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# Circular Migration and the Gulf States

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# Chapter 3

## Circular Migration and the Gulf States

Zahra Babar and Andrew Gardner

**Abstract** In this chapter the authors assess the application of the circular migration framework to the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. By some estimations, the six GCC states comprise the third largest migratory destination in the contemporary world, and for decades these states have hosted large transient migrant populations that, in some manner or another, appear to fit the definition of circular migration. Through an analysis of migration to the Gulf States this chapter provides an empirical contribution to the expanding discussion of circular migration. In this chapter the nexus between the Gulf migration system and the circular migration framework is configured around two focal points. After an overview of migration in the Gulf States, the authors first examine the policy frameworks that regulate and govern migration to the GCC. Second, using an ethnographic lens, the authors explore the experiences of the migrants at work in the region. They conclude with a discussion of the implications of promoting the circular migration framework in the region.

### 3.1 Introduction: Circular Migration and the Arabian Peninsula

Migration and movement have emerged as central to our understanding of the contemporary world. In the wake of this tectonic shift, scholars now work amidst a spectrum of conceptual frameworks that seek to grasp the various aspects of these movements and their characteristics. Alongside frameworks such as transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and diaspora studies, the *circular migration* framework seeks to grapple with the phenomena of contemporary movement. It stakes its claim to a conceptual and analytic space around the fundamental assertion that migrations

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of the past – movements that oftentimes led to the permanent settlement of migrants in the receiving country – have given way to temporary, ephemeral, and/or circular patterns that, eventually, carry migrants back to their original home. Indeed, it is that enduring connection and an eventual return to the homeland that is the hallmark of the circular migration framework.

The conceptualization of the migrant as enduringly connected to home and, more precisely, facing a horizon of eventual return, provides some balance against the longstanding anxieties that accompany the dominant, western, and social scientific understandings of migration. As Feldman argues, the “fantasy” of circular migration assuages nationalist anxieties in its promise that migrants will eventually leave, and it assuages neoliberal anxieties by maintaining an inexpensive pool of available labor (2012). But circular migration also addresses the broader anxiety that, through migration, families, communities, and sometimes nations themselves are permanently destabilized by the movement and absence of their constituent members/citizens. Indeed, the circular migration framework is often portrayed (and critiqued) as overly laudatory of migration and movement, for it suggests positive outcomes for all: sending countries generate income, receiving countries address labor shortages, and migrants themselves are empowered with income and agency (Vertovec 2007). Faced with the *de facto* reality of unstoppable migration and movement beyond the state’s control, policymakers and scholars have found a particular enthusiasm for circular migration and its promise that, with the right configuration of policies, benefits can be reaped by all.

As a conceptual framework that frames contemporary movement in particular ways, circular migration also accepts the nation-state as the predominant organizational unit in the world, and unlike transnational theory, envisions the state as unthreatened by these migratory circuits and movements. Whereas transnational theory and cosmopolitanism portray the movement of people as a contemporary and neoliberal reality that poses significant challenges to the nation-state (e.g. Ong 2006; Sassen 1998, 2001; Pries 2001; Basch et al. 1994), the circular migration framework centrally positions the nation-state in its calculus. Indeed, the steadfast maintenance of this methodological nationalism is characteristic of the circular migration discourse, and while this feature is central to its popularity in policy-oriented circles (most of which are also highly invested in the operation of the nation-state), it is perhaps also the measure of its less enthusiastic acceptance amongst many academically focused scholars.

In this chapter, we explore the application of the circular migration framework to the petroleum-producing states of the Arabian Peninsula. In addition to the qualities and characteristics we describe above, the circular migration framework, like most migration theory, has largely been constructed on an empirical foundation that, in geographical terms, is concerned principally with those migratory circuits connected to Europe and North America. By some estimations, the six GCC states (that is, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman) comprise the third largest migratory destination<sup>1</sup> in the contemporary world, and for

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<sup>1</sup> See ESCWA (2007).

decades these states have hosted large transient migrant populations that, in some manner or another, appear to fit the definition of circular migration.

With all of this in mind, we see an analysis of migration to the Gulf States as a vital empirical contribution to the expanding discussion of circular migration. Our analysis of the nexus between the Gulf migration system and the circular migration framework is configured around two focal points. After an overview of migration in the Gulf States, we first examine the policy frameworks that regulate and govern migration to the GCC. Second, using an ethnographic lens, we explore the experiences of the migrants at work in the region. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges and implications of framing Gulf migration in the circular migration framework.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 An Overview of Migration in the Gulf States

The cities of the Arabian littoral have been enmeshed in regional and trans-regional networks of exchange and mobility for millennia. Those networks carried all sorts of people to the shores of Arabia – merchants, traders, and slaves at first; colonial bureaucrats, technicians and professionals later. Indeed, while migration is often conceived as characteristic of the modern era, even a passing familiarity with the history of the port cities of the Arabian Peninsula suggests that the transnational migration flows that characterize the contemporary Gulf States are merely another chapter in a long history of movement and mobility. Amidst that historical continuity, however, the past four decades merit particular attention. While many of the historic migratory conduits that carried the aforementioned populations to Arabia persevere in some form or other, all were dwarfed by the changes wrought in the concluding decades of the twentieth century. Petroleum industries in the region were by that time highly productive and extremely lucrative, the various GCC states were newly independent, and the OPEC embargo multiplied the wealth these nations controlled overnight. At that historical juncture, all the GCC States embarked on vast infrastructural modernization projects that were deeply interwoven with their new national identities. In turn, those modernization projects required a vast labor force of unskilled and low-skill workers. Building on established ties to South Asia, the migratory conduits connecting India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan,

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<sup>2</sup>A string of research projects underpin this research. Those projects were funded and sponsored by a variety of institutions, including the Fulbright Program, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Bahrain Training Institute, Qatar University, and the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. In addition, this paper relies heavily on research funded by the Qatar National Research Fund under its National Priorities Research Program (award number NPRP 09-857-5-123). Note that the contents of this chapter are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Qatar National Research Fund, nor any of the other institutions that have supported the research underpinning this chapter.

and Nepal to these Arabian states swelled in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Today, foreigners predominate in all the GCC workforces. Foreign labor comprises an absolute majority of all six GCC nations' workforces, and the foreign population comprises an absolute majority of the population in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Kapiszewski 2001). These proportions are quite extraordinary – current estimates, for example, suggest that over 90 % of the population in Qatar is non-citizen. The foreign populations at work in the Gulf are geographically and demographically diverse. Atop the foundation of South Asian labor, the GCC states now draw increasingly large components of their contemporary labor forces from Sub-saharan Africa, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the Middle East. Much of this foreign labor force arrives to work unskilled positions – these migrants work as construction workers, truck drivers, domestic servants, office boys, custodians, and countless other positions. More lucrative skilled and professional positions are occupied by citizens or elite foreigners, typically of Middle Eastern, European, North American, or South Asian descent. Although naturalization is typically not possible for foreign migrants, many of the elite foreign populations have found ways to remain in the Gulf for several generations, and hence maintain a diasporic footprint in the region.<sup>3</sup> Those men and women working unskilled or semi-skilled positions often remain in the Gulf for much shorter periods of time.

Migration to the region is organized and governed by the *kafala*, or sponsorship system. This system mandates an association between each labor migrant and a sponsor/resident in the Gulf. This system of sponsorship, with longstanding roots in the cultural traditions of the region, is practically reinforced by the labor contracts that lock migrants to particular jobs for a particular period of time. Typical contracts are 2 years in duration. Overall, the *kafala* (and the labor contracts that underlie it) directly associates the individual migrant with a particular job and particular sponsor. The highly unequal power dynamics of these relations have been the focus of much research in the region, and are often portrayed as the keystone in the exploitative labor relations common in the contemporary Gulf States (Longva 1997, 1999; Frantz 2008; Gardner 2010a). Several of the Gulf States are currently amidst discussions concerning pathways to dismantling or substantially altering the sponsorship system. At the same time, decades of migration under the sponsorship system have lodged these practices as normative throughout the region, and the business communities of several Gulf States have publically argued that their economic competitiveness in the global arena would be significantly diminished if the sponsorship system were abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>There are limited opportunities for naturalization in some GCC states, but generally speaking, these opportunities are not available to the vast majority of labor migrants who stream to the region.

<sup>4</sup>See Gardner (2010a: 159–164) and Beaugrand (2011) for a longer discussion of Bahrain's claims regarding the abolishment of the sponsorship system.

The portion of this migration system discernible in the Gulf States is one part of a larger transnational migration system that reaches deep into Asia and Africa. Through manpower agencies and labor brokerages in those sending countries, potential migrants are routed to work in the GCC States.<sup>5</sup> Labor brokerages in sending countries oftentimes employ sub-agents who scour more peripheral villages and towns for potential labor migrants. These labor brokerages, in communication with manpower companies and other employers in the Gulf, extract profits from the migration process. Gulf-based employers and sponsors also commonly extract profits from the migration process. Unskilled and low-skill migrants typically pay \$1500–\$3000 for the right to a 2-year work contract in the Gulf States. In the longer history of Gulf migration, the commodification of the right to work in the region became commonplace in the 1990s, and is therefore a recent development. The amounts paid for this “right” vary between sending nations. Typically, migrants and their families incur significant debts in securing funds for this journey. Those debts are held in the sending countries, and, in the form of mortgages or loans, typically encompass vital productive resources and household-level savings.

Sustained analysis of this migration system suggests the relationships it structures are prone to abuse and exploitation (Gardner 2010a; Longva 1997, 1999; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009). By locking migrants to a particular sponsor and job, the kafala prevents migrants from escaping exploitative situations. While a full review of the patterns of these migrants’ experiences is beyond the scope of this chapter, systematic research clearly points to a set of recurring issues migrants encounter throughout the region.<sup>6</sup> Labor migrants oftentimes face the non-payment of wages; others face underpayment in relation to the contractually promised salary. Migrants’ passports are typically confiscated by their employer or sponsor, thereby preventing them from fleeing exploitative labor relations. Others are summarily deported by their sponsors. Housing is oftentimes substandard, and work conditions can be unsafe. Migrants are often retained against their will beyond the contractually delineated 2 years. “Jobswitching” – arriving in the Gulf to a different job than promised in the sending country – is commonplace. And various deductions, often for contractually promised benefits, significantly reduce the meager profits promised to labor migrants. As a result, this migration system has been a locus of international critique, and the Gulf States perennially occupy the lower tiers of the U.S. Department of State’s human trafficking report and other similar measures.

It is undoubtedly true that millions of labor migrants successfully navigate the risks and vulnerabilities of this migration system, and that remittances from the GCC states comprise a vital feature of household, community, and indeed, national

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<sup>5</sup>There is often confusion with these terms. We use labor brokerages to refer to those agencies in sending countries that connect potential migrants with employment in the Gulf states, a service for which they typically charge. Manpower companies refer to those companies that receive labor in the Gulf states. These manpower agencies are oftentimes also referred to as labor supply companies. They employ labor, often in large quantities, and contract with companies to provide labor services.

<sup>6</sup>See Longva 1997, 1999; Gardner 2010a, b, 2011, 2012; U.S. Department of State 2007; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009.

economies in South Asia, portions of Africa, and much of the Middle East. But those risks and vulnerabilities are substantial, and many of them are directly tied to the transience and circularity that characterizes the migration system in the Gulf States. Indeed, as we will argue below, many of the policy tools and procedures promoted by circular migration schemes are the very same tools that currently structure highly unequal and potentially exploitative labor relations in the GCC. Through an examination of the policy framework that governs this migration flow, and through an ethnographically-focused analysis of the Gulf migration experience, we portray the circularity of this migration system as a manifestation of exploitative labor relations rather than as a freedom to be enhanced through policy configuration.

### 3.3 Policy and the Governance of Migrants in the GCC

As some Gulf scholars have noted, any discussion of the state of migration policy and governance in the GCC states must first address the marked disconnect between articulated or implemented macro-level policy and the reality practiced on the ground. Clearly the Gulf States, boasting the third largest migration hub in the world, are developing and implementing migration policy at the macro level. The primary concerns of this macro level policy are to curtail the heightened dependency on foreign labor sources, to ensure a more balanced representation of their own citizenry in the national workforce, and to mitigate against the threat of cultural or socio-political dislocation that hosting large numbers of foreigners might entail. As a result of these foundational concerns, macro-level policies are geared towards minimizing the possibility of migrant integration and blocking pathways to permanent settlement and citizenship, toward the “nationalization” of the respective countries’ workforces, and toward establishing strategic limitations on the numbers of workers from one source country (Shah 2008). Macro-level policy does not adequately address the fact that migrants have continued to be a highly visible presence in this region for more than three decades, that this does not appear to be a “temporary” phenomena, and that the forces driving these migration flows will not be dissipating in the near future (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2011).

Ethnographic research amongst migrant populations in the GCC points to the extremely weak impact of this policy on their lives. Analyses suggest that many migrants experience the GCC as an ungoverned space where they are left to the devices and desires of the marketplace, where in fact a host of social and economic actors have vested interests in ensuring that the state and its policies have limited force. The weakness of this governance structure is embedded in the fact that over the past decades the Gulf States have exhibited a marked lack of interest in prioritizing migrants’ rights and protections (Winckler 1997). Until recently the preferred option for the state was to maintain a hands-off approach that, through the kafala, distributed the responsibility of governing the migrant labor force to individual

citizen-sponsors (Gardner 2010a). As Neha Vora (2010) has articulated, this arrangement yields the 'privatization of migrant governance' which allows the state to absolve itself of responsibility and actively enables the exploitation of migrant workers (see also Gardner 2010a, b).

More recently the Gulf States have opted for more direct involvement in governance of regional migration. This has led to a region-wide discussion on how the kafala system might be modified or eliminated entirely, and what new system might replace it (Baldwin-Edwards 2011). In light of mounting international criticism over the living and working conditions for many migrant workers in the region, the Gulf States have argued in their defense that existing labor laws protect basic rights of foreign workers by defining maximum work hours, by setting minimum health, safety, and environment standards, by ensuring the timely delivery of wages, and by mandating practice in other potential areas of contention. If employers are not abiding by the law or are denying their employees their due rights, then judicial mechanisms exist through which the workers may seek recourse (Ahmad 2010). Considering the fact that salary and contractual disputes remain central areas of concern for labor migrants and their advocates, an enabled legal structure could play a significant role in adjudicating many of the problems migrants face. At the current juncture, however, the courts are not the mechanism of redress preferred by migrants, but rather a last resort that is oftentimes altogether neglected. Whether due to limited capacity or disinterest, the GCC states have been unable to ensure compliance with many of their own policies (such as labor laws), and have failed to enact policy that would provide greater protection for foreign workers (Rahman 2010). Framing effective policy specifically tailored to improving workers' rights and protections and, perhaps more importantly, building state capacity to ensure employers comply with these policies, would be better than continued reliance on the legal mechanisms alone.

*Three Tiers of Influence* The rights and interests informing migration management and policy development in the GCC States can be conceptualized in three tiers. At the first tier we see the rights of the sovereign state being asserted. Migration is a contested area where sovereign rights tend to dominate policy-making. A state's internal and domestic agenda may exert primacy, but migration policy is also determined by a second tier of interests which exists at the regional level. In the Gulf the primary regional entity is the Gulf Cooperation Council. While the GCC has to date not implemented a harmonized policy platform on migration, the manner in which migration to the region is managed is in essence informally harmonized (Babar 2011). The six member states have all relied on the kafala system to regulate migrants' rights of entry into the territory, and to act as the structural mechanism in which temporary labor migration is grounded. The third tier of interests or rights exerted over migration management in the Gulf comes from the international domain. Over the decades the international realm has increasingly intervened in the debate around migration, both in terms of laying parameters for policymaking and setting the norms of what is acceptable behavior for states to engage in.

*National Context* Migration policy in the GCC has primarily developed within the national context, and there is little doubt that each state maintains firm control over entry and workforce participation within its territorial boundaries. Although they have developed migration policies individually, those policies remain quite similar, largely because the national contexts in which those respective migration policies developed are quite similar. One common thread woven through much of the discussion of migration in the GCC concerns the “demographic imbalance” present in the national labor markets and population structure, as well as the disproportionately large populations of non-national workers (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2011). Although these large workforces have been present for decades, the Gulf States do not see themselves as destinations for permanent settlement: these migrant populations are recurrently framed as a temporary historical circumstance. The six states are unequivocal regarding their aspirations to build a citizen workforce, and thereby alleviate their ongoing dependency on foreign labor. Until that goal can be realized, however, the guiding principle around migration management is one that strives to ensure that the large, foreign workforce currently dominating the Gulf labor market remains strictly temporary in nature, and the pathways to permanent settlement are almost non-existent.

In both law and everyday practice, this migration system reflects the deep anxieties felt by the regimes and citizenries faced with a significant demographic imbalance within their own societies. In turn, these anxieties of the host state are reproduced as pressures felt by the foreign workforce. As is discussed elsewhere in the paper, the kafala creates an environment where foreign workers are prone to exploitation at the hands of their employers. Our argument is that the temporary nature of these visa arrangements plays an integral role in the widespread exploitation many labor migrants encounter in the region. Employers can count on the fact that migrant workers have invested heavily in the opportunity to come to the Gulf for employment, and are therefore reluctant to leave without some return on their investment within the allocated time period. Sponsors are thus empowered to exploit the anxieties of those they sponsor.

*Regional Context* While the GCC states have not to date formally harmonized policies for managing migration, they have begun to take a more proactive role in addressing the issue as a bloc. Perhaps this is in belated recognition of the fact that all of the states face similar concerns around migration, as well as the fact that they are collectively the target of a stream of criticism leveled at them for their supposed apathy in protecting migrant workers. Regardless, during the past few years the GCC states have initiated regional cooperative efforts at migration policy reform. In 2005, five of the six GCC countries, as observers, attended the annual meeting held under the Colombo Process. The Colombo Process brings together a number of migrant-sending countries of Asia, and is primarily concerned with the protection of overseas workers. Building on this involvement, and spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates, all six of the GCC states in 2008 launched the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue is a regional consultative process on labor migration to the Gulf. It serves to bring labor sending countries from South and Southeast Asia

together with labor receiving countries of the Gulf, with the aim of addressing the concerns of both. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue however, evolved primarily as a response to increasing international sounds of alarm around migration management in the Gulf, as opposed to out of strictly GCC-based concerns.

*Global Context* A host of international organizations focused on migration have developed under the UN umbrella, including the International Labour Organisation and the International Organisation for Migration. Such international efforts have created an atmosphere where recognition is consistently given to the fact that migration is a global phenomenon affecting states everywhere, and accordingly international cooperative mechanisms for coping with migration are required.

While migration policy in the Gulf States developed in response to specific national and region-wide challenges, it is also informed by broader, global shifts in the discourse on migration. Throughout the world peoples' mobility across borders is more and more scrutinized and embedded in issues of state sovereignty and governance. Borders are being made less permeable, channels for permanent settlement for new migrants are being narrowed, pathways to inclusion and participation pared down, and criterion for citizenship made more stringent.

Beyond the impersonal machinery of the state clamping down on potential migrants, it is the strong anti-immigration bent to the public discourse in the developed world that indirectly supports these policies. Much of this hinges on anxieties of governments and citizenry around the presence of new streams of migrants who could become eligible for rights of full citizenship and place added pressures on the socio-economic and political capacity of the state. Framing migration as a threat to the development of politically and economically viable societies is a global phenomenon that is leading to a global climate of migration fear. This underlying global trend justifies the rationality of anti-migration sentiment elsewhere, such as in the Gulf.

Concurrently, neoliberal globalization creates greater economic co-dependencies. Economic policies encourage the free flow of capital and labor. Migration policies curtailing the movement of people, and potentially limiting sources of skilled and low-skill labor could have critical consequences on economic development across the world. Governments have been searching for migration policies that suit their national interests and support the flow of temporary labor migrants rather than permanent ones. Circular migration policies certainly suit contemporary circumstances, as they remove the need for integration, marginalize pathways to citizenship, and reinforce the concept of migrants' return to their countries of origin.

While circular migration is not a new concept, it has over the recent past gained ground in policy circles (Vertovec 2007). Its popularity is a result of the fact that it addresses the economic needs of both migrant sending and receiving countries, while framing temporary migrants as a dynamic, voluntarily transnational work-force. This temporary work-force moves fluidly between two or more countries for employment and residence purposes, not only oiling the wheels of an efficient globalised economy, but also contributing to development in both the sending and receiving state.

*Circular Migration and Gulf Policy Development* Proponents of circular migration posit that, given the right circumstances, transnational workers greatly benefit from temporary cycles of employment abroad. From this perspective, the obstacles to successful circularity are in the bad policies and practices that hamper workers from benefiting most from the experience, and do not create long term improved development trajectories. Advocates argue that undertaking constructive efforts which support seamless circular migration may prove that temporary periods of migration are beneficial for labor-surplus sending countries, labor-deficient receiving countries, and the migrant laborers themselves.

The circular migration framework suggests the traditional and conventional view – that international employment is viewed by migrants primarily as a gateway to permanent residency and citizenship – is outdated and not applicable to all contemporary contexts. Migrants are portrayed as agents of their own destiny, and the undertaking of temporary periods of employment outside their homeland is defined as an active choice rather than one resulting from the limited pathways open to them. Despite this framing of repeated and temporary periods of migration as the result of voluntary choices made by workers in a global labor market, it is of note that existing circular migration schemes have arisen specifically in regions which need to meet their labor market needs, which are labor deficient and yet do not want to offer permanent settlement. Additionally, and in spite of the attention given to migrants' welfare while in a host country, there can be no denying that the circular migration framework is principally lodged in the notion that migrants will return home. This framework highlights positive aspects of returning migrants, suggesting that they bring back to their countries of origin new skill sets, enhanced capacity, and capital investment.

Questions concerning the purportedly 'voluntary' nature of circular migrants' behavior certainly arise if we view Gulf migration through this analytic lens. Migrants to the Gulf have almost no agency in terms of obtaining permanent settlement or citizenship. This is particularly true for those migrants at the lower end of the income and skill scale. Current Gulf practices have removed pathways of traditional migration for settlement, and the kafala system is structured to only grant migrants opportunities for temporary cycles of employment. Migrants may choose to engage in repeated cycles of employment within one or more of the GCC states, interspersed with periods of repatriation home. It is impossible to determine whether these back and forth movements reflect migrants' preferences, as there is no option for them to remain long term in a host state. Unless empirical data emerges to the contrary, we cannot establish that current patterns of temporary labor migration to the Gulf region are based solely on migrants' agency. Rather, it can be argued these patterns have emerged because there are no alternatives available.

If circular migration ascribes a great deal of agency to individual migrants in terms of decision-making around managing their processes of migration, it also centralizes the role of the state. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the state is seen as having extensive capacity for controlling migratory channels into and through its borders. Embedded within this notion is the presumption that states have the necessary power to adjust their policies and practices to achieve more *effective*

management. Given our contention that current migratory processes to the Gulf are heavily influenced by non-state economic actors who are components in a transnational migration industry, it is hard to assume that adjustment in state policies alone would dramatically alter the experiences of exploitation faced by migrants to the region.

Defining temporary labor migration cycles to the Arabian Peninsula as ‘circular migration’ would augur well for the receiving countries, for it would justify the status quo. Circular migration exists as part of our historical understanding of people’s movements, as people have for centuries moved temporarily between two or more places, and have returned to their countries of origin. These patterns of migratory behavior could be constructed as voluntary or as a result of structural necessity, but were seldom controlled or managed through the intrusion of the state. Circular migration as a current policy framework, however, has arisen amidst rising concerns of states that wish to meet their labor needs without having to add to their actual population stock. It has largely emerged in liberal democracies seeking an alternate solution to the past experiences of temporary and guest worker programs, where labor deficits might have been met but residual and unexpected consequences (such as the permanent settlement of workers) have placed added pressures on the receiving states. The Gulf States present a different scenario from the liberal democracies in Europe where much of the discussion on circular migration originates. Through the kafala system and through the restrictive controls that limit migrants from pathways to social integration and participation, the Gulf to a great extent has been able to successfully manage its temporary labor cycles and mitigate the overall impact of migrants on the state and society. Conceiving of current migration patterns to the Gulf as being circular and embedding them within that discourse serves to reinforce or rather justify the policy intentions and practice of the states.

In critiquing policies that support temporary labor migration attention has been drawn to the fact that such policies automatically delimit migrant’s rights (Wickramasekara 2011). Ethnographic research in the Gulf substantiates policy studies which point out that temporary labor migrants (both in the Gulf and elsewhere) have their rights constrained through the lack of workplace mobility (by being contracted to work for one specific employer), the lack of possibility to have visas issued for family members, the limited opportunities for up-skilling or job-place training, the absence of social security, and a host of other issues. These concerns around issues of the absence of rights are not addressed in the circular migration framework.

### 3.4 Gulf Migration in Social Context

Broadly speaking, circular migration’s analytic lens principally focuses on the end results of migration rather than the experience itself.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to that typical focus, this section of the paper highlights the lived experiences of migrants who, in

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<sup>7</sup>In contrast to a human rights-based approach, for example.

some sense or another, fit the patterns that typify circular migration. By examining “circular” migrants through an ethnographic lens, we follow anthropologist Sarah Willen’s proscription for a phenomenology of migration centered upon the experiences and sentiments of migrants-as-agents (2007). This attention to the experience of Gulf migration leads to three interrelated critiques of the circular migration framework. First, we suggest that attention to the macroscopic “circular” patterns of Gulf migration elides the oftentimes problematic and exploitative experiences of individual labor migrants. Second, we assert that the circular migration discourse diverts attention from the profit-seeking nature of a transnational migration industry. Finally, in grappling with the transnationality of this system, we suggest that the ongoing valorization of circular migration fails to accommodate the fact that these migration systems, which are perhaps circular in character, essentially place the burden of the reproduction of the labor force utilized by the Gulf States back upon the shoulders of the sending countries. As these summaries suggest, we believe attention to the lived experience of Gulf migration points to some of the conceptual problems with the circular migration framework. These criticisms can most likely be extrapolated to other migration contexts in the contemporary world.

The departure point for this section of the chapter is a single migrant’s story. From an ethnographic standpoint, no particular labor migrant’s story, in all of its specificity, can stand as representative of the diverse experiences of the millions of men and women who stream to the region each year in search of opportunity. Nonetheless, of the hundreds of labor migrants the authors of this chapter have interviewed and/or encountered over the years, there is nothing particularly extraordinary about Vinod’s experiences in Arabia. Readers seeking a more comprehensive portrait of labor migrants’ lives in the Gulf States are encouraged to consult the growing ethnographic literature concerned with this mobile population (Longva 1997; Gardner 2010a, b, 2011, 2012; Nagy 1998; Bruslé 2008; Gamburd 2000).

Vinod<sup>8</sup> was born and raised in a village just beyond the outskirts of a minor city on the low Terai plain of southern Nepal. As a young man, he followed several others from his village to a job in Saudi Arabia. Although he was promised a salary SR 600 by the labor broker in Nepal, for 3.5 years in Saudi Arabia he toiled for SR 550 a month. His stay was extended, largely against his will: after the first 2 years, he had still not repaid the entirety of the loan he had incurred to come to Saudi Arabia in the first place. And the company insisted that he must pay for his own return ticket. As a result, he stayed a year and a half beyond the original 2-year contract. When he finally extricated himself, he returned to Nepal with the intentions of never returning to Arabia. But by early 2008, circumstances forced him abroad again. His father, recently deceased, had steadily whittled away the family’s fortune with drinking and gambling; more recently, the family had invested heavily in his sister’s dowry via a combination of loans and mortgages. Now the family faced an economic crisis of spiraling debt. Vinod had experience driving large trucks, and after contacting a labor brokerage in the nearby city, he secured a position in Qatar as a heavy truck driver. The debts incurred to this broker were substantial, but he figured

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<sup>8</sup>A pseudonym.

that within a year he could begin to save some money. Vinod left Nepal almost immediately. Once he arrived in Qatar, he was taken directly to a labor camp at the far edge of the Industrial Area, a vast grid of heavy industry, light industry, and labor camps on the urban periphery of Doha. Conditions at the camp were difficult: six men to a room, itinerant electricity, and an insecure water supply were at the top of his list of concerns.

For 6 months Vinod drove a water truck to and from various construction sites in and near the city. Then, the company's general manager, a Palestinian migrant himself, came and told all the drivers that they were using too much diesel. The manager refused to calculate for the fact that the majority of their time on the road was spent in traffic – and often at a standstill. The manager began to penalize them by deducting money from their salary. In protest, the men refused to drive under the imposed circumstances. Once they stopped driving, the company stopped paying the men. The drivers found their way to a labor court and filed a case. The court case took an enormous amount of time and a substantial investment on the part of the men. Vinod borrowed from friends, and the flow of remittances to Nepal ceased. At one point, Vinod persuaded his roommates to sell their collective television so he could extract his share for court fees. For 6 months the men sat in the camp as their case percolated through the legal system. Finally, in early 2010, the case was resolved in their favor. Vinod would be going home with all the salary due to him. Good riddance to Qatar, he thought. But before he could depart, the general manager of the company, a savvy and vengeful man, filed a countersuit contending that Vinod had “misused QR 10,000 worth of diesel”. The manager's intentions were to punish Vinod – with a new case in the courts, Vinod would be prevented from returning home. This spurious case against Vinod bounced through the court system in Qatar for another 2 months. The electricity at the camp was turned off during the day, so Vinod and the other unemployed drivers languished in the stifling heat of the summer as they awaited resolution. Finally the spurious case was dismissed, and Vinod and his fellow drivers were cleared for departure. He received several thousand Qatari Riyals in court-ordered back pay, but most of that money went to the various friends and acquaintances who had loaned him money over the many months he had gone without pay. He boarded the plane home with less than QR 500 in his pocket.

It is against the backdrop of Vinod's story that we can begin to unpack our contentions about the circular migration framework. First, like many transnational migrants in the Gulf, Vinod worked multiple contracts in the region. As his story indicates, he worked first in Saudi Arabia, and then after several years back in Nepal, he obtained a second position in Qatar. From a distance, then, the work histories of the many, many labor migrants like Vinod resemble the essential migration pattern at the conceptual foundation of circular migration perspective: their lives begin in the villages and towns of South Asia; they move back and forth between the Gulf States during their adult working life; they return home periodically, and oftentimes for good in the twilight of their lives. But only through the most problematic of analytic acrobatics could one conclude that Vinod's experiences in the Gulf were economically positive in nature. His time in Saudi Arabia

was extremely difficult, and his stay there was extended by over a year and a half from the original contract, against his will and desire. He returned home to a family that was plagued by debt. After several years of attempting to find remunerative work in Nepal and in a household caught in a financial cataclysm, he again left for the Gulf, this time with previous experience, the savviness of a veteran migrant, and high hopes. As his story suggests, however, in Qatar he faced dire economic circumstances for a second time, and by our last interview, it was clear that he would return to Nepal with almost nothing to show for his efforts.

The aggregation of these sorts of transnational movements comes to resemble the movements hypothesized by the circular migration framework and encouraged by likeminded policy analysts. From the vantage point of the labor migrant, however, these movements are understood quite differently – not as a form of elective movement between profitable work abroad and the comforts of home, but rather as a gauntlet of difficult and challenging circumstances with little guarantee of success. Foremost, then, there is a striking lack of agency amongst many of these migrants. In the countries from which they come, for example, many potential migrants are lured to the Gulf with misinformation and disinformation; oftentimes families – and, more specifically in the South Asian context, parents – are primarily responsible for the decision to migrate to the Gulf. Once in Arabia, men and women are frequently trapped in extremely unequal relations. They are often unable to secure even their most basic rights. Many endure periods of illegality after absconding from untenable situations at the sole job they are legally allowed to work.

What appears to be a conscious decision for a long stay is, oftentimes, revealed as a series of economic catastrophes, located both at home and abroad in the Gulf, that are a direct result of the exploitative relations that lock the migrant in a never-ending cycle of debt-driven servitude. And like Vinod, many migrants return home not to reconnect with family and community, but rather to flee those exploitative labor relations, or, in other cases, through the cancellation of their sponsorship and residency. These labor migrants display little control over their departure to the Gulf – economic penury and, more broadly, the failure of development compels them to leave their homes. And they display little agency in the decision to return home – sponsors and employers cancel their visas, police round up workers who have absconded from exploitative labor relations and deport them to their homes. As this suggests, our first contention is that the circular migration framework is inattentive to the lived experience of labor migration which, in the Gulf States, is characterized by highly unequal and oftentimes exploitative relations between foreign workers and their sponsors.

Vinod's story also indicates how ethnographic work amongst unskilled labor migrants compels us to grapple with this transnational migration system as a profit-seeking industry – an industry in which labor is the commodity. Here we draw on William Walters' insightful work on deportation, in which he (briefly) contends that the practice of deportation in the U.S. and western Europe employs “not just police and immigration officials, but airline executives, pilots, stewards, and other passengers” (2002). Turning our attention from deportation, specifically, to migration, more broadly, the scope of this migration industry in the Gulf States can hardly be

understated. In addition to the police and immigration officials who manage the flow of labor to the Gulf States, the migration industry that connects labor with employment in the GCC includes a vast labor brokerage system in the sending countries, the sponsors and companies that employ workers in the receiving countries, the companies that build and oftentimes manage labor camps in the receiving countries, and much more. In Vinod's case, he was able to extract very slight profits for his combined 6 years of work in Saudi Arabia and Qatar; some labor migrants actually lose money. The win/win/win implications of circular migration discourse fail to account for migration systems as exploitative, profit-seeking industries. In the Gulf States, the "circularity" of these migration flows is a key component of a profit-seeking migration industry whose interests are rarely aligned with those of labor migrants.

Finally, there is no doubt that for men like Vinod, the opportunity provided by work in the Gulf States is an attractive option. The fact that tens of millions of men and women are willing to gamble years of their time in the difficult context of labor relations in the Gulf is, in the final accounting, a measure of the failure of development in the states from which they come. In the longer history of migration, however, the circular migration discourse serves to codify the ongoing circumscription of host states' responsibilities and obligations to the labor upon which they depend and from which they profit. As Claude Meillassoux (1981) noted long ago, migration patterns of a circulatory nature allow highly developed capitalist zones to push the costs of the reproduction of their labor force back to underdeveloped and peripheral regions. This aptly describes the current situation in the Gulf States, where state and citizenry have come to deeply depend on the flow of a labor force whose rights are significantly attenuated and who may never settle or naturalize. The costs of the reproduction of that labor force remain in the sending countries – in the communities and households to which aging and infirm migrants return. In that sense, the promotion of circular migration in policy circles merely legitimizes the problematic realities – and, particularly, the enforced transience – of the migration industry already in place in the GCC.

### **3.5 Concluding Thoughts: Circular Migration and the Gulf States**

As all of this suggests, we find the application of the circular migration framework in the GCC to be a problematic venture. In part, our argument points to a discursive understanding of the issue: as a conceptual framework and discourse, circular migration focuses our collective attention on certain aspects of the migration process and pushes others out of the spotlight and into the shadows. One of those latter aspects, we suggest, is the lived experience of Gulf migration and, more broadly, the rights-based approach that typically accompanies it. Another is the collection of structural forces – poverty in the sending nations, the social context from which

many migrants come, the kafala that governs them in the Gulf – that readily confound simplistic renditions of migrant agency. Without attention to the lived experience of migration and the policies that shape it, the circular migration framework consists of a global “stamp of approval” for the involuntary movements that, from a distance, appear to be the manifestations of active circular migration. While rights-based approaches to Gulf migration have been laden with their own problems, we suggest that the circular migration discourse and the policy recommendations that stem from it will codify many of the policies and practices that inevitably produce exploitative and problematic labor relations in the region, and through that process, slow down the substantial progress toward reform that has characterized the last decade in the GCC.

Our analysis of labor migration in the GCC also points to a second area of critique. The GCC states, like many wealthy states in the contemporary world, seek a highly flexible and low-cost workforce to meet their developmental aspirations. Efforts to promote circular migration essentially validate these statal desires, and in doing so, yield to the purportedly<sup>9</sup> de facto norm of a contemporary world characterized by profitable and highly unequal neoliberal flows. Essentially, the circular migration discourse and the policy schemes it promotes call for the formation of a second tier of rights for mobile non-citizens. In doing so, circular migration schemes abandon one of the most energetic and active fronts through which a constellation of perspectives grounded in universal humanism have challenged the purportedly de facto neoliberal norms.

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<sup>9</sup>In a nod to the work of Gibson-Graham, we see the neoliberalism and its many manifestations in the contemporary world not as the empirical and de facto reality, but rather as a myth of totality that disempowers other alternatives and marginalizes those alternatives’ histories. To make this argument specific to migration, we suggest that the repeated apprehension of circular migration schemes as somehow aligned with a de facto and empirical reality as a political and ideological move that serves the interests of some stakeholders at the expense of others.

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