

United Arab Emirates and racism

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is comprised of seven individual emirate states: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm Al Qiwain and Fujairah (UN Special Rapporteur, 2009). Much like other nations situated in the region of the Middle East, the official religion of the UAE is Islam, and Arabic is its official language. Particularly over the last couple of years, this Gulf nation has undergone a lot of visual transformation, mainly in attempts to aid the development of its tourism, real estate and manufacturing industries (Emirates Centre for Human Rights, 2012). As a result of these drastic changes to the landscape, the UAE has fast become the global nexus of spectacular architecture and luxury living – earning its title as one of the richest countries in the world (Emirates Centre for Human Rights, 2012). Despite its recognisably booming neo-liberal economy, it is argued that much of this nation's success can be attributed to the millions of workers who relocate from their respective homes across the world, to the UAE to find work. According to the UN Special Rapporteur (2009), these mass flows of people have diversified the UAE so much so that it is now considered as “one of the most multicultural countries on earth” (p.9). However, despite the huge economic contributions which individuals from an array of ethnic backgrounds make to the labour market in the United Arab Emirates, there is still a prevalent and enduring issue of racism and xenophobia within the economic system.

Therefore, this academic paper is going to attempt a critical analysis of the processes of racialisation which take place within several economic institutions of the United Arab Emirates. Within the context of various workplaces, it will present an evaluation of how conditions of inequality on the basis of race and ethnicity are maintained, as well as initially established, at both an intra-state and national level. These objectives will be achieved by focusing on the following main areas: the historical and contemporary patterns of migration in the UAE and its relationship with the labour market, the three mainstream sectors of employment for foreign workers: domestic, construction and professional occupation, and in juxtaposition to these, this paper will also critically explore the extremely racialized nature of a more alternative industry, one which is particularly growing in popular emirates such as Dubai - the commercial sex trade. Whilst acknowledging the: social, cultural and legal parameters of the UAE, the final section of this paper will examine the ways in which the process of obtaining citizenship can be extremely racially discriminatory to economic migrants of certain nationalities and bias in the favour of others.

The findings from the United Nations' Special Rapporteur's visit to the UAE, in 2009, will act as a central point of reference throughout this paper. This is mainly because it offers an objective analysis of how racism and xenophobia are incorporated into this specific contemporary Arab society. However in addition to this, other forms of both anecdotal and empirical evidence, such as: official documentation from the National Human Rights Institution (NHRI), newspaper and journal articles, blog posts, information from topical websites and statements from non-governmental organisations, will also be used to validate the existence of sophisticated racial hierarchies, which are embedded in the entire economic structure of the United Arab Emirates.

Historical and Contemporary Patterns of Migration and the Labour Market

‘Only 13% of the 9.44 million population of the United Arab Emirates, are nationals – the rest are migrant workers or expatriates’

Economic racialisation is not an entirely new social condition within the Middle East. In fact there is an extremely rich social history which involves several countries within the region: harbouring, facilitating and in some instances, inviting people from all over the world into their respective borders – mainly for economic purposes. However, the initial means by which economic prosperity was achieved in this region was not very humane; historically, an entire structural system of forced labour was founded on the concept of racial inferiority – the Arab slave trade. This organised movement of large groups of people, mainly from East Africa, to the countries like the UAE to become domestic workers or sex slaves for the indigenous population (BBC, 2016), was mainly justified by a perverse Arab logic of colourism. The axiom that lighter skin equates to higher social worth ideologically dominated multiple Arab societies. As a result, because of their darker complexion, captured black Africans were positioned at the bottom of the social order and subsequently, they were deemed solely fit for servitude (Marmon, 1999). Lewis (1992) highlights that slavery on the basis of skin colour has been a very normative aspect of Middle Eastern civilization since antiquity; despite its official abolition in 1807, it continued to influence the social order of Arab lands until approximately the late twentieth century. This historical trade of certain persons for monetary gain has served as the social and ideological context for both the migration patterns and types of racisms which we see today in modern Emirati society. Particularly within the economic sectors of the UAE, factors such as: price of labour and the types of jobs which are presented as being universally accessible and available, in actuality, are often incredibly subject to the prospective worker’s race or ethnicity.

According to Attiyah (1996) the contemporary mass movement of foreign workers into the UAE mainly started in the late 70s, due to an increased global demand for oil. In order for many of the oil-producing gulf countries to meet this demand, they required more manpower, which was not readily available in their individual labour markets at the time (Attiyah, 1996). In response to this regional-economic shift, the UAE made a global invitation, not just for rig and refinery construction workers, but for manual labourers of all kinds. Furthermore, the UAE effectively marketized this economic opportunity, by promising: good wages, reasonable hours and suitable contract-dependent accommodation – and as a result, the invitation was heavily responded to.

However, since the UAE facilitated this initial multinational influx of workers, the migrant-national demographical ratio has not been conventional. According to the UAE’s population review, as of 2014 the estimated population was 9.44 million, and out of that only a shocking 13% were nationals, the majority percentage was made up of migrant workers or expatriates (World Population Review, 2016). According to the UN Special Rapporteur (2009) the non-national ethnic composition of the UAE is dominated by Indians and Pakistanis, who represent around 50% of the migration demographic, whilst the remaining percentage is divisibly representative of workers from: China, Australia, Europe, Africa and Latin America.

Although UAE nationals “represent a minority in their own country” (UN Special Rapporteur, 2009: 5), Emiratis are still considered the most superior race within their society. Their implicit establishment of social structures which safeguard their economic interests, further evidences their power. For example, there are strict racial hierarchies within workplaces and specific industries, which keep migrant workers in their supposed places. Particularly, Indian and Pakistani workers, who proportionately pose the biggest threat to the current elitist social order, are systematically oppressed within menial, manual labour jobs. This process of racialisation ensures that Indians and Pakistanis do not challenge the dominant economic position of Emiratis within the UAE’s growing economy.

The connection between Emirati class consciousness and prevailing racial ideologies within workplaces, is further evidenced by the fact that the Emirati “generally refuse to perform manual work because [such jobs were] traditionally assigned to khaddiris - persons who do not belong to a strong tribe or whose tribal origins are unknown” (Attiyah, 1996: 2). Subsequently, foreign migrant workers have now assumed the roles of ‘khaddiris’ and are subject to doubly-negative social connotations stemming from their race and type of employment. Fundamentally, Arab Racism or “‘Aracism’” (Goldthorpe, 2012:1), constitutes this disregard and disrespect towards migrant workers who assume lower socio-economic positions within society. Despite many of the foreign workers migrating to the UAE for work, at the expense of their native countries’ labour market and economic condition,

traditionalised Arab racism attempts to justify “the [grossly] insufficient wages that workers receive as compensation for their intensive labour” (Hamza, 2015: 88), as being normative. Kannan (2013), highlights that this is especially the case for dark-skinned Ethiopian workers, who earn salaries of as little as Dhs 600 per month, which is the approximate equivalent of £111.

These unfair working conditions which have manifested as a result of deeply embedded racial discrimination, suggests the emergence of a much more contemporary form of human enslavement within UAE society – ‘wage slavery’ (Degorge, 2006). Migrant workers are contractually bound within construction or domestic jobs, which often yield little substantive economic gain for them to send back to their families in reparations, but also puts their lives in danger on a daily basis.

The 3 main sectors of employment amongst differently skilled foreign workers: Domestic, Construction and Professional occupation.

‘In the UAE, jobs within specific employment sectors are racially allocated’

Upon arrival in the UAE, a wide range of differently skilled migrant workers often join one of three formal employment sectors: construction work, domestic labour or professional occupation. Cooper (2013) notes that many lower-skilled “migrant workers [particularly those] that are employed [within] private [construction or domestic companies, are often] sponsored by UAE citizens under employment contracts for one to three years” (p.67). At the end of each contractual period, the manual labourer is reviewed and their documents are revised for renewal. On the other hand, highly skilled professional expatriates have contracts which conveniently vary from short-term to long-term. The main difference between construction, domestic and professional workers is the level of job security which they have. The expected term of work for professional expatriates is pre-established before they leave their respective, often Western, countries, whereas the employment of non-western foreign construction and domestic workers is continually subject to uncertainty. These social and economic inequalities stem from sophisticated racial stratifications, which are made evident from the initial processes of job allocation.

- **Construction Work**

Most construction workers in the UAE originate from: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Sri Lanka (Smith, 2014). Due to the UAE’s highly advertised, tax free income policy, many of these workers relocate with very idealistic expectations of economic prosperity. However, having already paid “recruitment fees, [travel fees] and interest rates tacked onto [large] loans... [it is very common for]...migrant [construction workers] to already be in a disadvantaged state of debt [before they even start work] (Hamza, 2015: 87). In addition to this precondition, the reality of poor working facilities and insufficient wages, not only rectifies the idealism, but also worsens the economic position of South Asians within UAE society. The racialisation of South Asian workers within the UAE construction industry has led to direct violations of their basic human rights. Inadequate work accommodation in the form of: unkempt, unhygienic, over-crowded and isolated labour camps further perpetuates the notion of these specific workers as being second-class citizens (McMeeken, 2009). Moreover, Motaparthi (2015) highlights that due to the infamous Kafala System, which widely enables employers to exploit their workers, many socially vulnerable South Asian construction workers find themselves bound within systems of forced labour. This is an entirely strategized economic manoeuvre by Emirati employers who are more than aware that South Asian workers have little to no access at all to legal representation to fight for their liberation.

Despite the fact that the construction industry both commissions and receives large-sum national contracts for “high-rises, shopping malls, roads and other mega-construction projects throughout the entire [UAE]” (The Guardian, 2015), the executing workforce remains extremely low-paid or not paid at all (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Again, this evidences the existence of an acute racial superiority complex amongst Emirati employers within the construction industry, as short payments not only effect the social existences of the South Asian workers themselves, but also their families back in native countries.

- **Domestic Work**

Much like the construction industry, domestic work is also a significant sector within the UAE labour market; this is mainly because the presence of a domestic worker within an Emirati household is often considered a symbol of wealth and status. However, Jureidini (2003) notes that a large percentage of female domestic workers within the UAE are not nationals, but originate mainly from Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Foreign female domestic workers are expected to cook and clean for an entire household, as well as assist with various child care duties. Although their duties appear mundane and routine, there are frequent employee complaints of being overworked (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Moreover, the extremely interpersonal space which domestic maids occupy as their working environment, poses several risks to their: emotional, psychological and physical safety. From the onset patriarchy is deeply embedded within UAE society, so much so that there is a standard social expectation of unchallenged compliance from all women. However, within private homes, male dominance is further exercised in the form of the sexual harassment of vulnerable Filipina and Sri Lankan domestic workers (Human Rights Watch, 2007). By failing to implement proper safeguarding procedures, the domestic work sector facilitates the promotion of a widely racialized feminine double-standard. This misogynistic contradiction ideologically permits Emirati or Arab men in general, to sexually abuse ‘exotic’ domestic workers, whilst praising and protecting the chastity of their modest Emirati wives – this again, evidences the Arab racial superiority complex. The sexual servitude, physical and verbal harassment of Filipina, Sri Lankan and East African domestic workers shapes a dysfunctional employer-employee relationship which leads to the routine withholding of wages. Feminist critique would implore these kind of working conditions to be unacceptable. A women’s economic condition should never be dependent on her willingness to perform sexual favours for her employer.

- Professional Occupation

The economic power structure of the UAE is racialized widely in favour of Western expatriates. Highly skilled professionals from: USA, the UK and other parts of Europe assume a secondary social position, directly after the indigenous population. As a result, many white western expatriates receive preferential treatment in their workplaces and are paid much better than any other racial group. This exclusively beneficial economic relationship between Emiratis and Western expatriates, both directly and indirectly promotes white supremacy (Hage, 2000). Arabs mainly respect American, European and British expatriates, because they associate their Aryan aesthetics with: competence, superior intellect and subsequently the prospect of substantive economic contribution (Law, 2009). In juxtaposition, Arabs have ideologically attached notions of incapability and servitude to black Africans, systematically pigeon-holing them in low-level jobs. This discriminatory rhetoric which considers race and potential economic worth to be mutually exclusive, guarantees more than sufficient remuneration for western expatriates, often at the expense of other nationalities represented in the UAE labour market. However, according to the UN Special Rapporteur (2009) resentment towards Western expatriates is building within UAE society, mainly because these kinds of migrant workers are frequently given well-paid managerial posts over Emiratis. This kind professional displacement poses a threat to the relatively high living standard of the indigenous population.

The Commercial Sex Trade

‘Colourism is key component of sexual economics in the UAE’

The sex industry is rapidly growing in the UAE, particularly within more liberal emirates, like Dubai; despite this, its contribution to the net economy of the country is still an extremely under-researched area. This is possibly due to the multiple contradictions which this industry poses to the moral and religious make-up of the UAE (Butler, 2010). However, this cautiousness still does not negate the fact that within UAE borders, there are thousands of women from a diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds who regularly exchange their bodies for money. In fact, much like the other economic facets of Emirati society explored above, the sex industry is also extremely racialized. Sexual negotiations between native, as well as migrant worker males and foreign female sex workers resembles the economic relationship between a buyer and a seller (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004). However, Mahdavi (2010) notes that there is a rigid racial hierarchy, which widely stems from the ideological parameters of Arab colourism, which is employed to calculate the sexual worth of women

within the UAE sex trade. In addition to discriminatory, this hierarchy is not entirely accurate as Mahdavi (2010) highlights it is organised according to “perceived race” (p.946).

Within this racial hierarchy, women who are lighter in complexion are often categorised as ‘white’; regardless of the fact that in actuality they could be of Eastern European or alternative Arab decent, the ‘white’ label automatically ensures them higher wages. Subsequently, women from India, Pakistan, the Philippines and the general region of East Asia, assume a secondary position. Such women are recognised as ‘brown’ and they often acquire comparatively decent pay to sex workers of the socially superior ‘white’ category. However, ‘black’ women, majority of who are often from Nigeria or Ethiopia, are socially organised at the bottom of the sex work hierarchy. As a result of this, not only are they the least desired or least ‘in demand’ on the sex market (Mahdavi, 2010), but they are also extremely underpaid for their services. The commercial sex trade within the UAE has widely facilitated the creation of a racial dichotomy which groups white or fair skinned women together and collectivises all subsequent: races, shades and complexions as an ‘other’. Goldthorpe (2012) highlights that this socio-sexual demarcation, closely parallels with the racial narratives exhibited in pornographic material. The extremely globalised Western porn industry mainly constructs and sells prurient fantasies involving white women, therefore in the physical line of work, they are also the most desired group. Within the UAE, this disproportionately predisposes Eastern European or Iranian sex workers to earning more money.

The racial hierarchy at work within the Emirati sex trade also highlights the intersectionalities between: race, sexual worth and the accessibility of public spaces. The varying earning powers of differently raced sex workers directly reflects and effects the kind of environments which they are allowed to operate within. White privilege is made very apparent within these systematic spatial divisions of the UAE sex trade, as light-skinned women can freely access exclusive bars and clubs in elite areas of Dubai, whereas the isolated groups of dark and or darker-skinned women are forced to engage in highly risky street work (Mahdavi, 2010). The lack of safeguarding in spaces where particularly African women offer their services, further reflects the lack of regard which modern Emirati society has for their lives – essentially they are treated as disposable assets within this informal economic market of the UAE.

Furthermore, because black sex workers make up a large proportion of the entire work force of this alternative industry, they are often seen as a basic commodity or a lower status interaction. It can be argued that as a result of this demographic ratio and the unfavourable perceptions which it reproduces, that there is a deeply embedded hypervigilance of blackness within UAE night life culture. Many high-end clubs have restrictive door policies which are often directly racially discriminatory towards black women in general, whether: sex workers, professional expatriates or tourists (Willock, 2014). Subsequently black women are prevented from exercising their economic rights as they wish, because of unfavourable stereotyping. An application of Black Feminist theory would attribute this kind of treatment to the hypersexualisation of black femininity: within UAE society, ‘foreign’ dark skin has become synonymous with sexual promiscuity (Hammonds, 1997), whereas lighter skin, which is aesthetically familiar to the region, remains a symbol of: class, high position and in some instances, innocence (Hammonds, 1997). These racial characterisations deeply resonate with the historical construction of extremely low socio-economic status for East African women, who were taken as sex-slaves by Arabs, to work in infamous harems (Arab Slave Trade, 2016).

With the UAE being such an interconnected capitalist system, the entrapment of black women at the bottom of the sex industry’s organisational hierarchy, helps to reinforce a much larger socio-economic structure. By them not being able to access prosperous work opportunities and safe working spaces, it ensures that they do not acquire the financial ability to climb the social ladder. As a result, through racial representation, black people in general and not only black sex workers are forced to reassume their inferior position within UAE society. Altogether, the precarious social position of foreign women within the informal sex trade speaks of a general lack of female integration within mainstream employment agencies.

Although the sex trade in the United Arab Emirates is a highly lucrative business, the benefits and profits are no way near evenly spread. Whether directly or indirectly, it is undeniable that race, or specifically skin shade, plays a significant role in determining a sex worker’s earning capacities.

Migrant workers and citizenship

‘The social, cultural and legal parameters of obtaining citizenship in UAE are racialized against migrant workers’

The social, cultural and legal parameters for obtaining citizenship in the UAE, are extremely complex for migrant workers. This can be attributed to the racialized nature of the tradition Kafala System of employment. Under this Arab employment sponsorship system, “a [construction or domestic] migrant worker’s immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor” (Migrant Forum in Asia, 2012:1). This essentially gives Emirati employers disproportionate amounts of power and control over ethnic minority workers, as they can regulate “salary, living conditions, nutrition, and ability to work elsewhere” through the illegal confiscation of passports and other legal documentation (Sönmez *et al*, 2011:19; UN Special Rapporteur, 2009). In doing this, such tyrannical employers are also in direct violation of article 13.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The meticulous legal monitoring of migrant workers is evidence of xenophobia within the UAE labour market. Keeping migrant workers legally captive is essentially justified by the unwarranted social fear of foreigners ‘running wild’ in the UAE, potentially overthrowing the pre-existing elitist social order. This kind of treatment towards South Asian, North African and Latin American construction and domestic migrant workers is resonant of the sub-human treatment of slaves in the ancient Middle Eastern Slave Trade (UN Special Rapporteur, 2009; Marmon, 1999; Moore, 2014).

Within the context of the rapidly growing neo-liberal economic climate of the UAE, as a result of migrant workers not being able to freely access or even apply for citizenship, they often experience economic exploitation in the form of contract slavery (Gray, 2016; Bales, 1999). The extremely precarious legal, socio-economic position of foreign construction and domestic workers, who as previously mentioned, originate from a wide range of countries, renders them practically helpless against the superior powers of male Emirati employers or sponsors. Again, the intersections between race, socio-legal standing and economic position are made apparent within the labour market, as Emirati companies yield enough economic capital to trap human beings within undesirable working situations - often without any regulation by a higher governmental body. A Marxist critique would suggest that such infrastructure only favours the ruling class of a capitalist society, whilst systematically oppressing everyone else.

Access to adequate health care is another extremely racialized facet of UAE society; it is also almost inextricably connected to the migrant worker’s struggle to gain citizenship. According to the World Health Organisation (2014), only nationals are provided with full healthcare in the UAE - courtesy of the Ministry of Health, however for non-nationals, valid health insurance is a mandatory requirement. This policy is extremely problematic for many low-paid migrant workers, as their insufficient wages do not permit them to afford privatised health coverage. As a result, low-paid migrant workers represent the unhealthiest fraction of contemporary UAE society, which further endorses the racial superiority of the indigenous population. However, in Dubai, state powers have attempted to bridge the gap in quality of health care between nationals and migrant workers through the introduction of health cards. These identification cards allow basic access to health facilities which are under the Dubai Health Authority (DHA) (<http://www.livingindubai.org/>). It can be argued that such policies are the pioneering steps towards the racial desegregation of the UAE health sector.

Although it is generally known that many migrant workers are subject to long working hours and physically, as well as mentally hazardous working conditions (Kristiansen and Sheikh, 2014), Sönmez *et al* (2011) highlights that there is still a significant void in literature which intensively assesses the health ramifications of construction, domestic and sex work in the UAE. The lack of related research could possibly reflect the government’s nonchalance towards bettering the social position of migrant workers or it also could reflect prevailing notions of Aracism, which generally prioritises the well-being of Arabs over foreigners. However, because several labour sectors within the UAE are relatively dependent on migrant workers, directly addressing occupation-induced health risks would only ensure the maintenance of the majority work force, subsequently promoting the prosperity of the national economy.

Furthermore, despite the UAE being one of the largest melting-pot societies in the world (Al Mubarak, 2013), Attiyah (1996) highlights the social and cultural challenges surrounding the naturalisation of migrant workers in the UAE. Attiyah (1996) further proposes that the large disparities in cultural-behaviour, religious beliefs and personal values, between natives and migrant workers, catalyses the contemporary xenophobic attitudes displayed by Emiratis. Moreover, the restrictive measures imposed upon migrant workers within their respective labour sectors may be partially mobilized by a fear of cultural erosion. For example, within each of the seven emirates, there are implicit spatial demarcations between the living quarters of migrant workers and the homes of the indigenous. It can be argued that such social measures are a physical manifestation of an ideological bid to protect Emirati culture and community. In order to tackle racialization within the formal and informal processes of obtaining citizenship, social researchers have suggested that the UAE's governmental bodies facilitate the acculturation or socialisation of foreign workers, equipping them with the same moral and cultural baseline as Emiratis, which would further enable stronger inter-community cohesions (Attiyah, 1996).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the United Arab Emirates is globally considered to be synonymous with widespread luxury living, the empirical and anecdotal evidence critically assessed throughout this piece suggests otherwise. The critical analysis of several facets within the UAE labour market has illustrated the ways in which the national wealth is racially distributed amongst the demographic, often at the expense of the extremely ethnically diverse migrant workforce. Unreasonably long working hours, low wages, inadequate accommodation, document confiscation, verbal and physical harassment in the workplace and unpredictable daily occupational hazards, are all by-products of economic structure designed to oppress foreign workers on the basis of their racial differentiation. However, similar to social rhetoric concerning race and ethnicity in China, Emirati society still exhibits racial denial (Law, 2009; UN Special Rapporteur, 2009); both at a governmental and societal level, the unequal treatment of migrant workers within the UAE labour market is actively ignored and consciously overlooked.

Nevertheless, the implicit use of physical race markers, by Emirati employers, to collectivize members of the same perceived race, still facilitates the creation of a racial juxtaposition whereby the Emirati indigenous represent an 'us', whilst the remaining eclectic demographic of migrant workers constitute as 'them'. If this dichotomy should legally and socially persist within UAE society: racism, racial stratification and xenophobia will continue to precondition the employment experience of foreign workers. Fundamentally, this piece has demonstrated the extent to which the economic structure of the United Arab Emirates is racialized against members of its multicultural workforce, systematically preventing them from economic progression.

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