
Ending the Exploitation of Migrant Workers In The Gulf

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Migrant laborers provide important services and support in our globalizing world. They provide a variety of menial and low-skill services in the private and public sectors. They work in factories, fish farms, households, plantations, and construction sites and serve as nannies, maids, cooks, sweepers, servants, and laborers both within and beyond their nation-state boundaries. In this article, I refer to migrant workers as those who have been, are, or plan to be engaged in work for wages in states which they are not nationals.¹ According to a 2006 estimate by the International Labor Organization (ILO), “there are more than 86 million migrant workers in the world, 34 million of them in developing regions.”² According to existing literature and media reports, migrant workers are exploited in most regions of the world.

In this paper, I analyze the ways migrant workers are being victimized in their quest for better jobs in the Gulf states where some 10 million of them currently serve. Jobs resulting from this region’s great wealth of oil and gas draw in tens of thousands of new migrants every year. Looking for a way out of poverty, migrant workers from developing countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Indonesia pay large fees to obtain labor-intensive jobs in this region. While many of them are able to earn more than they would have earned in their native countries, many also suffer appalling abuse. In both the sending and receiving countries, migrant workers are often misled and exploited by intermediaries, sponsors, and employers.

In numerous cases, the migrant laborers end up not only losing the investments they make in obtaining their jobs, but also their basic human

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dignity, health, and, in some tragic cases, even their lives. All too often, they are deprived of pay, forced to work, left in squalid living conditions, denied the freedom to move or change jobs, and subjected to physical and sexual abuse. Their exploitation violates both internationally established norms

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and basic principles of the Islamic faith that serve as the foundation of morality and law in these states.

Migrant workers today are an extremely vulnerable group and are caught up in the throes of a vicious problem that is created and sustained by poverty, labor rackets, dynamics of globalization, and government inaction or corruption in both their home and host countries. Ending this problem is a moral imperative for both the govern-

ments that send and receive them. Robust policy prescriptions to put an end to this vicious problem are also available; yet, they are not being acted upon primarily due to a lack of social awareness about the plight of migrant workers. In the absence of a catalyst for action, ending the exploitation of migrant workers is not at the top of the public agenda in either the sending or the receiving countries.

I therefore propose that “moral diplomacy” can serve as a catalyst to spark policy changes that can lead to the end of migrant labor exploitation. Migrant workers must be treated with human dignity, given fair wages on time, and guaranteed their fundamental human rights. Reforms of the migrant labor system must ensure that migrant workers have “decent work” which, in the ILO’s terms, is “productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and dignity.”³ These rights are rooted in the ethical and social justice traditions found not only in international law,⁴ but in Islamic law⁵ and in the national legal systems of the Gulf states as well.

I conceive of moral diplomacy broadly as diplomacy with ethical consciousness. Essentially, it is a strategic communication campaign that should have both conventional diplomatic and public/citizen-diplomatic dimensions. Anchored in the largely universally recognized moral values of those recognized in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, moral diplomacy can be conducted not just by professional diplomats but also by the world’s citizens who care about human rights and believe in vulnerable people’s right to decent work and life. Moral diplomacy need not take the form of moral didacticism; rather, it should focus on increasing

transparency regarding the conditions of migrant laborers, highlighting the inconsistency of their treatment with both global and local values and norms, and promoting a social dialogue among all stakeholders that leads to greater awareness and a moral consensus for meaningful social reform.

This paper develops the above argument, integrating research reports, media stories, and findings from my own fieldwork in the Gulf, which dates back to 2001. During my fieldwork, I observed migrant workers in their worksites, barracks, or on embassy premises. I have also interviewed corporate officials and local scholars, students, and community leaders to understand the problem from multiple perspectives. In addition, I have talked to many returning migrant workers and government officials in Bangladesh, a country which sends a large percentage of migrant workers serving in the Gulf states.

Political realities in this region limit the ability of individuals and groups to collect and publish solid “scientific” data on labor issues. With broad quantitative data unavailable, qualitative inquiry and anecdotal analysis provides the best opportunity to develop an understanding of how migrant laborers are treated or victimized in this region.

EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS WORLDWIDE

Reports by groups such as the ILO and Human Rights Watch (HRW), and the *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) reports issued by the U.S. Department of State, bring to light the extent of the global exploitation of migrant workers.

According to the ILO, the exploitation of migrant workers often takes the form of forced labor: work or service that is exacted under the peril of a penalty and undertaken involuntarily.⁶ It “consists essentially of exploitation in the place where the work or service is provided.”⁷ Migrant workers are subjected to forced labor, for example, in the sweatshops of China, the households of Hong Kong, the fish farms of Burma, the garments industries of Bangladesh, the plantations of Malaysia, and homes, ranches, and construction sites in the Middle East.

In the 2009 report on forced labor, the ILO estimates that migrant workers are defrauded of more than \$20 billion a year in terms of opportunity cost or lost earnings due to forced work.⁸ In an earlier 2005 report, the ILO estimated that 12.3 million men, women, and children were in some form of forced labor or bondage worldwide. Other estimates of people under forms of forced labor (e.g. bonded labor, forced child labor, and sexual servitude) range from 4 million to 27 million at any given time.⁹

In the 2009 report, the ILO notes that over the previous four years some significant progress has been made in terms of media exposure, public awareness, government policy measures, and judicial action against human trafficking.

HRW presents a more focused and sometimes more grievous picture of labor exploitation in various regions of the world. In a series of reports accessible on its website, HRW documents migrant labor rights violations as part of its comprehensive research and monitoring on human rights violations worldwide. In 2009, for example, HRW published 14 reports showing how migrant workers face discrimination on the basis of immigration status and national origin.

In these reports, HRW recognizes the improvements in the conditions of migrants seeking decent work in a few countries, but shows how stringent entry and return policies in many other countries have led to

..... their detention, torture, and in some cases even death. Xenophobia has led governments to implement laws, policies, and practices that violate some of the fundamental human rights of migrant workers. In Thailand, for example, "large numbers of migrants from Burma, Cambodia, and Laos have been subjected to severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and even their ability to possess mobile phones."¹⁰ In addition, government officials extort money from the migrants through threats of violence, detention, and deportation.

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Issues of exploitation, debt bondage, and modern-day slavery are highlighted as well in the U.S. State Department's TIP reports, published annually since 2001. Trafficking is broadly defined in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially for women and children to include a broad range of activities that trap persons into involuntary servitude. The TIP reports are much more focused on severe types of trafficking including "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."¹¹

The major consistent theme in the TIP reports is that human traffickers lure victims with false promises of a better life, lucrative jobs, and other economic opportunities and then force them "to toil in sweatshops,

construction sites, brothels, and fields.”¹² As stated in the introduction to the 2008 TIP report: “The common denominator of trafficking scenarios is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit a person for profit. A victim can be subjected to labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, or both. Labor exploitation includes traditional chattel slavery, forced labor, and debt bondage.” Roughly, about 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked every year according to these reports. The U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton states that the 2009 TIP report illuminates “the faces of modern-day slavery” as a global problem and claims that human trafficking “affects virtually every country, including the United States,”—though the United States itself is not covered in any of the TIP reports.¹³

These reports illustrate how migrant workers are left with their human rights violated worldwide; they are exploited, humiliated, and dehumanized in most countries of the world. However, the Arab Gulf states have received particular attention in the global landscape of migrant labor exploitation.

PATTERNS OF LABOR EXPLOITATION IN THE GULF

It is worth noting that the majority of migrant workers report being treated and paid fairly. Few have registered complaints even though their salaries are meager, their living conditions squalid, and many of their human rights violated. Many of the hundreds of laborers interviewed in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar seemed fairly content with their treatment and compensation. They usually receive their promised, contract-based salaries on time. In many cases, they are allowed to complement their meager salaries by working overtime. In addition, *zakaat* (mandatory charity) funds and generous *sadaqah* (optional charity) gifts from pious and wealthy Gulf nationals add to their family incomes. In the estimates of several diplomats and academics I interviewed, 70–to–80 percent of the migrants in Gulf countries seem to accrue a net benefit from their jobs despite numerous hardships.

Nevertheless, the minority of migrant workers who are victimized represent a large number of people (an estimated 20–to–30 percent of the estimated 10 million). They are exploited by private sector intermediaries and employers in both their home and host countries, under the indifferent eyes of their governments. But much of their abuse occurs in the homes or hands of their employers. These migrant workers are victimized in a multitude of ways: They are often cheated during recruitment (in the signing of the labor contracts), forced to work, paid unfairly, housed in squalid conditions, and sometimes subjected to physical or sexual abuse.

Even among those who report being satisfied with their work conditions, almost all are denied some of their basic human and labor rights.¹⁴

Deception in Recruitment

Migrant workers serving in the Gulf are recruited through labor brokers operating in their home countries. These brokers charge potential laborers a substantial fee in exchange for the opportunity to travel abroad and work for a higher wage than is possible in their home countries. The decision to become a migrant laborer is tremendously difficult; it requires not only a significant up-front financial investment, but also the personal cost of leaving one's family and home country for a prolonged period of time. For many, the prospect of being able to send money back home to support the family makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

However, based on my research, there is considerable evidence that the labor brokers are misleading and dishonest in their efforts to recruit new laborers, often promising higher wages and better working conditions than will actually be received as well as failing to inform laborers of limitations that will be placed on their ability to return home. For example, a Bangladeshi woman in her fifties living in the workers' barracks in Kuwait, described how she sold a large part of her family's land to pay a labor broker for job and journey to Kuwait. She left behind five children under the care of her disabled husband because she was promised a 100 Kuwaiti Dinar (about \$350) monthly salary as well as free room and overtime pay. She thought she would be able to buy back the land in a few months; however, three months after arriving in Kuwait she had not been offered any employment and was living off the charity of a distant relative.

The brokers are fully aware of the disparity between what they promise and the realities of the labor conditions abroad, and in some cases even express shame and embarrassment. In February 2010, when I asked an agent of a labor broker in Dhaka, Bangladesh to describe his job, he responded:

I can't tell you about that; it's a bit embarrassing and unethical... The broker I work with procures visas from a foreign recruiter for a price. I buy several from him, go to the villages, and tell people of some inflated success stories to sell the visas to them. My problem is that I know that what I am telling the people is not true, but it is something I have to do. I don't have a job.

This broker agent blames poverty for his unethical participation in the exploitation of migrant workers. However, there are many others whose

unethical behavior can be attributed to greed, not to poverty. This redirects our attention to poverty and greed—two dynamics of a vicious cycle that victimizes migrant workers in their pursuit of seemingly better jobs in the Gulf.

Inadequate Pay

Blue-collar workers suffer from low wages and poor job security in many parts of the world, including the United States.¹⁵ In comparative terms, they are egregiously underpaid in the Gulf. As the salary estimates presented in Table 1 show, an unskilled laborer in the United States is paid roughly 30 percent of the salary of a skilled worker, but in the Gulf, a similarly unskilled worker is paid roughly 2 percent of the salary of a comparable skilled worker in the Gulf. Furthermore, an unskilled worker in the Gulf states receives roughly less than 10 percent of what his/her counterpart in the United States receives.

Skilled Gulf nationals receive salaries that are the same as, or better than, those of their expatriate counterparts, and they get additional allowances and benefits from the government based on their family sizes. The percentage of Gulf nationals doing the menial jobs that migrant workers do is virtually zero. While most Gulf countries have mandatory policies to increase representation of their citizens in public and private sector jobs, these policies are not implemented when it comes to the very lower-level jobs. In Qatar, for example, few, if any, Gulf nationals are seen doing any of the service-sector jobs, let alone the menial jobs of migrant workers.

OCCUPATION VS. WAGE ESTIMATES

<i>Occupation Title</i>	U.S. Wage Estimates	Gulf States Wage Estimates
	<i>Annual Mean</i>	<i>Annual Mean</i>
Maids & Housekeeping Cleaners	\$ 20,290.00	\$2,184.00
Building Cleaning Workers	\$ 28,660.00	\$2,184.00
Grounds Maintenance Workers	\$ 27,180.00	\$2,184.00
Financial Managers	\$110,640.00	Same or higher
Human Resource Managers	\$103,920.00	Same or higher
Engineers	\$ 80,820.00	Same or higher
College Social Sciences Teachers	\$ 74,720.00	Same or higher

TABLE 1: *A comparison of annual mean salary estimates for several occupations in the United States and the Gulf states based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics¹⁶ and on personal interviews with workers and professionals in the Gulf.*

These comparisons or contrasts look much more stark when we put into perspective the high per capita GDP of these countries vis-à-vis that of the U.S. According to CIA's *World Factbook*, in 2009 U.S. dollar estimates, Qatar's per capita GDP was \$11,1100, UAE's was \$47,600, Kuwait's \$42,300, and the United States' was \$46,400.

The difference however, is that U.S. workers pay for their own accommodations; they are free to change jobs or move around; and they can live with their families. Migrant workers in the Gulf, on the other hand, are provided free, though overcrowded, accommodations; they have no freedom to move around or change jobs; and they do not have the option to live with their families or visit them on a regular basis. They are given short-term one-to-three-year contracts. Even though these contracts are frequently renewed, in most cases the workers have to actually pay for their extension, leaving them with barely enough money to buy food and clothes for themselves, much less to send money home to the families they left behind.

In many cases, migrant laborers have reported not being paid at all for months at a time. A senior Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) executive described the starvation that several migrant workers were enduring in Kuwait. On several occasions, a migrant cleaner at his office politely asked

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if he could eat the banana that the executive had as part of his lunch. The executive offered him the banana, but as the cleaner repeated the same request on a couple of other days, he asked why he wanted the banana. The laborer said that he had not eaten a meal in three days as his employer—a subcontractor

who gets paid handsomely by providing cleaning services through cleaners like him at KOC—had not paid his salary for the past three months.

Several men and women who worked cleaning the streets and buildings of the campus I was teaching at similarly reported going without sufficient food for days because they had been unpaid for months. Despite appeals to the university and the subcontractor who directly employed these laborers, they remained unpaid when I left Kuwait three months later.

Squalid Housing Conditions

While some migrant laborers work in their employers' houses as nannies or domestic servants, those that work in construction or industrial jobs usually live in large work camps or barracks. Living conditions in these

barracks are often squalid with severe overcrowding and inconsistent water and sewage service.

One barrack that I visited in Kuwait, for example, housed 450 workers and had no running water for five days prior to the day I visited. The building was divided into small rooms (approximately 12 by 15 square feet), each housing 8 to 10 people in bunk beds. Larger basement rooms (15 by 20 square feet) had 25 to 27 people cramped on floors and bunkbeds, cooking, eating, and sleeping in the same place. These workers did not have access to toilets in their barracks and instead had to rely on the facilities at a nearby mosque.

Living conditions for migrant laborers are similar in other Gulf countries. Workers in Qatar report living in rooms with as many as twelve people and with limited access to bathrooms.

Physical Abuse

In a 2006 report titled *Building Towers, Cheating Workers*, HRW documented “serious abuses” of construction workers in the UAE, including working conditions that led to “high rates of death and injury.”¹⁷ In August 2007, seven members of a Saudi family beat to death two Indonesian women workers, accusing them of practicing “black magic” on their teenage son.¹⁸ And on October 7, 2007, al-Jazeera featured the tragic story of a Sudanese maid who had been sadistically tortured by her UAE employers for two years.

My own research also suggests that the types of abuse reported by these international organizations and media outlets are in fact common in the Gulf. On October 17, 2005, I read a shocking story in the *Kuwait Times*. The heading of the story read: “A Bangladeshi houseboy escaped from certain death at the hands of his employer who he alleges brutally mistreated him in lockup for nearly six months.” I interviewed the boy when he was released from the hospital. His neck and back had marks of severe burns from hot water hurled on him several times by his employer. He said that the day he was left unlocked, he stepped out, scavenged through a garbage can to gain some energy, and then went to the Bangladeshi embassy.

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Victims have little recourse as government officials often ignore complaints or engage in even further physical abuse themselves. In November 2005, I interviewed a young Bangladeshi man who worked as a driver for a Kuwaiti family. He reported being beaten by his employers for no reason. Eventually, he went to the police station to file a complaint. The police called the employer to the station, and after listening to his explanation, proceeded to beat the young Bangladeshi man themselves.

In a case that has since received international attention, Sheikh Issa, a younger brother of the President of the UAE, had videotaped himself brutally torturing an Afghan migrant man for forty-five minutes in 2004. The torture included tying the man up, hitting him hard with boards that had protruding nails, pouring salt into his wounds, and running a SUV back and forth over his semi-conscious body. Issa was not prosecuted until ABC News aired the tape in April 2009, and he was eventually acquitted on the grounds that he was intoxicated at the time of the torture and thus was not aware of his actions.¹⁹

Physical and Sexual Exploitation of Women

In my 2009 visit to Kuwait, I witnessed 200 runaway maids being sheltered in the Indonesian embassy, 130 in the Filipino embassy, and more than 100 in the Sri Lankan embassy. In the Filipino embassy, I interviewed some of them, whose stories elucidated the gravity of the situation of migrant laborers in the Gulf. One said her employer became interested in having a sexual relationship with her, but when his wife became jealous, the woman left the home and took shelter at the embassy. Another runaway said the young men of the house were tormenting her nightly for sex. Many of the women reported that their rooms did not have doors that they could lock, heightening their feelings of vulnerability.

The Labor Attaché in the Indonesian embassy in Kuwait shared with me press clippings of hundreds of stories of runaway maids in Kuwait. While at times their reasons for leaving were benign misunderstandings or culture shock, many others reported serious abuses including overwork, sexual abuse, beatings, and torture.

The suffering of domestic help in Kuwaiti households seem to have gone from bad to worse. According to an October 15, 2009 report in the *Kuwait Times*, Indonesia has stopped “deploying housemaids to Kuwait until the issues of some 600 runaway housemaids are resolved.” On the same date, the *Jakarta Globe* reported “About 500 women with complaints ranging from physical beatings to the denial of pay are being sheltered

at the Indonesian embassy in the oil-rich Gulf emirate (Kuwait).” In the seven months since my last visit to Kuwait, the number of runaway maids sheltered at the Indonesian embassy has grown from 200 to 500.

As bad as the situation is in Kuwait, conditions for female laborers may in fact be worse in Saudi Arabia where women are prohibited from traveling alone and are thus often unable to seek refuge in the embassies. In a story in the June 13, 2008 *Saudi Gazette*, Col. Yousef Al-Qahtani, spokesman of Dammam Police reported that “The case of housemaids running away from their employers has reached an epidemic level, [creating a social and economic problem] that is draining the resources of the Kingdom.”

Denial of Freedom to Travel

Almost all migrant workers enter the Gulf countries legally for employment purposes through an employer sponsorship system known as “*kafael*.” This system gives the employer almost complete control over the laborers ability to remain in the country or to travel home. The employer often maintains the passport of the workers while they are in the Gulf country and are able to use this control to threaten workers with deportation or deny workers’ the opportunity to return to their home country.

In November 2005, I interviewed migrant workers in a labor barracks in Kuwait reported going unpaid for periods of between three and nine months. Tearfully, they said they were depending on charities or scavenging in the garbage cans to survive. However, they claimed that if they complained about their conditions, the company henchmen would beat them up and threaten to fire or deport them. They could not change jobs because their employer possessed their passports. If they are fired, or if they are found in public without valid residency papers provided by their employer, the police may arrest them, detain them for months and, finally, deport them. Kuwaiti police randomly confront migrant laborers in the streets to check their residency permits. In fact, during my four months of research in Kuwait, I was confronted by the Kuwaiti police twice and asked to provide documentation proving that I was in the country legally.

The sponsorship system also gives employers tremendous leverage to prevent workers from returning home to visit their families. Typically, a man can return home and visit his family once every four or five years for a month or two. Many of the workers I interviewed, however, had not returned home once in over ten years of working abroad. In a Kuwait travelogue, a Bangladeshi Army physician under the pen name Rubon bin

Rania, wrote the tragic story of a migrant he treated at a Kuwait health center,²⁰ who worked on a desert farm for twenty-five years without ever being allowed to visit his home country.

Vulnerability in a Vicious Situation

Migrant workers looking for jobs or working in the Gulf are an extremely vulnerable group caught in the throes of a vicious situation over which they have no control. Their extreme vulnerability stems from and contributes to an interlocking set of disadvantages they carry—including poverty, joblessness, powerlessness, and illiteracy or lack of education. Similarly, the vicious situation they find themselves in is systemic, interactively created and sustained by the dynamics of poverty, opportunities, constraints, free markets, globalization, and government inaction or corruption in both their home and host countries. We can identify several systemic dynamics to understand the vicious nature of their situation.

First, poverty propels migrant workers to desperately look for work opportunities. The inability to read or critically analyze information about job opportunities makes them susceptible to misinformation or manipulation by labor brokers and employers. Once they move to the Gulf states with a job contract that they poorly understand, they find themselves subjected to a set of rules that constrain their ability to organize and defend their rights. In essence, they contribute to their own victimization by failing to understand the terms of labor to which they are agreeing to before they travel abroad.

Second, the *kafael* system, the subcontracting system, and the largely unregulated job market in the Gulf give labor traders and employers the freedom to exploit migrant workers. The labor trading corporations recruit the vast majority of migrant workers from their home countries, often with help from the local government or private agencies. These corporations then manage the workers in barracks in the Gulf cities and sell their daily menial services to individuals and other corporate or government clients, receiving subcontracts of specific tasks (like cleaning, maintenance, gardening, etc.). Buyers or service-receivers pay the labor trading corporations, not the workers themselves, for the labor services. This creates a systemic gap between migrant workers and their service-receivers.

Third, since the Gulf nationals do not directly deal with migrant workers, they do not realize how unfairly some of them are paid and treated. Many do not realize the level of abuse taking place until they make media headlines. Dozens of Gulf nationals interviewed believe they treat

their domestic help well, and did not realize that many of their compatriots were engaging in abuse.

Some Gulf nationals also deny that migrant worker abuse is widespread at the household or corporate level. They argue that migrant workers are being paid competitively in the international market; otherwise, why would they be flocking to their countries? In addition, many others argue that the influx of foreign labor has brought on a growth in crime, violence, and unhealthy socio-cultural practices in the Gulf.

Finally, the powerful forces of globalization create another intersecting set of economic and political incentives and constraints that make reforming the existing employment system of migrant labor difficult. Legally prohibiting the practice of migrant labor would be unfeasible and counterproductive, especially because of the high unemployment rate in the developing countries while there is high demand for unskilled labor in the Gulf. Countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, or Indonesia cannot politically or economically afford to miss opportunities to earn foreign exchange by sending their citizens abroad. Even if the government tried to block the outflow of people, it could result in an increase in even more dangerous "underground" human trafficking. In a recent personal conference with me, a high-level foreign ministry official of Bangladesh mused, "If the doors of the world are wide open, about 80 percent of the people of Bangladesh will move out of the country. They have desperate needs or constructed desires."

At the other end, the receiving countries in the Gulf have come to rely on the cheap labor from abroad to achieve rapid growth. Their populations meanwhile have become accustomed to a lifestyle where they are able to afford domestic servants. Wary of making changes that would increase the cost of labor, the governments and corporations are often willing to turn a blind eye to the unethical practices of labor brokers. The end result is the vicious continuation of the status quo like a nightmare in which the more things change the more they remain the same.

ENDING THE EXPLOITATION

The above analysis presents us with two important lessons. First, we recognize the human cost of migrant labor exploitation and have a sense of moral urgency to put an end to it. Second, we understand that the vicious systematic dynamics of the problem make it extremely difficult to deal with.

Since the problem is systemic, we can draw insights from cybernetics and systems theory to devise effective approaches. In system(s) theory,

requisite variety is a property of systems that suggests that a system must be as diverse and complicated as the environment in which it is embedded.²¹ William Ashby's system law of requisite variety holds that "the variety in the control system must be equal to or larger than the variety of the perturbations in order to maintain stability."²² Similarly, Karl Weick's theory of organizing uses the concept of requisite variety to recommend that successful organizations and groups be as "complicated" as the problems that confront them.²³ In other words, just as there are multiple dynamics at work to create the vicious situation in which migrant workers are exploited, there cannot be one simple recipe that will bring an end to the problem. A requisite variety of creative approaches will be needed to deal with its vicious growth effectively.

A systems approach, however, does not preclude the use of a simple recipe to trigger larger systemic change. Equifinality, another system property, suggests that there are a variety of ways to reach any system goal. Such a variety of ways may include just one simple recipe to deal with a problem. In fact, we learn from the epistemological literature²⁴ that parsimonious or simple theories or solutions receive wider social acceptance and lead to profound social change. Malcolm Gladwell explains how simple ideas diffuse in society to reach what he calls 'tipping points,' leading to large scale social change.²⁵ In his words, the tipping point is "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point."²⁶ Alternatively, Bryan Wash defines tipping points as "the levels at which momentum for change becomes unstoppable."²⁷ Historically, many instances of profound change were set off by the spread of a simple idea. In other words, sometimes even a simple recipe can trigger a set of systemic dynamics for wider social change.

Fortunately, we have at our disposal a requisite variety of recipes to unleash the set of systemic dynamics that can end the exploitation of migrant workers seeking jobs or working in the Gulf. Many general and country-specific guidelines and recommendations to deal with this problem are available in the research reports by HRW, ILO, and the U.S. Department of State. In a recent report,²⁸ for example, HRW recommends a variety of policy actions for labor-receiving countries, which include the following:

- Sign and ratify the UN International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.
- Sign and ratify the core ILO Conventions and support the proposal for a binding convention and recommendation on domestic work.

- Extend equal protections to domestic workers, strengthen inspections of workplaces with migrants, create accessible complaints mechanisms, and speed up grievance redress mechanisms.
- Lift restrictions on migrant workers' freedom of movement within countries and ensure that policies facilitate legal migration and not disproportionately punish workers without proper documents.
- End discriminatory entry and exit requirements for migrants living with HIV or other health conditions and ensure uninterrupted access to treatment.
- Punish individuals that abuse their power over migrants.

It may also be possible to diffuse one existing recipe to reach the tipping point in favor of an end to the exploitation of migrant workers. For example, enhanced transparency in communication (for both workers and, more realistically, the buyers of their services) can serve as a simple recipe with complex and far-reaching effects.

Therefore, the main barrier to ending the exploitation of migrant workers is neither the absence of moral imperatives, nor the lack of information, but a vacuum of political will on the part of the governments and people involved. In a nutshell, in the absence of a catalyst, ending the exploitation of migrant workers is not at the top of the public agenda in either the sending or the receiving countries.

However, this vacuum can be filled in by what I call moral diplomacy.

THE ROLE FOR MORAL DIPLOMACY

Moral diplomacy can play the role of catalyst in creating social awareness that can morph into the political will to end or at least alleviate the exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf. Moral diplomacy is a strategic

communicative response from citizens of the world—both official diplomats and public/citizen diplomats alike—to the exploitation of migrant labor in the Gulf states and other regions where similar abuses occur. It is and should continue to be a moral cause for citizens who care about human rights, human dignity, liberty, and social justice in our globalizing world.

To many people, the term “moral diplomacy” may seem oxymoronic. In popular discourse, diplomacy is often viewed not just as an art or science

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of conducting inter-state negotiations but also as a politically expedient or pragmatic art, one that carries all the insinuations of Henry Wotton's famous saying that "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." Surely, there is a strong trend in modern diplomacy that substantiates this conception of diplomacy, and from this perspective, diplomacy becomes the conduct of international business without regard to its ethical implications.

However, since the beginnings of diplomacy as a career, many eminent diplomats have recognized a central role for morality and moral discourse in the profession.²⁹ Even Niccolo Machiavelli, the Renaissance poet and political philosopher whose name has become synonymous with the "ends justify the means" type of political pragmatism, emphasized the role of morality in diplomacy. In "Advice to Raffaello Girolami, on his departure, October 23, 1522, as ambassador to the emperor Charles V, in Spain," he wrote,

Above all things an ambassador must endeavor to acquire great consideration, which is obtained by acting on every occasion like a good and just man; to have the reputation of being generous and sincere, and to avoid that of being mean and dissembling, and not be regarded as a man who believes in one thing and says another.³⁰

Similarly, in "The Perfect Ambassador," Don Juan-Antonio de Vera y Figueroa y Zuniga also argues that the ambassador "must not deviate from the path of justice for the sake of anyone, nor make himself the instrument or the executor of some crime or impiety."³¹ In his view, the ambassador must exhaust all opportunities to execute his jobs as a moral agent.

I believe many citizens of our world including those employed in the diplomatic services are inherently moral diplomats already engaged in efforts to secure social justice for migrant workers. The challenge for the moral diplomats is to strategically develop and implement a campaign to catalyze policy and behavioral changes that can secure decent work for migrant workers, balancing moral advocacy and criticism with pragmatic efforts to keep the dialogue or communication with the host people and governments open.

STRATEGIC AGENDA FOR MORAL DIPLOMACY

Moral diplomacy is a serious, deliberate, strategic set of communicative actions to achieve intended results. Our goal in this particular case is to reform the practice of migrant labor in the Gulf in a way that protects the migrants' human rights while continuing to allow them to find work

in societies that need their labor. Here I outline a few strategic steps for a coordinated moral diplomatic engagement that could help promote solutions to the current social injustice.

First, moral diplomats should believe that they have both the ethical responsibility and the ability to catalyze social change and end the exploitation of migrant workers. The strategies for moral diplomacy offered in this paper are but a starting point, and they should be built upon and improved by moral diplomats themselves based on their practical experiences and reflection.

Second, moral diplomats should highlight the dire need for transparency in the circulation of information about the realities of the migrant labor system in both the sending and the receiving countries. As states such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Indonesia compete to export their unskilled workforces to meet that demand, workers in these countries rashly sign up for any job abroad to escape local unemployment. Migrant workers do not understand that the system does not allow

workers the freedom to change jobs or often even to return home; they remain captive to their sponsors who control their passports, entries, and exits from the host country. In search of better wages, migrant workers often collaborate in their own victimization. Since a significant part of the problem is that many Gulf citizens who use migrant services are unaware of their abuse, most victims would benefit from regulations that mandate transparency. Thus, by helping to educate prospective migrants and their service-receivers about the realities of the migrant work life, moral diplomats can mitigate deceptive recruiting practices and liberate both the oppressed and their inadvertent oppressors.

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Third, moral diplomats should call on governments to make immediate short-term policy reforms that can serve as buildingblocks for long-term transformation of the migrant labor system, using HRW, ILO, and U.S. TIP reports and recommendations as diplomatic communication tools. They should suggest pragmatic and ethical steps for governments, corporations, and individuals sending or employing migrant workers. Specifically, moral diplomats should call on governments to immediately implement the following:

- Ensure transparency in the diffusion of information about process and realities of reemployment in the Gulf.

- Ban the kafeel system.
- Establish a fair minimum wage that secures a decent life for migrant workers and their families.
- Announce ethical guidelines for the labor-brokerage practices.
- Formulate unambiguous terms of labor recruitment, employment, transfer, and termination.
- Separate the employment visa from the sponsor.
- Ensure that laborers have the right and the means to leave the country on reasonable grounds.
- Firmly establish a mechanism for reporting abuses and a system of penalties for abusers; and sternly punish the unethical labor traders.

For a long-term end to the exploitation of migrant workers, the sending/receiving countries should adequately educate and train their workforces, and end imports or exports of unskilled migrant workers.

Fourth, moral diplomats should highlight the cognitive dissonance between how Gulf societies see themselves and how they treat their migrant workers. According to Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, when people perceive discrepancy between their beliefs and actions, they will change either their beliefs or actions. Clearly, there is a chasm between the values of both the sending and the receiving countries and their actions regarding migrant workers. The Gulf states have been very generous when it comes to providing disaster relief around the world. Kuwaitis, for example, top the generous donors in the Muslim world. In 2005, they gave \$100 million to quake victims in Pakistan and \$500 million to Katrina victims in the United States. Yet, in the same year, Kuwait ignored the cries of thousands of migrant workers who demonstrated in Kuwait city, asking for their unpaid salaries. In pressing Gulf states for reform, diplo-

..... diplomats and international activists should emphasize the humanitarian contributions these countries have made internationally and point out the disparity with how they treat impoverished populations within their own borders. In essence, this way the Gulf citizens will be equipped with the information they need to deal with their unethical

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behavior in dealing with migrant workers. This type of “name and shame” approach must lead to greater transparency in order for Gulf citizens to act on their disgust.

In the Gulf, the ethics of the Islamic faith can also play a particularly poignant and effective role in highlighting cognitive dissonance. Many Quranic verses, prophetic traditions, and juristic interpretations can give us a 'calculus' or vocabulary for moral diplomatic engagement from the Islamic perspective. Islam has a set of ethics or moral imperatives that parallels those of the Judeo-Christian and even the secular rights and justice traditions.³² Some of the key values underlying Islamic ethics include the following statements culled from the traditions of Prophet Muhammad:³³

- Give laborers their wages before their sweat is dry.
- Deal gently with a people, and be not harsh; cheer them and condemn not.
- When you speak, speak the truth; perform what you promise; discharge your trust; be chaste in thought and action; and withhold your hand from striking, from taking that which is unlawful, and bad.
- What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.
- God is gentle, and He loves gentleness.
- Be persistent in good actions.
- Prevent your brethren from oppressing others.

In the moral tenets of the Islamic faith, the images and stories of injustice perpetrated against migrant workers presented above are categorically wrong and compel action to end their recurrence.

Furthermore, moral diplomats should network with local activists who are part of the cultures and societies involved. There are many active moral diplomats working to enact reforms in the sending/receiving countries such as Kuwaiti Islamic scholars and human rights activists Sheikh Muhammad Awadhi and Sheikh Mishary Alafasy. Sheikh Awadhi has been featuring cases of torture, murder, and abuse of migrant workers in his television programs. He argues that such acts are criminal, inhuman and un-Islamic. Sheikh Alafasy, a renowned preacher of the Qur'an has been leading an educational campaign in the Arab media in Kuwait. Similar advocacy campaigns are also occurring in Saudi Arabia. Local messengers are often better able to instill cognitive dissonance and talk about discrepancies between Islamic morality and the treatment of migrant laborers with greater legitimacy and resonance than outsiders.

Finally, moral diplomats should communicate honestly and strategically and create what the ILO calls "social dialogue" amongst stakeholders. Many communication theories rooted in multiple disciplines can help

moral diplomats communicate honestly and strategically to achieve results.³⁴ There are numerous ways for moral diplomats to organize social dialogues. For example, American diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Doha, Qatar collaborated with the Qatar Foundation to sponsor a workshop and competition for budding filmmakers. The film that won the competition was one created by a Sudanese student featuring exploitation of migrant workers in Qatar. Two members of the four-person jury were Qatari nationals, who were already convinced of the need to fight this injustice. Social dialogues create a cooperative forum for engaging local populations and raising awareness and understanding of the problem of human rights abuses.

CONCLUSION

There is no single cause or culprit behind the exploitation of migrant workers. Multiple dynamics—including the forces of globalization, poverty, illiteracy, powerlessness, and lack of skills—interactively create a vicious situation which victimizes migrants. There is a ‘requisite

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“Tens of thousands of migrant workers seeking jobs or working in the Gulf are victimized by their recruiters and employers alike in many different ways.”

variety’ of policy and action steps available for political actors to tackle the problem of migrant labor exploitation. Transparency of information, if widely diffused, can create a tipping point for change leading to the end of the system of migrant labor exploitation. What is missing in this equation is the political will to act, which is again caused by inadequate public awareness of the problem. There are hence a set of strategic

steps for moral diplomacy as catalyst for the creation of public awareness and political will to change the situation.

It is worth noting that over the past few months there have been some improvements in the conditions of migrant workers in terms of somewhat better living accommodations, legislating minimum wages and recent or prospective legislation banning the *kafael* or sponsorship system that gives employers so much control over workers’ ability to stay in the Gulf or return home. Bahrain banned the *kafael* system in August 2009 and Kuwait passed a new labor law in December 2009, setting “tougher penalties, including jail terms, for businessmen who trade in visas or who recruit expatriate workers and then fail to provide them with jobs, or who fail to pay salaries regularly.”³⁶ The bill requires the government to intro-

duce a minimum wage for the lower-paid workers. However, according to HRW reports, there are still questions about loopholes in the implementation of those laws.³⁷ For example, those who serve as live-in housemaids or house-servants have been left out of these laws.³⁸

Meanwhile, instead of enacting binding legislation for sponsors and employers, the UAE has published a handbook for migrant workers, specifying the rights and duties of employers and workers. In Saudi Arabia, there has been little progress on any of these fronts. Like Bahrain and Kuwait, the Saudi government should immediately abolish the *kafael* system and implement the policy measures suggested above. Overall, the improvements are still nowhere near what could add up to the conditions of decent work or decent life for migrant workers in the Gulf states. As the culture of exploitation has not changed significantly, moral diplomats need to take up the challenge with a sense of urgency to press the issue forward. ■

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