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Migration

The Kafala System is How Capitalism Is Driving Modern Slavery

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South Asian workers in the Middle East are systematically dehumanised and othered in a society where whiteness is considered the ideal.

Beirut: I sit across from Raghav [1] at one of Beirut's numerous Sri Lankan resto-café's. We're in Beirut's noisy neighbourhood of Doura, an area home to a significant number of Beirut's migrant worker populations from Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh. Life in Doura is no easy feat. On the drive over from the well-polished neighbourhood of Achrafieh, one can instantly discern the change in scenery; the luxury cars turn to buses, the french to Arabic, Bengali and Sinhalese, and the colour of bodies from white to a distinguishable chocolate brown. The smells of Ethiopian and Sri Lankan cuisine mixing with the assortment of argileh flavours fills the air. Doura is rife with hardened men, many of whom are migrants living pay check to pay check. One such migrant is Raghav, who hails from the Punjab in India.

Raghav has changed since the last time I saw him – his beard is neatly cut, his hair sleekly pulled back and freshly oiled. He's lost weight. It's his first day off in a month and leaving the compound to get a haircut and to buy oil is only a possibility on that day off. Despite the fragrance of mustard oil which emanates from his body, he seems sadder – as if life itself has been drained from him. Raghav came happy – hopeful even – that life in Beirut would be different. That hope is nowhere to be found today, as Raghav repeatedly asks how he can return to his native India. I don't know what to tell him other than the truth which both of us know so well: he has fallen victim to the complex and subtle system of modern day slavery that profits in the often involuntary movement of brown bodies from South Asian countries for exploitation in Middle Eastern ones. In short, Raghav has simultaneously become a survivor and active participant of the Kafala system.

Six months ago, Raghav paid a man by the name of Mohan Lal – a third party agent operating in both Lebanon and India – nearly \$6,000 for transport and to find him employment in Lebanon. Today, Mohan Lal is nowhere to be found, with some suggesting that he is either hiding in India or incarcerated. Through this agent, Raghav secured employment at Ramco, a lucrative company, profiting from, among other things, the trash crisis in Beirut. Brought over on the premise of working in packaging and earning \$600 a month, today Raghav earns only \$300, his job is to collect Beirut's trash for 15 hours a day, and he lives in a single room with nine other men. He is not allowed to leave the compound except on his day off, which is never guaranteed. His passport has also been confiscated, relegating him to the status of corporate prisoner.

Raghav's story is not unique but it is revelatory. He is but a tool in the vast repertoire of the Kafala system. The Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility defines the Kafala system as a "sponsorship system that regulates residency and employment of the workers in the GCC countries." In Lebanon, the Kafala system is alive and well, so much so that this economic system which relies on human movement has added another racial element in an already racial society: brown and black bodies are systematically dehumanised and othered in a society where whiteness is considered the ideal. For decades now, the Kafala system has relied on the mass movement of South Asian labour to meet the economic demands of the Arab Gulf. These stories are not new and thousands of individual narratives remain well documented. What is shockingly left out of the narrative, however, is the system's corrupt collaboration with capital which spans borders and nationalities, and is ultimately race blind; Arab businessmen hire kafeels who then provides the lucrative service of providing human bodies at the lowest possible cost. It is worth clarifying, the Kafala system does not intentionally seek out brown bodies for enslavement, but rather it is the amorphous force of the market capital which determines where labour will come from.

Stories such as this one – the exploitation of labour from South Asian countries, the mistreatment of women in some circles and the broad characterisation of institutionally marginalised peoples as passive subjects lacking agency – are

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often deployed as political tools which serve power – power which is more often than not concentrated in the geographic West.

The logic, then, is one which naturally constructs itself: the West, fuelled by an amorphous sense of Manifest Destiny, views itself as possessing a moral authority to save oppressed brown bodies from other oppressing brown bodies. It is this narrative which also creates false binaries, most important of which is one which purports the West as a beacon of enlightened thought and boundless humanitarianism, and the Orient as an inherent bastion of backwardness and oppression. This does not mean that Lebanese businessmen and corporations are not directly engaged in the marginalisation of other brown bodies and that blame lies squarely with former colonists, but rather that this practice is part and parcel of a larger process of historical continuity – a process and narrative which is conveniently left out of most journalistic accounts critiquing the Kafala system.

Hera Syed has argued that “the way certain nationalities are classified are representative of 20th-century British colonial attitudes toward different peoples.” While Syed writes with respect to the Kafala system in the United Arab Emirates, his point is also applicable to Lebanon, where race and class intersect to create a unique racialised hierarchy, in which whiteness is considered the optimal and brown and blackness, an unfortunate condition. Certainly it is hard to prove a direct link between the racial hierarchy of the French mandate, which categorised French citizens and Lebanese Christians as morally and genetically superior to other brown, mostly Muslim, Arabs, to the racial hierarchy which exists today, but the similarities are striking, insofar that the system of classification and the general foundation of “their categorization” have largely persisted. In many ways, the modernity which Lebanon now inhabits and simultaneously produces is one which occupies the same discursive space of the colonial era, a space in which capital and market liberalisations reproduce the same old colonial racial hierarchies.

While thousands of Raghavs can be found in Beirut – they are found in garbage collectors, in domestic servants, in construction workers and the list goes on – a small group of Lebanese citizens, mostly young Lebanese, are at the forefront of fighting a system most of them equate with slavery. The Anti-Racism Movement, more commonly referred to as ARM, describes itself as a “grassroots movement created by young activists in collaboration with migrant community leaders.”

ARM opened its first centre – the Migrant Community Centre – in September of 2011 in Bourj Hammoud, a small neighbourhood close to Daoura. Farah Salka, one of the founders of ARM and the primary catalyst behind opening MCCs across Beirut, tells *The Wire* that the “root of all evils” is the exclusion of domestic workers from the Lebanese labour law, which means that domestic workers are not afforded maternity leave, minimum wages, days off or any legal protection. More often than not, their passports are also confiscated, as was the case for Raghav whose employers now demanded \$800 if he wanted his passport back. Migrant workers like Raghav who work in Lebanon on behalf of a sponsor are also subject to similar conditions, but these restrictions are imposed not by an individual but usually by a large corporation, like Ramco.

Salka tells *The Wire* that the sponsorship system “criminalises freelance work” and ultimately aims for workers “to be obedient, silent, and doing what they are supposed to do.” Despite the fact that suicides committed by migrant workers are not declining in Lebanon – more than 60 a year according to Salka – ARM is making steadfast progress. Since 2011, ARM has opened three Migrant Community Centres which offer English language classes, assistance in navigating daily life in Lebanon and above all a space for migrant workers that is uniquely their own.

Walking into the Migrant Community Centre in Achrafiye, one can see workers coming and going freely, relaxing on the sofas, smoking a cigarette on the balcony, sifting through vocabulary lists and above all, existing as humans as opposed to machines in “slave-like conditions.” While progress has been made, Salka ultimately confesses to *The Wire*, “the local community is not involved in these issues,” but recently feminist and activist groups have started to include all migrant workers in their conversations and programming.

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On Sunday (June 24), activists and migrant workers across Lebanon will gather for the International Domestic Workers Day Protest in Daoura, the same neighbourhood in which Raghav and I first spoke. They will call for, among other things, abolishing the sponsorship system.

The last time I spoke with Raghav, he did not know how or if he would ever recover his passport from his employers who were presently holding it hostage. Raghav told *The Wire* that he had contemplated fleeing the compound – much like some of his friends – but no sponsor and no passport in Beirut would not only make Raghav a vigilante in the eyes of the law, but returning to India would be impossible. Perhaps Raghav would have been more open to that alternative if it were not for his sister's wedding that week. Raghav is now back in the Punjab. Rather than finding work in India, however, Raghav now aches to return to the Middle East. The flow of remittances from Raghav's work not only support his family, but provide Indian families who send sons and daughters abroad with a status that is derived from migration – a sense of reputation, class and stature that propels lower and middle class Indians upward.

“To the UAE or Qatar,” Raghav says when asked where he wants to go next. He says life is better there and the pay is higher. For his sake, I hope he's right.

Source [The Wire](#).

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[1] His name has been changed.