

Gender, labour and the law: the nexus of domestic work, human trafficking and the informal economy in the United Arab Emirates

PARDIS MAHDAVI

*Pomona College, 420 N. Harvard Ave,
Claremont, CA 91711, USA,
Pardis.Mahdavi@pomona.edu*

Abstract *Based on ethnographic fieldwork with female migrants in the United Arab Emirates, the focus of this article is on the confluence of human trafficking discourses, gendered migration, domestic work and sex work in the UAE. I explore three main findings. First, domestic work and sex work are not mutually exclusive. Second, women choose to enter sex work in preference to domestic work because of poor working conditions in the latter. Third, global policies on human trafficking that seek to restrict female migration have inspired female migrants in the Gulf in search of higher wages and increased autonomy to look for employment in the informal economy. Employing a theoretical lens that emphasizes structural violence, the article chronicles the individual and macro social factors structuring the transition of female migrants from the formal economy of domestic and care work into the informal economy of sex work.*

Keywords DOMESTIC WORK, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, SEX WORK, GULF COUNTRIES, MIDDLE EAST, INFORMAL ECONOMY

For the last two decades, we have seen a global increase in what scholars term the ‘feminization of migration’. Migration to the Gulf countries has also become more feminized (Sabban 2004), with the vast majority of women migrating in search of employment in the semi-formal sphere of domestic and care work and some moving into the informal sphere of commercial sex work (note that these forms of labour are not mutually exclusive). Domestic and care workers – including maids, nannies and caretakers of the elderly – are a particularly interesting group of Gulf migrants. This is because they seek to migrate into the formal labour economy through legal channels, but increasingly prefer employment in the informal economy due primarily to three factors. These are (1) poor working conditions in domestic work, (2) fallout from the global trafficking and migration policies enacted in the last decade, and (3) local responses to these policies and discourses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While

women working in domestic and care work are subject to the same labour *regulations* embodied in the *kafala* (the sponsorship system delineating conditions of employment for all migrants in Gulf countries), they fall outside the *protection* offered by the labour laws in place in the UAE. This reveals the presence of a type of structural violence in these migrant women's lives. In addition, recent global policies aiming to reduce the number of 'trafficked'¹ persons have actually resulted in policies that seek to restrict female migration and tighten borders to women specifically. The authorities took these measures without offering alternative employment opportunities to women in their home countries, who therefore increasingly look to illegal avenues of migration to make ends meet. In this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with migrant women in the UAE² to explore disconnections between law and discourse on the one hand and the reality of gendered labour and migratory patterns in Dubai and Abu Dhabi on the other.

Four years of extended trips to the Gulf between 2004 and 2009 framed my ethnographic research on migrant men and women in the UAE (including sex workers, domestic workers, construction workers and others), as well as those who provided services to them. I assessed the experiences of migrant women and sex workers whom the international community labelled as 'trafficked'. To date, the sample consists of 78 migrant workers who have resided and worked at some point in the UAE. I also spoke to 25 local officials, government employees and grassroots activists in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. In addition to the fieldwork in the Gulf, I spent nine months in Washington, DC interviewing policy makers and migration activists about discourses, laws and policies relevant to trafficking, sex work and migrants' rights globally. Because the sensitive nature of the research topic ruled out a random sampling scheme, I relied on snowball and targeted sampling to facilitate participant observation and in-depth interviews with migrant workers, activists and policy makers.

***Kafala* and its discontents**

In Dubai, as in many other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, a *kafala*, or labour sponsorship scheme, structures the uses of migrant labour. *Kafala* is a form of guest worker programme in which migrants are not legally permitted to settle in the host country. Anyone migrating into the formal sectors of labour must contend with this system, which protects the interests of the employer/sponsor over safeguarding the safety and rights of employees. Because the *kafala* system merges the employer and sponsor into one category, it creates a situation in which, in the event of a labour dispute with an employer that ends in the termination of employment, the dismissed employee automatically becomes an illegal or undocumented worker (Longva 2005). Workers who break their employment contracts frequently work as illegal aliens in an attempt to stay in the country for as long as possible, which is a better option for them than to return home empty-handed. While there are labour laws that allow a worker to take his or her employer to court for violating their labour contract, such a law 'does not take into consideration the fact that while the trial is pending, the plaintiff is

unemployed and forbidden to work for anyone else' (Longva 1999: 22). As Andrew Gardner (2010) noted, the *kafala* brings extreme variability to migrant workers' experiences in the Gulf because the sponsor's flexibility and character determine the quality of the work experience. A major shortcoming of *kafala* is that when labour disputes arise between migrant workers and their employers/sponsors, the workers are at a distinct disadvantage because they can be deported if accused of any 'moral wrongdoing'. Indeed, merging the employer and sponsor into a single category may be at the root of the problem. Furthermore, the threat of deportation can structure many migrant workers' lived experiences in the Gulf. As Nicholas De Genova and Natalie Peutz (2010) point out, we take deportation for granted as a natural part of state sovereignty, but it is a construct and, even though it has been normalized, it is both socially produced and a violation of rights. In other words, deportation is not only a social concept agreed between sending and receiving states but also part of a global discourse. Thus, it is important to look at the social discipline and labour subordination that result from the ability to deport migrant workers.

Female migrants in many parts of the world face challenges such as coping with abusive employers, working illegally with limited rights, and enduring unregulated hours with very little recourse to the law if they are abused or if their pay is withheld (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Parreñas 2001, 2004, 2008). The conditions that the *kafala* system imposes on the Gulf countries, however, make the experience of domestic and care workers (who make up the majority of female labourers in the UAE) unique. UAE labour laws require domestic workers to abide by the *kafala*, which means that their residence in the country is reliant on their sponsor or *kefil*, who is also their employer. They depend entirely on this person not only for residence but also for assistance in accessing services such as health care.³ Some of the more problematic aspects of the general provisions section of the labour law that structures the lived experiences of migration include Article 3. This states that 'the provisions of this law shall not apply to ... domestic servants employed in private households, and the like ... farming and grazing workers.' Later, Article 72 adds seafarers to the list of migrant workers not protected by any labour laws. Thus, while domestic workers must abide by *kafala* procedures, there are no labour laws to protect them. They, like other migrant workers, are also unable to join labour unions because Laws 155 and 160 of the UAE Federal Law No. 8 of 1980 (also known as the Labour Law) ban the creation of such organizations (Human Rights Watch 2007).

The UAE has not signed the UN's 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. However, this convention is the only ratified international instrument available that is able to protect domestic workers, for even the ILO Convention excludes contract workers recruited under the *kafala* system. Although on 16 June 2011 the UAE (with other members of the GCC) expressed support for the new ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers,⁴ the convention has not yet been ratified and it remains to be seen whether or not the UAE or GCC will adhere to its recommendations. Currently, neither local nor international labour laws protect migrants employed in the domestic or agricultural sectors in the Gulf. The legal domain of domestic work is a

highly contested issue across the globe. In the Gulf, however, it is problematic that this type of labour remains unprotected by any labour laws. Because they work in people's private homes, any dispute between domestic workers and their employers is viewed as a 'private matter' or 'matter of the home' and not to be solved in a court of law. Indeed, the construction of domestic work as relegated to the private sphere is neither new nor specific to the UAE (Boris and Parreñas 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Parreñas 2011).

Moral controversies of 'human trafficking'

Today's 'moral controversies' are also manifest in the discourses on human trafficking, which have resulted in a series of initiatives, such as the US-based Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP),⁵ seeking to regulate the movement of (female) bodies across borders (Cheng 2010; Parreñas 2011). Although some countries tighten their borders in an attempt to prevent female migration, the demand for female labour and the supply of women looking to migrate in search of employment remain the same. Thus, as Bridget Anderson and Julia O'Connell Davidson (2003) note, the demand for mobility in migrant-receiving countries, coupled with restrictive immigration policies, creates irregular migratory patterns that could be exploitative. In the context of the UAE, women migrating from other parts of Asia and Africa must increasingly rely on unlicensed intermediaries to procure employment in the Gulf. With options for income generation in the home country limited, many women choose to migrate to another country where they work illegally. In addition, some domestic workers who migrated to Dubai legally resented having to comply with labour regulations without enjoying their attendant benefits or rights. Garcés Mascareñas (2010) refers to this as the legal production of illegality. Tired of their abusive employers and the restrictions placed on their mobility and income earning potential, these women are turning to the informal sphere of sex work in search of increased autonomy and higher wages.

In this article, I focus on a group of women I encountered during my fieldwork who had initially migrated into the formal labour market of domestic and care work, but were now working in the sex industry, either exclusively or to supplement their incomes. Through their stories, I chronicle the individual and larger macro social factors structuring their entry into the informal economy of sex work. Although only relatively few female workers in the Gulf would countenance employment in the sex industry, that I met more than two dozen who did points to an important finding, namely that the informal economy, where the potential for abuse is high, has become comparatively desirable for many women. This highlights the challenges inherent in choosing within a series of limited options and structural constraints – what Nicole Constable (2003: 30) calls a 'bind of agency'. My interlocutors' experiences highlight the shortcomings of trafficking policies that focus exclusively on women in the sex industry. Their stories show how global initiatives on trafficking, such as the TIP reports, and the home country's protectionist migratory laws, largely in response to international pressures, strive to regulate female migration.⁶ In practice, however, they fail to reduce the probability of women encountering abusive situations, whether

or not they fit into the category of trafficking. In fact, they actually increase their vulnerability to abuse.⁷

A common assumption about sex work is that most of the women in it want an exit strategy; they would do just about anything to get out of the oppression inherent in it. My fieldwork revealed, however, that women move *into* the sex industry as a way *out of* the oppression they experience in domestic work or in joblessness in their home countries. Increasingly, people are articulating and using the term ‘trafficked’ – which I place in inverted commas to indicate its contested nature as a word that at once claims too much and too little – to describe the experiences of women who migrate to work in the sex industry (O’Connell Davidson 2006; Vance 2009).⁸ Trafficking seeks to account for migratory experiences characterized by the elements of force, fraud and/or coercion (as outlined by the UN Palermo Protocol and the US-based Trafficking Victims Protection Act, or TVPA–HR 3244). The label of a ‘trafficking victim’ theoretically entitles its bearer to a particular legal status and its attendant benefits. Borne out of an understandable sense of indignation regarding the types of abuse and exploitation that seem all too common in migrant women’s worlds, the concept has been narrowly gendered, sexualized and racialized. Specifically, and problematically, the misunderstanding that human trafficking refers only to women whom men kidnap and force into the sex industry has become the functional definition of the term in policy, media and discourse. As O’Connell Davidson (2006) notes, ‘framed within the convention on transnational organized crime and packaged within a protocol on smuggling, the trafficking protocol reflects a preoccupation with illegal immigration as part and parcel of a supposed security threat posed by transnational organized crime as opposed to a concern with the human rights of migrants’. For these reasons, it is important to push for a larger conceptualization of trafficking within a broader framework of human rights, forced labour and migration (Brennan 2010; Peters 2011; Vance 2009).

When policies and discussions aimed at reducing human trafficking focus on ending sex work – through their marked focus on sex trafficking – they neglect many grey areas, such as the numbers of women entering the sex industry because of abuses in other industries. We forget to consider the many global, local and individual factors that structure a preference to work in the informal economy. Furthermore, as Sealing Cheng (2010) notes with respect to Filipina entertainers in South Korea, women in the sex industry take issue with the discursive construction of their lives as characterized by victimization. Some women in the sex industry have sought this type of work for specific reasons, and the global moral panic about ‘sex trafficking’ has actually been more detrimental to their lives than the abuse that the policies are trying to prevent (Bernstein 2010; Cheng 2010). Global discourses about sex trafficking also fail to question global and state level policies, which, when combined with the *kafala*, produce a type of structural violence (Farmer 2000) that diminishes women’s access to rights and protections within the legal channels of migration. Significantly, in 2000 and 2001, a migrants’ rights movement, particularly in the UAE, was beginning to push for a reform of the *kafala*. Following Bahrain’s decision to abolish the *kafala* and under pressure from migrants’ rights groups, the UAE began to consider a serious

reform of the *kafala*, which would give all labourers, including domestic workers, more rights and better protection. The worldwide moral panic on trafficking, however, and the US Department of State's condemnation of the UAE in its various TIP reports (United States of America 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2009) – which placed the UAE on a trafficking 'watch list' – cast a shadow on the movement. The consequent public shaming of the UAE, a major trading partner of the USA, led government officials to create an anti-sex trafficking squadron. This elevated 'sex trafficking' to centre stage and the groups seeking to reform the *kafala* system lost their momentum.⁹ The moral panic obscures the root causes of abuse, namely lack of employment in the home countries; restrictive migratory policies towards women, so forcing them to resort to illegal measures; and the absence of legal protection in the host countries for women in industries such as domestic work.

International policies, local labour laws, the government and economy of the home country, the need to supplement an income to support their families and a preference for a particular type of labour (in this case informal over formal) all affect women's decisions to migrate. Paradoxically, the combination of global push/pull forces and the home/host country policies that structure the supply and demand for women's labour, are creating an environment in which women are *more* vulnerable to abuse. The global rhetoric on trafficking, fixated as it is on preventing the movement of women into sex work, is actually resulting in more people ending up in it because the challenges of migration into the formal economy are making the informal economy of sex work a comparatively easier option. International responses to the US Department of State's annual TIP reports, tighter border controls and policies based on values (Oishi 2005), such as bilateral agreements that prevent unmarried or underage women leaving their home countries (Silvey 2004), merely exacerbate these challenges.¹⁰ These policies ignore the fact that migrants must move to make ends meet and that they will use any means necessary to do so. With tighter borders and increased bureaucracy, some migrants resort to illegal channels of migration and this exposes them to high-risk situations. Yet, in their international recommendations on trafficking, the TIP reports are devoid of any discourse on how to improve civil society or reform labour laws to protect women who are migrating into the formal economy. In the specific case of the UAE, because of the lack of protection within labour laws, and the stringent and challenging *kafala* system, many women who may have migrated legally or illegally into the formal labour market of domestic or care work are marginalized. As many scholars have noted, the absence of labour laws and protection for women in this sphere of the labour force can create an environment in which using 'unfree' labour is both possible and profitable (Brennan 2002; Boris and Parreñas 2010; O'Connell Davidson 2004). Hence, some leave the formal sector in favour of jobs in the informal sphere of commercial sex work.

Structural violence and the state

The concept of 'structural violence' is useful in framing understandings of the experiences of female labourers in the UAE. At home, in the sending countries, migrant

women experience structural violence¹¹ because weak economies create high unemployment, and their governments are still reeling from World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programmes that have left them with huge debts. The sending countries often have weak infrastructures and rising levels of unemployment, especially among women, which add to the ‘push’ factors that motivate them to seek employment abroad. In addition, some sending countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Pakistan are now attempting to implement rules to prevent the out-migration of unmarried women, or women under the age of 30, in an attempt to address the recommendations of a TIP report to prevent the trafficking of women into the sex industry. In the Philippines, the government has increased the bureaucracy required for women to become overseas guest workers and now insists they attend courses lasting several months. Such impositions are leading them to seek out alternative channels of migration, which can involve bribery, trickery or abuse. Thus, the structures of migration can subject these women to the danger of physical violence. Finally, on arrival in the host country, women in the domestic and care work industry have to abide by the rules of the *kafala* without enjoying any attendant benefits or rights. In essence, the *kafala* contributes to the physical violence women often experience in the host country. Racism and elitism in the host country compound the situation, especially in a place like the UAE where racial and class hierarchies, though unspoken, are very rigidly enforced.¹² O’Connell Davidson (2006: 9) noted that race is an important factor in the experiences of domestic and sex workers around the world. As she puts it:

It is important to recognize that racism, xenophobia and prejudice against minority ethnic groups makes it much easier for employers ... to tell themselves that exploitative labour practices are justified. The racially/ethnically other worker does not count as fully human so can be abused in ways that same race/ethnicity workers can’t be.

In the UAE, there is a prohibition against guest workers from some backgrounds frequenting certain spaces, such as malls or ‘public’ beaches, without their sponsors. Furthermore, they do not have access to legal protection or benefits in the eyes of the law, which, because of the *kafala*, often sides with the employer.

As Anderson and O’Connell Davidson (2003: 28) note, the state helps to create the conditions that make women seek jobs in the informal economy of sex work:

Studies exploring the rise in demand for labour in private households tend to focus on changing demographics and family structures, feminization of the labour force, and lack of public provision for care. This indicates some recognition of the fact that the state is implicated in the creation of circumstances that generate demand.

This is also true of the UAE where local discourses equating status with having ‘home help’ socially reinforce the currently high demand for female labour in the care

and domestic work industry. Efforts to address this demand through the public provision of care or through labour laws that protect such labour remain absent. In places with large expatriate populations, such as Dubai, social norms reinforce the high demand for domestic labour. According to the Dubai Statistics Center, fewer than 10 per cent of the local citizens employ domestic labour, but there is a demand for it from people who have settled in the Emirates and wish to meet the various social and moral expectations of their peers. Although demand remains high, the UAE, responding to an initiative contained in a TIP report, has cooperated with sending countries such as Ethiopia and the Philippines to restrict the numbers of women migrating to work in this sphere. Paradoxically, global policies and discourses have created a situation in which demand for female labour remains high and the supply from the sending countries is high, yet migration is tightly controlled, invariably forcing women to rely on irregular routes, which can be abusive. In the next section, I record the experiences of women who have moved from the formal to the informal economy of sex work, not to generalize and argue that these are the experiences of all migrant women, but to illustrate the ways in which policies can have a detrimental impact on the lives of even a few women.

Women's stories

'I used to see my cousins and girlfriends come back to Ethiopia with lots of money, and nice magazines and nicer clothes', Meskit said, reflecting on her decision to migrate to Dubai to work as a domestic worker. When I met her, she was working illegally as a nanny for three different families and occasionally engaged in sex work on the side. She had been in Dubai for almost five years and, during that time, had borne a son from an Emirati man with whom she had lived for two years. She was very eager to return to Ethiopia to reunite with her family, but was afraid of the heavy fines she would incur upon her departure. Migrants who overstay their visas or work illegally must pay a \$25 fine for each day they remain beyond their assigned departure date. Meskit's problem was that she did not have her passport or visa. Her previous employers had retained her documents and refused to return them to her.

Meskit's trajectory from migrating to a job in the formal sphere of domestic work to working in the sex industry in the informal economy and living as an 'illegal alien' in Dubai resembled that of at least seven other women with whom I spoke. After her father died, she, her mother and her siblings found themselves heavily in debt. Worried about her family's future, she decided to ask her friends about possible avenues of migration to the Gulf. After announcing her decision to her mother and siblings and receiving their blessing, Meskit approached a friend of hers who had told her that he knew of a shortcut that would get her to Dubai more easily. In recent years, the Ethiopian government has passed a series of measures designed to regulate the flow of Ethiopians migrating for work, particularly to the Middle East (De Regt and Moors 2008). The state has imposed rules on recruiters having to get licences and has been working towards a system of employee training (similar to that in the Philippines) and contract monitoring. This increased bureaucracy has resulted in many

women looking for alternative ways of leaving Ethiopia – simpler and faster ways of securing transnational employment.

Meskit's friend put her in touch with an illegal recruiter who asked for a high fee, the equivalent of \$2000, to secure her a passage to Dubai (via boat through Yemen) and to draw up a contract for her to work as a domestic servant. Meskit never saw the contract, but he told her that another recruiter would meet her on her arrival in Dubai.

Meskit and many other women with whom I spoke indicated that they knew the risks involved with migrating, especially with migrating illegally, but they noted that these were risks and challenges they were willing to face to secure a better life for their families. 'When you go, you have to tell yourself that it will be OK, that you will be one of those who makes it,' Meskit's friend had once told me. 'You know, maybe it won't be OK when you go, but you also know it won't be OK to stay. I know if I don't go, no chance – no chance for me, for my family. In Ethiopia, [there is] no money, no work. What am I supposed to do?' Meskit asked rhetorically.

When she arrived in Dubai after a long journey, a recruiter met her and took her to the home of her new employers, a Lebanese family who had moved to Dubai a few years earlier. The family took her passport and working documents and Meskit never saw them again. She is still trying to retrieve her working papers so that she can find legal employment and return to Ethiopia soon. During the six months she worked for this family, she endured beatings from her madam and sexual advances from the male head of the household and his son. She had to work for up to 18 hours a days, the family often locked her in the house when they went out, and did not provide her with a dinner on the majority of weeknights. When she complained, they beat her and the male head of household made further advances towards her, uttering sexual threats that he would rape her one night while she was asleep. She was afraid of these threats, so one afternoon she ran away from the apartment in which they had sequestered her for the past six months without pay.

That day, Meskit jumped from the window of her room on the third storey of an apartment building. In doing so, she injured her right leg badly, but instead of going to the hospital or police, she decided to go to the church her employers had permitted her to attend once a month. However, she did not know her way around town and her injured leg severely restricted her mobility. After a few days of living on the street, she met a young Emirati man who wanted to help her. After a few weeks, she became romantically involved with him and eventually became pregnant. The man was happy to hear about the pregnancy, showered her with gifts and attention, and promised to get her a legal visa and to be her sponsor and potentially her husband. She was overjoyed and, during this period, converted to Islam and became involved at the local mosque her Emirati boyfriend attended. After their son was born, however, things changed. He told her that his family had heard about their relationship and was unhappy about the situation. The affections of the young man, who had not yet succeeded in retrieving her working papers or passport, suddenly changed and he ordered her to leave the house with the baby. He gave her some money for the child and sent her away.

Meskit and her son moved in with friends from the mosque while she looked for any kind of work that would allow her to earn enough money to pay off the fines she had incurred for having overstayed her visa and to procure an exit permit to return to Ethiopia with her son. Limited by not having the legal entitlement to take on employment, she began by working in a restaurant in the town's Ethiopian neighbourhood. After a few months, however, it was clear that the restaurant was not going to pay her. Then, one evening, a group of women came into the restaurant who earned their livings as sex workers at a bar called the Rattlesnake and, on discovering her potential earning power, she decided to join them right away. This marked the beginning of Meskit's entry into the informal economy of sex work. One night, after a few months at the Rattlesnake, the police raided the bar and arrested Meskit, who spent three weeks in prison. Meanwhile, her son, whom the authorities would not permit her to see, was still at the home of her friends with whom she had been living.

Gloria was living in a shantytown on the outskirts of Manila with her two daughters, sister and mother when she met Ram, a British Australian who made regular trips to the Philippines each year in search of women to work as domestic workers for his European clients in Dubai. Though she did not wish to leave her family behind, she felt that she would serve them best by seeking work abroad where she was told she could 'make a lot of money quickly' and return home. Gloria saw an advertisement that Ram had placed in a local newspaper and decided to go and meet him in Manila. Her friends had told her that it was not easy to work as a domestic worker in the Gulf, but as she said, 'the Middle East is not the first choice for OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers], but I thought, I will start there and hope to get another, better job somewhere else. Like maybe Europe, but Dubai was good for first.' After meeting Ram, she signed a contract and was on her way in a matter of weeks.

'When I had to say goodbye to my family, that was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. But I kept telling myself, I am doing it for them, I told myself that every day,' she recalled. Gloria had hoped she would be making a lot of money and would be able to send it home immediately, but she soon realized that she owed Ram a large sum for her travelling costs and visa procurement. After a few months, her family started to call repeatedly, saying that they were experiencing difficulties in Manila and needed money urgently. Gloria had still not paid off her debt to Ram – he charged an unusually high recruitment fee because he guaranteed employment within a month. Other registered recruiters in the Philippines facilitated migration at much lower fees, but they required a lot of paperwork and a three-to-six-month training programme. 'I did not have that kind of time, so I agreed to go with Ram and just prayed that everything would be OK,' she said. Desperate to fix her finances, Gloria had agreed to the terms of the contract in the hope of paying off her debt quickly. When, after three months, she was still paying back the debt and could not send money home, she decided to ask her employer, a British executive who had been living in Dubai for two years, for a loan. When she spoke to him, he indicated that he would be willing to give her money in exchange for sexual favours. 'I wasn't sure what to do. I did not

leave Manila, come all the way to Dubai to be a prostitute, but I said to myself, this was different. He was my employer. I wasn't working on the streets or in some bar or something. So I said OK.' She said she was uncertain about accepting her employer's offer, but felt constrained by not knowing if there were any other options for higher wages. She had approached Ram about her situation, but he told her that she would have to take up any issues she had with her employer, who was also her sponsor, and who was the only reason she was able to stay in Dubai. He also reminded her that she owed him a significant debt for bringing her to Dubai and securing a good work opportunity. Unsure of where to turn next, Gloria embarked on a sexual relationship with her employer and was able to make more money to send home to her family. Within 18 months, she had paid for the renovation of her family home and both her daughters were attending private school. 'But I missed them too much, and my girls kept calling me, begging me to come home. I knew I had to make as much money as possible, to do whatever I had to do to get home quickly.'

Juju left Sri Lanka after her father died, leaving her mother and siblings with a substantial debt and no possibility of generating an income. She went to the government office in Colombo to ask for an overseas job, but they told her that she was too young and would have to wait a few years. This was impractical for both her and her family, so she went back to the office the next day and asked to see another official. 'The next guy told me I had to go to school and to do some training,' she said. This too was an unsatisfactory answer to Juju's enquiry. 'I thought, I have to go now, I can't wait. And I don't have money to go to school, I don't have money for a visa, so I knew I would have to find another way,' she reflected.

Juju's mother had heard of a man who made regular trips to their village in Sri Lanka and 'knew all about going to the Middle East'. He was an illegal recruiter who received large sums of money from migrants and potential employers in the Gulf for brokering transactions with 'less paperwork'. He arranged for Juju to go to Dubai on a tourist visa (a fact she did not know at the time) and placed her in the home of a Lebanese family.

Juju's recruiter was also facilitating the migration of four other women that day. He met them at the airport and travelled with each of them to the homes of their new employers. 'He dropped me off at a house and said goodbye. That was the last time I saw him too,' said Juju. After a few months, Juju settled into the home of her new family. She thought she would be a nanny to their three children, but it turned out that she was also responsible for housekeeping and tending to her employer's elderly mother. She started working around the clock and was on call 24 hours a day. Some weeks they gave her only three hours a day to sleep and no days off. Her day would begin at 5.00 a.m. when she would wake to begin cooking breakfast and feeding her employers' youngest child, who was just six months' old. Then she would have to clean the house, cook for the family and tend to the elderly mother, who required almost constant attention. With the baby on her hip, Juju would routinely have to change the elderly woman's bed sheets when she wet the bed. In addition to the caretaking and cleaning, Juju often had to assist in household chores such as handy work and landscaping. Most days she worked until two o'clock in the morning.

Juju became tired and weak. When she told her boss she needed time off to rest, he told her that she had overstayed her tourist visa and would face arrest if she left their house. This was when Juju discovered that her visa was not a work permit. Her recruiter had led her to believe that he had secured a sponsorship visa for her through the employers. 'He told me so many lies. He told me that I would only work eight hours a day, make \$800 a month, and that I was coming on a work visa. Everything he told me was a lie,' said Juju, angrily. She noted that she had no way of contacting him or anyone else. She thought about contacting her embassy, but worried that her government would punish her for having violated its rules about migration.

For three more months, Juju continued to work, each day hoping that her recruiter would turn up or that things would change and her employer get legal sponsorship papers to legalize her residence. Then, one day, the family invited another family for dinner and the visitors brought along their Sri Lankan nanny, a woman named Mediha. Juju was overjoyed to meet Mediha and soon began to tell her new friend about what she had been enduring for the past nine months. Mediha was concerned for her, and told her that she needed to leave the house immediately to find other work. When Juju said that she did not want to work for another family, Mediha mentioned some friends she had met at church who had left their jobs as nannies to become sex workers in local clubs. She said that the women made a lot of money and that it went directly to them rather than to an employer or intermediary. 'But prostitution is illegal, I told Mediha'. Then it dawned on Juju that she was already an illegal resident in Dubai. 'I thought I'm here illegally anyway. Why not do work where I can make money and be my own boss? So that night I made my decision.'

A few weeks later Juju collected her few belongings and left through the backyard sliding door. 'I guess the only thing keeping me in that house had been fear. I could have run away a long time ago, but I was too scared. Once I made up my mind, it was easy,' she said. That night she hitched a ride to the part of town in Bur Dubai that Mediha had told her to go. 'The first night was hard. I was scared, but at least I was free of that house,' she remembered. Juju saw three other Sri Lankan women walking into a hotel bar and asked them for assistance. They were hesitant at first, noting that Juju was not dressed to attract male attention, but still in the grey and white uniform her former employers had given her. After talking for a few hours, with Juju telling them her story, the women took her back to their shared room a few blocks away, lent her some clothes and brought her back with them to the club to which they had been heading.

These women's stories highlight the complexities involved in the lived realities of labour and migration in the UAE. More specifically, their experiences highlight three main factors mentioned earlier. First, domestic labour and commercial sex work are not exclusive and, in fact, women who work in both industries often experience the same types of challenges. Second, women (at least in the studied sample) sometimes turn to sex work because of poor working conditions in domestic work. Finally, the series of policies that have emerged from the global focus on sex trafficking have resulted in situations that leave migrant women *more* vulnerable to abuse. Most importantly, these stories highlight the challenges inherent in female employment and

some of the ramifications of the glaring lack of laws available to protect women in this corner of the formal labour market. However, this situation is not exclusive to the UAE, but rather a global problem associated with the informalization of intimate labour (see Anderson and O'Connell Davidson 2004). The latter also show that, contrary to popular assumptions that all women must be looking for ways out of sex work, some women find that the space of the informal sexual economy affords more rights, autonomy and economic mobility than the restricted space of domestic work. That women end up in the informal economy of sex work because of their need to migrate through restricted channels, which renders them illegal in the host country and ineligible for protection or rights, is thus far specific to the UAE, though we are beginning to see similar issues arising in Japan (Parreñas 2011).

The narratives presented here show that migrant women are not wholly victims of circumstance and can exercise agency in various ways. They demonstrate this through the decisions they make and the ways in which they navigate their experiences as migrant workers in the UAE. We should read Meskit's decision to abscond, to run away in search of other employment to improve her situation, as a resourceful act, albeit one prompted by an unfortunate, dehumanizing situation. Gloria's decision to raise her income by providing sexual favours to her employer was just that, a strategy and a deliberate, well-reasoned act of survival. Finally, one should interpret Jujú's decision to leave the home of her employers in search of increased autonomy in the sex industry as a deliberate and active exercise of the choices available to her. When she realized that she was an illegal employee irrespective of her profession, she chose to enter the illegal economy where her ability to manoeuvre the terms and reap the benefits of her labour would be greater.

Concluding thoughts

Several of the women I met during my fieldwork had initially migrated in search of jobs as domestic or care workers, but had ended up in the sex industry or in other parts of the informal economy through complications over work permits or disputes with employers, in some cases resulting in their arrest. Failing economies or violence in their home countries had led other women to migrate as sex workers. The experiences of female migrants who work in the sex industry are not necessarily uniform and cannot be captured under umbrella terms like 'trafficked', 'exploited', or even 'guilty' or 'innocent'. Each narrative was different, and the only common ground they all shared was that they had migrated from elsewhere and were now working as migrant labourers in Dubai. Though literature on trafficking and sex work points to the existence of extensive criminal networks whose agents kidnap, trick or sell women into the transnational sex industry,¹³ I found no evidence of that type of female migration. I wish to emphasize that I do not dispute the harrowing reality of those types of experiences. However, I believe it is significant that in the course of my fieldwork, I did not meet any women who would fit that category. I therefore feel that it is crucial to explore the disjuncture between this mainstream representation and my data from the field.

While it is important to note that not all domestic workers seek work in the sex industry, that some are tending to do so requires greater attention to the facilitating circumstances – largely the difficult conditions of domestic work in the Gulf. As domestic workers, they may encounter force, fraud or coercion in their migratory journeys or in arranging their terms of employment. Unfortunately, the weak labour laws, which in any case exclude them, combined with not fitting the archetypal image of the trafficked victim because they remain technically outside the sex industry, allow them very little recourse to protection. Paradoxically, the lack of protection afforded to domestic workers leads some to move into the sex industry where they seek increased autonomy and higher wages. ‘If we don’t have rights as maids or prostitutes, then we might as well be prostitutes so we can make more money’, said one Ethiopian sex worker who had originally migrated to Dubai to work as a domestic worker.

Notes

1. I use quotes to indicate the contested nature of a term that has no universal definition; rather, various actors define the term ‘trafficked’ in ways that are most convenient for their policies, academic discourses or activist procedures.
2. I based this study on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2009, mostly in the UAE, but with extended ethnographic visits to the Philippines, Iran and Malaysia. In total, I interviewed 33 commercial sex workers from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who were working in various sectors of the commercial sex industry (ranging from high-end call girls and dancers at bars, to street-based sex workers).
3. For more discussion of relationships between migrant workers and their sponsors, see Gardner (2010).
4. This is according to Human Rights Watch (2011).
5. The TIP is a report the US Department of State produces each year. For more information see Mahdavi and Sargent (2011) or www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2009/.
6. Rhacel Parreñas, lecture at Woodrow Wilson Center, March 2010.
7. For more on this subject at the global level, see Woodrow Wilson Center’s occasional paper series starting from summer 2010 featuring the work of Denise Brennan, Nicole Constable, Laura Agustín, Sealing Cheng and Rhacel Parreñas.
8. A full discussion of the historical roots of these issues is beyond the scope of this project. For an in-depth description of the panic over the white slave trade, see Walkowitz (1982). For further references about panics over migrants and immigrants at the turn of the nineteenth century, see Benton-Cohen (2009) or Frydl (2009).
9. This is similar to what happened in South Korea when embarrassment over having received a low ranking in a TIP report prompted the government to track down and punish people working in the sex industry (Cheng 2010).
10. See Parreñas (2011) for an excellent discussion of the paradoxes inherent in policies that seek to restrict the movement of women.
11. For an in-depth discussion of structural violence, definitions and parameters, see Bourgois (1996) or Farmer (2000).
12. See Leonard (2005) or Reyes (2012) for a discussion of racism in the Gulf countries.
13. See Siddharth Kara (2010) or Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn (2010) for examples of this type of discourse.

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