is a "face-saving" measure, where a disclosure of hardship will affect social standing and status in the home community and the mirage of migration as a utopian solution will be spoiled.
18. Calling an Iranian an Arab is of course a misnomer. But among Indian low-wage workers, it was usual for Iranians to be lumped into the same category as others from the region.
19. Indian low-wage workers in Dubai in this way are compared to a stereotype of the inefficient and lazy labourer in an India that is also often typecast as backward and underdeveloped.

## 5 The Divided City: Gated Communities, Everyday Mobilities and Public Space

1. Emirati citizens also live in exclusive neighbourhoods, in villas with high walls, and interact predominantly with members of their own community.



Dresch (2005a: 10) suggests that, as opposed to the situation of domestic workers, this mode of “confinement of foreigners to camps or quarters attracts less attention, yet provides an obvious complement to citizens’ exclusivity. The modes of separation and control are effective, and... complement a history of what in fact is a growing social isolation”.

2. This blurring between public and private has historical precedents in Dubai. In the pre-oil era, merchants depended on sheikhs for protection in return for subsidising rulers. This model is one that is common through the Gulf (Hvidt 2007).
3. With Emaar, Dubai’s brand of neoliberal spatialisation practices is also transported abroad (refer to Chapter 2’s discussion of the dissemination of the Dubai brand through these developments). It is a part of the neoliberal modernity expansionism that is enabled through freewheeling capital that was available in the emirate, at least until the advent of the GFC.
4. The property sector in Dubai liberalised to allow foreign ownership from the mid- to late 1990s. This was in concert with other practices of neoliberal restructuring that the emirate undertook.
5. The United States Department of State classifies the crime rate in Dubai as considerably lower than most cities throughout the world of a similar size. (<https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=15084>). Retrieved 29 September 2014.
6. It is interesting here to note again how the mobile phone becomes the most important vehicle in transnational relationships (as highlighted in Chapter 4).
7. Eight lakhs are equivalent to 800,000 Indian rupees or about US\$13,000 (based on an exchange rate of 1 Indian rupee to 0.016 US\$).
8. Statistics compiled by the Consulate General of India in Dubai show that suicides rose more than three-fold between 2003 and 2008. As many as 75 per cent of these deaths were attributed to debts, 15 per cent to domestic strife and 10 per cent to job-related stress (Rajan, Varghese et al. 2010: 272–273).
9. As pointed out earlier, men who leave families in the home country and migrate to Dubai are considered “bachelors” by the state and in public discourse.
10. Post-GFC, the situation altered temporarily, with rents falling by more than 50 per cent. However, the informal spatial economy still thrives, and real-estate prices have risen again.
11. For a more sustained discussion of the significance of the informal sector, refer to Chapter 3.
12. This policing of moralities is highly selective. While displays of public intimacy are frowned upon in Dubai’s malls, overt solicitations by sex workers in hotels and bars are frequently overlooked.

## **6 Social Networks: Informal Solidarities and an Ethic of “Care”**

1. This articulation of urban informality has overlaps with Burkitt’s conceptualisation of unofficial practices of everyday life. These social relations, being

- less codified and institutionalised, are “more resistant and provide the basis for opposition and social movements” (Burkitt 2004: 211).
2. It is important here to distinguish this conceptualisation from that in other academic literature that deals with “care” in the context of the provision of health care or care for the elderly and disadvantaged.
  3. Ironically, perhaps, Dubai and its ruler Sheikh Mohammed, perform “care” outside the emirate’s borders. For example, the annual “Dubai Cares” campaign, targeted to fit in with the Muslim month of Eid, donates millions of dirhams each year to charities in the developing world.
  4. Khalaf (2010) describes the self-segregation of groups according to nationality within the context of a camel market in Dubai – a microcosm of divisions in the city-state.
  5. *Diyya* is paid to the victim’s family according to Sharia law upheld in the UAE. It only needs to be paid by the perpetrator if he or she is found guilty or legally responsible for the death. However, the victim’s family need not sue for the *diyya*. Payment is automatically assumed as a penalty.
  6. Dubai has one of the highest traffic fatality rates in the world (Bener and Crundall 2005).
  7. Chapter 3 provided an example of how an activist/social worker attempted to inform the Indian embassy about the inadequacies of its helpdesk.
  8. Here we can see parallels with paternalism in the provision of international aid by Western developed nations, especially to former colonies. This literature examines how aid is often contingent on certain conditions rather than in relation to the needs, opportunities and capacity of the recipient society. See Baaz (2005), Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen (2003) or Lancaster (2007).
  9. This theme of the “good migrant” was brought up in Chapter 4 discussion of middle-class migrants’ encouragement of a neoliberal ethics of self-discipline. It was also highlighted in Chapter 5’s discussion of the conditional aid of NGOs in relation to spatial practices in labour camps, and surveillance of migrants by their peers.
  10. This is also true of local associations with Emirati membership.
  11. Women are typically seen to develop more local informal networks than men, as they are more likely to be confined to the home and neighbourhood, which facilitates the formation of such bonds (Moore 1990). This research shows that men placed in similar physically limited situations, develop analogous networks.
  12. Similar practices of aid and exploitation have also been documented in the case of rural to urban migrants in Nairobi (Lyons and Snoxell 2005).
  13. Employers with *wasta* were typically local Emiratis from merchant families or who had connections to the royal family.
  14. It was in 2008 the only Telegu-language radio station in the entire GCC region, and served a Telegu speaking population of about 400,000 in the UAE. After Keralites, they are the second largest migrant population to originate from one Indian state. They are also predominantly low-wage migrants.
  15. This was prior to the opening of the Dubai metro.
  16. Frantz, writing in the context of domestic workers in Jordan, similarly observes that “it appeared that while friendships occasionally developed

between domestic workers of different nationalities, such alliances were rare” (2008: 626).

17. Another factor to consider here is the role of communications technologies in facilitating these random and spontaneous acts of help. Mobile phones here act as “intermediaries of care” (Amin 2009). Random dialling of mobile phone numbers, on the off-chance that a person who picks up the phone speaks a common language and is willing to help, is another strategy employed by distressed FDWs and trafficked women looking to escape.
18. Hage (2003: 25) argues that it is certain material and symbolic social conditions internalised by individuals that “activate their conatic hopefulness and allow it to flourish”.

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