

Out of Africa

The Influx of African Migrants to the UAE

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Introduction

The number of African migrants in the United Arab Emirates has increased in the last few years. The reasons for this growth are myriad, but in general an increase in the country's labour demand combined with poor economies in places such as Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya Cameroon, and Ghana have led many to seek work here and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Small but Growing Numbers

The number of African residents in the UAE is lower than some other expat communities. Of the 9.5 million people in the country, Emiratis make up 11.48% of the entire population, Indians 27.5%, and Pakistanis 12.7%. Official, country-based statistics are not often made public, and the data that is provided is often broken down by region, not nationality,¹ however the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimates that there were 3.6 million migrants from African countries in the GCC in 2019. This number, which represents approximately 6.7% of the total population, seems to significantly underestimate the overall numbers of Sub-Saharan African migrants. Other notable expat communities in UAE include residents from Bangladesh, Iran, Philippines, Egypt, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and China².

"Migration to the Gulf region and especially the GCC states has been on the increase in the past two decades," wrote migration expert Kennedy Atong in a 2018 paper. "[The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] and the UAE have been the most prominent destinations in the GCC states and in the whole region..."³. Nigerian migration researcher Amanda Bisong backed up this assertion in a recent report by stating: "Migration from African countries to Middle Eastern countries is increasing."⁴

The Pushes and Pulls of Migration

The UAE's increasing demand for labor, both for new jobs and to replace temporary workers, is the common "pull" factor for migration, but in the case of Africans moving to the region there are also specific reasons that account for the trend. Typical analysis of the field examines the following: the job market in the home country and the salary structure compared to that in the GCC; facilitation of migration in the home country and the role of recruitment agencies; temporality or temporary status of migrants; precarity, or the risks and vulnerabilities of work and living conditions; the particularities of the *kafala system*, an employment system that categorizes specific ethnicities in terms of occupation and salary structure; positionality, or how migrants might view the GCC as a "transit

¹ Ngeh, J. and Michaela Pelican. 2018. "Intersectionality and the Labour Market in the United Arab Emirates: the experiences of African Migrants," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 143, pp. 171-194

² Edarabia (2021) "Population of the UAE (2021)," [Population of the UAE \(2021\) \(edarabia.com\)](https://edarabia.com)

³ Atong, Kennedy et al. 2018. "African Labour Migration to the GCC States: The case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda." ITUC-Africa, https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_study-africa_labour_migration_to_the_gcc_states.pdf

⁴ Bisong, Amanda. 2021. "Regional solutions: Regulating Recruitment and Protection of African Migrant Worker in the Gulf and the Middle East." Ecdpm. Discussion Paper No.292. <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Regional-Solutions-Regulating-Recruitment-Protection-African-Migrant-Workers-Gulf-Middle-East-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-292-2020.pdf>

lounge" for future migration; and remittance culture, or how migrants might be expected to send money back to their home countries⁵.

Many African migrants in the UAE are well-educated, young, speak English fluently, and are often willing to work for lower salaries compared to traditional migrant groups. Migrants of other ethnicities (e.g. Filipino, Indian, Pakistani, Arab) have often gathered in-country work experience and can demand higher salaries based on their service time. Though many East and West African migrants have more formal education and advanced professional qualifications than these other ethnicities, they persistently face deskilling, whereby the jobs they take are not commensurate with their qualifications⁶. They predominantly work as shop assistants, security guards, taxi drivers, and in the hospitality sector (hotels and restaurants). The high demand for domestic help in the region also means there are many positions for women⁷.

Migration from West and East African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon and Ghana to the UAE has increased due to a variety of more specific contextual "push" reasons. Poor governance in these countries has led to sociopolitical conflict, corruption, favoritism, and unemployment. Many university graduates have found it increasingly difficult to find employment in their respective countries and decided to move abroad. The increasing immigration restrictions in Western countries further pushes many African migrants to the GCC, where visas are easier to obtain.

Population growth rates are an additional contributing factor. According to a report issued by the World Economic Forum, population growth in Africa can be attributed to high fertility rates, larger desired family sizes, a younger childbearing age, and low rates of contraceptive use. The urban population in the continent is expected to triple by 2050, which will lead to an increase not only in rural-urban movement but also in migration out of the continent.⁸

Several surveys have shown that African migrants, in particular, perceive a strong sense of safety and a high level of comfort living in the UAE and other GCC countries, especially compared to the insecurity of their own countries or crime-ridden Western capitals.⁹ Women in particular see migration to the region as potentially liberating. Dr. Lahra Smith of Georgetown University, who wrote the book *Making Citizens in Africa: Ethnicity, Gender, and National Identity in Ethiopia*, notes these women are not only concerned with crime and corruption. "Interpersonal violence [family and domestic violence] and lack of autonomy within families are also drivers for women, and they seek greater control over their lives, economically and in terms of bodily and socioeconomically, as well as the ability to contribute to their families, through employment opportunities..."¹⁰

There is data to indicate that many Africans migrate to the GCC not just for family and work but also to study. Obtaining a degree at a UAE based, internationally accredited, university is becoming an increasing attractive option for many African students, as the country is viewed as hospitable and accommodating to a multicultural student population. As Ahmad and Hussain point out, "In addition, the economic and political stability of the country, together with the rapid growth of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, meant that there were ample career opportunities upon graduation. Students studying in the

⁵ Errichiello, G. and Line Nyhagen. 2021. "Dubai is a transit lounge: Migration, temporariness and belonging among Pakistani middle-class migrant," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol. 30(2), pp.119-142, "[Dubai is a transit lounge: Migration, temporariness and belonging among Pakistani middle-class migrants \(sagepub.com\)](#)" and Gardner, A. and Zahra Babar. 2016. *Circular Migration and the Gulf States*. University of Puget Sound. Sound Ideas. [Circular Migration and the Gulf States \(core.ac.uk\)](#)

⁶ Malit, F. Jr. and Ali Al Youha. 2016. "Kenyan Migration to the Gulf Countries: Balancing Economic Interests and Worker Protection," Migration Policy Institute, [Article: Kenyan Migration to the Gulf Countries: B... | migrationpolicy.org](#)

⁷ Apekey, Ann Dela et al. n.d. "Women's Labour Migration on the Africa-Middle East Corridor: Experience of Migrant Domestic Workers from Ghana." GAATW, https://gaatw.org/publications/Ghana-Country_Report.pdf

⁸ Hajjar, B. 2020. "The Children's continent: keeping up with Africa's growth," World Economic Forum, [The children's continent: keeping up with Africa's growth | IsDB](#)

⁹ Ngeh, J. and Michaela Pelican. 2018. "Intersectionality and the Labour Market in the United Arab Emirates: the experiences of African Migrants," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 143, pp. 171-194

¹⁰ Interview with Lahra Smith, April 22, 2021

UAE could choose from a variety of fields to begin their careers, which added to the appeal of the UAE as a destination for education within the Arab region.”¹¹

The number of recruitment agencies in many West and East African countries also contributes to the higher migration rate. Some of these agencies use deceptive practices and false promises to lure eager laborers to move, only to charge them exorbitant fees that can lead to exploitation upon arrival. Though illegal, these practices have contributed significantly to chain migration to the region.¹²

Two researchers who have conducted field work on African migrants in the UAE have found that there has been a substitution of traditional nationalities with those from Africa. Dr. Jonathan Ngeh and Dr. Michaela Pelican observed that in the UAE in 2020, for example, while the number of domestic workers from East and West Africa increased “...at the same time, domestic workers from the Philippines and India were in decline because of travel restrictions imposed by their home governments. [These] policies were intended to put pressure on the UAE government to improve the working conditions of domestic workers. Most African countries have no equivalent migrant programmes in place and have relatively limited diplomatic bargaining power as compared to these well-established migrant sending countries.”¹³

From the UAE governments perspective, the diversification of nationalities is politically and economically expedient. The African migrant community is not perceived as a potentially politicized (subversive) or ‘threatening’ group and the business community is accustomed to and reliant on low-cost labor and a surplus of workers in the labor market.¹⁴

Accounts of worker abuse and non-payment of salaries in various GCC countries have been widely publicized by human rights groups and the international media. Labour camps that house most of the manual workers range from a few people to a few thousand foreign labourers, originating from many different countries. Squalid conditions, overcrowded dorms and facilities, lack of adequate water and sanitation prevail in most of these collective dwellings. Many lower wage earners, African migrants among them, also live in shared apartments and villas, in multicultural popular neighbourhoods away from Gulf citizens’ residential areas. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these conditions made labour camps the first contamination clusters in Gulf countries. This has prompted some response by some GCC governments, in terms of new legislation that offers some limited improvements to worker’s rights.¹⁵

Lastly, the growth in African migration can also be attributed to the UAE’s good reputation in these countries. Abu Dhabi and Dubai have provided humanitarian aid and funded various infrastructure initiatives across the African continent. Private-sector entities such as Etihad Airlines have helped build mosques, dig wells, provide blankets and school supplies in underprivileged communities, and sponsored orphans.¹⁶ In doing so the UAE has not only improved living conditions but built goodwill, which in turn has made it a preferred choice of destination by African migrants. Dubai’s allure as a wealthy cosmopolitan city, aided by media portrayals and advertising campaigns, have made it a magnet for expat workers who aspire to the “good life.”

¹¹ Ahmad, S.Z. & Matloub Hussain (2017) ‘The analytic hierarchy process of the decision-making factors of African students in obtaining higher education in the United Arab Emirates’, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47:2, p. 172

¹² Bisong, Amanda. 2021. “Regional solutions: Regulating Recruitment and Protection of African Migrant Worker in the Gulf and the Middle East.” Ecdpm. Discussion Paper No.292. <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Regional-Solutions-Regulating-Recruitment-Protection-African-Migrant-Workers-Gulf-Middle-East-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-292-2020.pdf>

¹³ Interview with Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican, April 25, 2021 (Account for increased migration from Africa to the GCC states, University of Cologne)

¹⁴ Gosh, Palash. 2013, ‘Young Africans Flocking to Dubai, Joining South Asians as Guest Workers’, *International Business Times*, <https://www.ibtimes.com/young-africans-flocking-dubai-joining-south-asians-guest-workers-1272339>

¹⁵ Babar, Z. 2020. ‘Migrant Workers Bear the Pandemic’s Brunt in the Gulf’, *Current History*, pp. 343-348

¹⁶ Atong, Kennedy et al. 2018. “African Labour Migration to the GCC States: The case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda.” ITUC-Africa, https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_study-africa_labour_migration_to_the_gcc_states.pdf

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