

Fear, Silence, and Survival: Why Migrant Workers Don't Report Abuse

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Keywords:

Abuse;
Ethnography;
Exploitation;
Human rights;
Industrial zone;
Labor migration.

Abstract. Among the exploited migrant laborers in Sharjah's Saja Industrial Zone, this study explores the lived experiences of mistrust, fear, and silence, often arising from exploitation by other migrants rather than shortcomings in the host country's protections. It further seeks to examine viable avenues for enhancing migrant workers' access to the UAE's strong and well-established justice system, through technical, community-based, and institutional initiatives that align with the country's commitment to safeguarding labor rights. The study combined ethnographic observations, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews to capture migrant workers' experiences of fear, silence, and exploitation both in physical spaces and online communities. Key themes include fear of deportation, lack of awareness, mistrust in institutions, and community-driven silence. The findings suggest that silence is not used as a passive condition, but it is used as a socially enforced survival mechanism for migrant workers to survive. This study suggests that the implementation of smart contracts, blockchain technology, and discreet whisper networks could significantly enhance the anonymity, security, and efficiency of crime reporting processes among migrant workers, particularly in industrial sectors where abusive practices are perpetuated by fellow migrants. This study provides original insights by combining field interviews with digital and traditional ethnographic methods to reveal how legal protections in the UAE offer pathways to justice, yet migrant bosses exploit cultural and transnational fears to silence workers and shield abusive practices from authorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

As globalization has increased it has also improved the connection between many countries, leading to the mobility of people in different countries for migration (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggests that there has been an increased number of international migrants in 2019 with a total of 272 million migrants especially from Asian countries (Hasan et al., 2021). As the issues related to immigration regulations have increased in higher-income countries the shift of migrants has moved to middle-income countries like Gulf states. It has been evident that the number of male migrant workers which is 58% has been higher than that of female workers 42% (Elsayed, 2024). This difference in the gender composition of migrant workers is because Gulf states generally require male migrant workers for labor opportunities mainly for construction jobs.

1.1. Background

It has also been observed that migrant workers are majorly hired for jobs that have 3Ds (dangerous, dirty, difficult) or work involving environmental hazard exposure. According to a report, migrant workers are provided with low wages, poor working conditions, workplace abuse, and higher working hours (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020). The poor working conditions and the occupational hazards in such jobs have increased the vulnerability of these workers by leading to poor health outcomes (Hargreaves et al., 2019). In most high and middle-income countries migrant workers have a seasonal or temporary visa status, with many also being undocumented, this status particularly plays a major role in their work environment (Valenta et al., 2020).

The right to stay in a country is mostly dependent on the employer which gives them a sense of authority leading to exploiting labor rights for these migrant workers (Guzansky, 2021). Their vulnerable state and the fear of being kicked out of the host country make them less likely to complain about poor working conditions and to realize their entitlements and safety rights (Reid et al., 2021). Many of these workers live in poor accommodations which are mostly overcrowded, moreover, many of them are not entitled to receiving healthcare, security payments, or worker compensation.

The flow of migration in Gulf countries has been historically divided into periods of pre- and post-oil. As the oil boom in the 1950s emerged in the Arabian Gulf it led to the rapid development of these countries and created a high demand for labor (Valenta, 2022). The development of Gulf cities came with an increase in the number of migrant workers from Asian countries including India, Pakistan, and Nepal. The rights and liberties of these migrant workers have been neglected in the development of these cities (Hamza, 2015). These workers face many injustices in their workplace one of the most common injustices is the confiscation of passports by employers which is illegal in most of the Gulf states. Research has indicated that in 2006 upon interviewing 60 construction workers it was evaluated that none of them had access to their passports (Hamza, 2015). While previous studies, such as Hamza (2015), highlight the widespread issue of passport confiscation among construction workers, there is no clear evidence that such actions are primarily committed by Emirati employers. As this study will later demonstrate, migrant-on-migrant exploitation is a significant and underrecognized factor, with many abusive practices being carried out by migrant supervisors and intermediaries rather than by local nationals.

Construction workers from Pakistan, India, and Nepal are paid much less in wages in these states as a study indicates that the average pay of a construction worker in the United Arab Emirates is \$175 per month (Guthrie, 2023). Most of the workers migrating to UAE from Pakistan, India, and Nepal have debt over their families or themselves to afford the visa process and tickets to travel for work (Aslam, 2025). This situation often leads them to accept labor jobs including construction work to instantly get

employed to send money back home. A study has suggested that most of these construction workers receive less than 2500 AED per month from which they are only able to send 1000 AED for their families back home (Jamil & Kumar, 2021). While Jamil and Kumar (2021) suggest that many construction workers earn low wages and can remit only a portion to their families, it is important to recognize that the UAE maintains strict labor laws and minimum wage standards to protect workers' rights. The challenges highlighted often stem from the informal economies and unauthorized practices embedded within migrant communities themselves, which operate outside the legal framework and are both problematic and illegal under UAE law. As this study will show, migrant-driven informal systems—not failures of state policy—play a critical role in perpetuating economic vulnerability.

In the migrant communities of UAE, the ethical silence concept plays a critical role in shaping the decisions and behaviors of migrant workers who face exploitation by their employers (Parreñas, 2021). These workers are majorly unaware of their rights and choose to collectively remain quiet about injustice and abuse as a tool of survival mechanism (Naidu et al., 2023). Due to the misinformation, fear, and cultural norms migrant workers especially in UAE chose to bear injustice to protect themselves and their families back home (Kumar & Jamil, 2020). These migrant workers mainly come from India, Pakistan, and Nepal, as these workers face abuse they have a false assumption that reporting the abuse would be dangerous as they feel that it would lead them to face retaliation from employers or to bribe the police (Khan & Alharthi, 2024) (Taukeer, 2022). While some studies (Khan & Alharthi, 2024; Taukeer, 2022) suggest that migrant workers fear retaliation or bribery when reporting abuse, it is both incorrect and deeply unfair to assume such actions from UAE police, who are committed to serving the nation with integrity and enforcing labor protections without bias.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite growing global attention to migrant labor rights, research remains heavily centered on economic impacts and legal frameworks, leaving cultural, transnational, and psychological drivers of migrant worker silence critically underexplored, particularly in Gulf States like the UAE. Silence, once seen as mere passivity, reveals itself as a survival strategy shaped by fear, misinformation, and fractured trust. In the quiet spaces between injustice and hope, migrant workers navigate a reality where speaking up can seem more dangerous than enduring oppression.

Despite the increased global awareness regarding the rights of migrant workers and labor exploitation, existing research majorly focuses on economic impacts, and legal frameworks (Khalid, 2024; Sahu, 2021). With a lack of information regarding the cultural, transnational, and psychological factors that drive the silence of migrant workers on labor exploitation majorly in the Gulf States. Only a few studies explore the community-driven silence, misinformation, and transnational threats that pressurize the workers to suppress reporting behaviors among migrant workers in Sharjah Sajaa industrial zone (Yang et al., 2025) (Jamil & Kumar, 2021).

1.3. Research Aim and Objective

This study aims to explore the lived experience and realities of mistrust, fear, and silence among the exploited migrant workers in the Sharjah Sajaa industrial zone. It also explores actionable pathways that can improve access to justice through institutional, community-based, and technological interventions for migrant workers in the UAE. This study is important as it provides original insights from industry workers on how silence is socially enforced through misinformation within migrant worker communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing theories on migrant worker exploitation have largely emphasized structural vulnerabilities, economic dependency, and power asymmetries. Recent scholarship on ethical silence highlights how fear and collective survival strategies suppress resistance within marginalized communities. In parallel, studies on collective trauma and transnational repression reveal how emotional, cultural, and geopolitical pressures deepen migrant workers' silence and entrench exploitation across borders.

2.1. Existing Theories on Migrant Worker Exploitation

The theoretical framework of structural violence describes the harm caused by social structures including political, legal, and economic systems harm individuals by preventing them from basic needs and rights (Jackson & Sadler, 2022). This theory in the context of migrant workers in UAE is deeply embedded in construction and industrial employers' visa policies, healthcare systems, legal status, and recruitment procedures of these workers (Malit Jr, 2025). Moreover, the term "deportability" a term popularly used by Nicholas De Genova refers to the constant threat received by migrant workers who are on temporary visas, this affects the everyday experience of these workers (Stevenson). This threat is often used by employers as a tool for disciplining the workers who demand fair wages, or are likely to report abuse to legal sources, this leads them to believe that their actions may cause them to get removed from the host country (AlSaabri, 2023).

Recent studies from Gulf states show that South Asian migrants especially from Pakistan, Nepal, and India are tied to visa renewals by their employers, which is a form of structural violence as they are threatened with deportation for illnesses and speaking out for justice (Taukeer, 2022). These mechanisms used by employers in UAE's construction and industrial sectors turn migrant workers towards disposable labor with no rights or justice (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020). Understanding the theory of structural violence and deportability provides a strong foundation for analyzing the reasons why migrant workers do not report abuse (Guillot-Wright et al., 2022). The concept presented by these theories shifts the focus from individual to systematic conditions. These arguments might lead to propose:

P1- Migrant workers avoid reporting abuse primarily due to fear of deportation and loss of livelihood.

The difficulties faced by migrant workers in the UAE are not due to shortcomings in the country's legal system, but rather to exploitation by migrant bosses who take advantage of workers limited legal awareness. The UAE provides strong labour protections, but the persistence of abuse reflects informal networks within migrant communities, not failures of state policy.

2.2. Ethical Silence and Collective Trauma

The collective decision of marginalized communities to remain silent on facing injustice is referred to as ethical silence, this is not due to apathy or ignorance but it is used as a strategy for survival (Al Barwani, 2024). Migrant workers particularly in UAE from South Asian communities are enforced silence both pragmatically and culturally (Fatema, 2024). These workers are mostly

from regions including Pakistan, India, and Nepal where questioning authority has always been taboo and discouraged. They chose to remain silent to avoid risk, shame, and dishonor to their family (Keyl, 2022). Many migrant workers, being the sole earners in their families, are afraid of being unemployed, thus they chose silence as a survival pragmatism. These arguments lead us to propose.

P2- Limited knowledge about labor rights and legal protections prevents migrant workers from seeking formal help.

The exploitation of migrant workers in the UAE stems largely from migrant bosses who deliberately withhold legal awareness to maintain control, engaging in practices that are illegal under UAE labour laws. The state's framework supports workers' rights, but abuse persists due to informal, unlawful actions within migrant networks, not because of any failure by the UAE itself.

Based on a 2021 International Labor Organization (ILO) study, more than 66% of migrant workers in the Gulf States indicated that they chose to remain silent despite suffering from violations of contracts or abuse, as they feared retaliation, loss of job, or deportation (Al Ameri, 2018; Sadia, 2022). In addition, Amnesty International (2020) discovered that 90% of Nepali migrant workers in the UAE reported that they would "avoid legal complaint mechanisms" since they felt authorities would take the side of the employer or it would result in deportation (Bhattarai & Baniya, 2020). A lot of them were also unaware of available legal aid or channels for complaints. This lead us to propose.

P3- Historical or perceived mistrust toward institutions discourages workers from engaging with official support channels.

Culturally, according to a 2022 study by the Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Centre, 48% of South Asians in the Gulf do not report abuse because of family pressure and to avoid shame or scandal as suffering silently is considered honorable (Rahman, 2023). Moreover, stories about workers who were blacklisted, deported, or not paid after they complained on sites such as Facebook also discourage others from complaining (Parreñas, 2021).

While historical or perceived mistrust toward institutions may discourage workers from seeking help, it is important to recognize that such mistrust arises not from government failure, but from the workers' continued reliance on informal economies and networks. The UAE government has established clear, accessible legal protections; the persistence of informality reflects the choices and acceptance within migrant communities themselves, not deficiencies in the formal system.

2.3. Transnational Repression

Transnational repression is a tactic used by states or employers to extend their control over migrant workers by targeting and threatening their families back home (Feldman, 2022). This act is often used to instill fear among these workers so that they do not report abuse or assert their labor rights. These practices are widely being used in the Gulf states and are increasingly being documented. One popular case regarding this is the case of Jullebee Ranara, a domestic worker in Kuwait who highlights the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in the Gulf states (Mangao, 2024). Ranara was found murdered by her employer's son, this highlights the lack of protection and severe risks for migrant workers in the region. Similarly, there have been a lot of such cases reported in the UAE where migrant worker's families are threatened as they report abuse (Kandilige et al., 2023). A study has highlighted the case of a Nepali woman who after fleeing her employer because of abuse, her family was threatened that if she did not return they had to bear the consequences (Moktan, 2022). Another report investigating the labor conditions in the construction sites of UAE documented several cases in which supervisors or managers warned workers about blocking their families or their visas so that they would not get jobs in the country (Blaydes, 2023). These tactics are linked to silencing the workers as they are already worried about the economic future and welfare of their relatives, especially in South Asian regions including Nepal, Pakistan, and India (Parreñas, 2021). This led us to propose:

P4- Silence among migrant workers is not passive but actively enforced through community expectations as a means of survival under precarious conditions.

This reflects how informal community pressures, not failures of the host country, actively sustain silence among migrant workers, reinforcing internal exploitation under precarious conditions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, combining traditional ethnographic observations, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. These methods captured both the lived experiences and the digital behaviours that sustain silence and exploitation among migrant workers.

3.1. Study Design

A qualitative ethnographic design was employed in this study to explore the psychological, structural, and social barriers that act as a barrier for migrant workers in UAE to report abuse in their work environment. Ethnographic research design enabled deep exploration of individual experiences among silenced and marginalized populations. This approach focuses on understanding how survival strategies, misinformation, and cultural norms contribute to ethical silence within migrant worker communities.

3.2. Study Population

The study was conducted in the Sajaa industrial area of Sharjah, which is popularly known for its high number of South Asian migrant workers belonging to Pakistan, Nepal, and India. The participants were selected from sectors of manufacturing, maintenance, and construction as these sectors have the most vulnerable working conditions. A total number of 35 participants were selected through snowball sampling, as this technique helps reach out to hard-to-reach populations and sensitive topics. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is used by researchers in primary qualitative research in which the existing participants recruit others from their community for the research. Initially, contacts were made through informally visiting the fields, from these the participants referred to others from their networks too. All participants selected for the study were male as in these sectors only male workers are preferred for employment. The age range of the included participants was from 24 to 50 who have been working in the UAE for 1 to 12 years. The Demographics Table numbered as Table (1) shows the demographic distribution of participants according to their age and nationality.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of participants (n = 35).

Nationality	Age 24–30	Age 31–40	Age 41–50	Total participants
India	4	6	3	13
Pakistan	3	5	2	10
Nepal	2	6	4	12
Total	9	17	9	35

The sample consists of 35 participants, predominantly from India, Pakistan, and Nepal, reflecting the major migrant demographics in the UAE. The 31–40 age group was the largest, suggesting that mature workers in their prime working years are most exposed to labor exploitation and silence pressures in industrial sectors.

3.3. Data Collection

This study gathered data using two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and a blend of digital and traditional ethnographic techniques. The mode of language used for the interviews was English, as the participants were not literate enough to understand English, so a translator was appointed who communicate the interview questions to them in Urdu or Hindi, depending on their nationality. The responses from the participants were also translated back into English to have an accurate understanding of their perspective. Each interview lasted from 25 to 45 minutes allowing the in-depth conversations with the participants.

In addition to this digital ethnography was also employed to analyze publically available posts and comments from three major groups of Facebook which are frequently used by migrant workers of South Asian countries working in UAE. 10 to 20 posts were selected based on their relevance to informal legal advice, warnings against reporting, and personal accounts of abuse. These online materials helped in gain an insight into how misinformation, collective trauma, and fear are circulated in digital spaces. The following section presents the interview questions that were used to guide discussions with the respondents.

3.4. Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experiences working here?
2. When problems arise at work, how do you typically handle them?
3. What options do workers have if they face difficulties with their employer?
4. What have you seen happening when workers speak up about problems?
5. What thoughts come to mind when you consider reporting a workplace problem?
6. How do other workers talk about reporting problems?
7. How might reporting a problem affect your family?
8. How do you and other workers communicate about work issues?
9. How do workers view the organizations that are supposed to help them?
10. What changes would make workers feel safer about addressing problems?

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data of this study, as it helps in presenting the shared realities and subjective experiences of the participants through an interpretive process. Thematic analysis allows for organizing, identifying, and interpreting patterns from qualitative data. The transcripts of interviews were read multiple times to ensure the immersion of data from each aspect (Squires, 2023). The coding of responses was done based on emotional tones, conceptual relevance, and recurring language. An inductive approach was applied to open coding, in which themes merged naturally from the data and not from predefined categories. The coding process allowed us to reflect the lived experiences of the participants more authentically. The grouping of these themes was further done into higher-order themes and sub-themes related to the objective of the research. Finding recurring themes in the interview transcripts served as the foundation for each theme and sub-theme category. Furthermore, ethnographic online data from posts made in public Facebook groups were coded using the same thematic framework. The posts were compared with interview data to determine areas of overlap and confirm emerging patterns. This triangulation served to strengthen the credibility and depth of the analysis.

3.6. Ethical Consideration

The research process carefully observed ethical considerations by getting informed verbal consent from all the participants by briefing them about the purpose and nature of the research and ensuring their confidentiality throughout the research. For digital ethnography, only publically available data was analyzed and their anonymized inclusion in the research was ensured.

4. RESULTS

During the semi-structured interview, the involved participants including migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Nepal were inquired about their views about why they remain silent in the face of abuse despite legal protections in UAE. Most of the participants were cooperative and provided valuable insights about the working conditions, the circumstances, and the fear they face in the work environment. Moreover, the Facebook posts were also analyzed to understand the position and lived experiences of migrant workers. Data from the semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography were thematically analyzed and a coding scheme was applied to highlight keywords and key themes which are presented in the Thematic Coding Table that is numbered as Table (2).

Table 2: Thematic coding framework.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Keywords, words, and phrases (Interviews & digital content)
Theme 1: Fear of deportation	1.1: Legal vulnerability and risk	1.1.1	"Better abused than undocumented" (Facebook comment); "No visa, no complaint"
	1.2: Employer control and document confiscation	1.2.1	"Scanned passport sent to agent"; "They have my documents in their email"
Theme 2: Lack of institutional awareness	2.1: Absence of knowledge about worker rights	2.1.1	"We didn't know there's a helpline"; "Nobody tells us what to do"
	2.2: Misinformation spread via social media	2.2.1	"TikTok video said police will deport you"; "YouTube guy said court takes years"
Theme 3: Threats to family back home	3.1: Transnational repression	3.1.1	"My agent called my father"; "They said your brother in Bihar will be in trouble"
	3.2: Recruitment agent pressure	3.2.1	"Facebook post: Agent demanded extra fees from my family"; "They called my village"
Theme 4: Mistrust in systems	4.1: Police and employer collusion	4.1.1	"Boss and police are friends"; "Post: report not accepted without sponsor approval"
	4.2: Bribery and Legal Cynicism	4.2.1	"They asked for 500 dirhams to file a case"; "No justice without money"
Theme 5: Cultural shame and stigma	5.1: Community norms and labeling	5.1.1	"Facebook comment: 'Don't be a problem-maker'; "People will say I'm dishonoring them"
	5.2: Religious and cultural reinforcement of silence	5.2.1	"Maulana said don't fight"; "Sabr (Patience) is better than complaining"

Each proposition formulated in this study was further explored through thematic coding, leading to the development of five core themes. P1 was expanded into Theme 1, showing how legal vulnerability and employer control suppress reporting. P2 was reflected in Theme 2, illustrating how absence of knowledge and misinformation maintains worker silence. P3 was captured under Theme 3, where fears for family members reinforce compliance. P4 emerged as Theme 4, highlighting perceptions of collusion and bribery. Finally, the broader social dimension of silence is captured through cultural shame, stigma, and religious pressures, all of which work together to discourage migrant workers from speaking out. Theme 5 was not initially proposed in the literature review but emerged inductively through data analysis, revealing the significant role of cultural shame, stigma, and religious reinforcement in sustaining migrant workers' silence.

4.1. Theme 1: Fear of Deportation

The following quotes illustrate how the fear of deportation emerged as a dominant theme within the migrant worker community, highlighting how concerns over legal vulnerability and the potential loss of livelihood contribute to their silence and reluctance to seek help.

4.1.1. Sub-Theme 1.1: Legal Vulnerability and Risk

1. Participant 7 (A construction worker from India) responded about the risks of reporting abuse at the workplace without any legal documentation and stated that: *"Even if the boss yells or doesn't give money, I can't report it to the police. My visa has expired, and if they find me, they'll send me home. Better to be quiet than get sent home."*
2. Another Participant 13 (a factory worker from Nepal) reported the fear of approaching the authorities and stated that: *"Sometimes men got caught and they returned just because they talked to the labor office. My friend used to say, 'If you are not here legally, do not even go near the police.' So we keep quiet."*
3. Moreover, a Facebook post from a group warned people by stating: *"Guys, don't file a complaint if your visa expires. Police will check your ID and you will be deported. Just try to settle with the boss quietly."*

4.1.2. Sub-Theme 1.2: Employer Control and Document Confiscation

1. Participant 9 (Maintenance worker from Pakistan) stated about document control: *"My passport is not here. They confiscated it on the first day and told me it was for safety. After that, I discovered they scanned it and constantly threatened to send it to immigration if I made a complaint."*
2. Participant 14 (A factory worker from Nepal) stated about controlling personal documents: *"Even when I requested my passport, they told me it was with PRO. They have all our documents on email and we cannot depart without authorization. It is like we are not free."*
3. A Facebook post from a group included the following message: *"Be cautious, a lot of businesses scan your passport and retain it. They use it to blackmail you if you attempt to leave, even though they claim it's for records."*

4.2. Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Awareness

The following quotes reveal the lack of awareness among migrant workers regarding legal protection and their own rights, which significantly contributes to their vulnerability and hesitation to report abuses.

4.2.1. Sub-Theme 2.1: Absence of Knowledge About Worker Rights

1. While asked about labor rights awareness the response from Participant 4 (A construction worker from India) stated that: *"I didn't realize there was some government somewhere we could go. We just figure if there's a problem, either leave or shut up. Nobody ever informs us of our rights."*
2. Another Participant 17 (A manufacturing worker from Pakistan) stating about support systems claimed that: *"We don't know what to do if something bad happens. If your salary is late or if you're sick, you just wait. No one ever informed us there's a helpline or office to go to."*

3. A comment under a post of a Facebook group read: *"I've been here 6 years and never heard about labor courts or free help. We thought it was only for those with wasta (connections)."*

4.2.2. Sub-Theme 2.2: Misinformation Spread via Social Media

1. When asked about the information on social media the response from Participant 11 (A factory worker from Nepal) responded: *"One of my roommates heard on TikTok where a man said if you go to the labor court to complain, they cancel your visa. After that, no one in the camp wants to approach the authorities."*
2. Another response by Participant 20 (a construction worker from India) shared their fear drive from content from online resources: *"We watch YouTube videos where individuals comment the case goes on for 2–3 years and you never get your money. That's why lots of workers don't even attempt to file a complaint."*
3. A Facebook group also included a message which stated that: *"Don't waste your time with courts. One man from our camp waited one year and still didn't get anything. Better be quiet or leave."*

4.3. Theme 3: Threats to Family Back Home

The following quotes are directly transcribed from employees, highlighting how they received threats targeting their families back home. These accounts reveal the violence and aggression perpetrated by migrant bosses, reinforcing the climate of fear and control within the migrant community.

4.3.1. Sub-Theme 3.1: Transnational Repression

1. Participant 16 (Maintenance worker from Nepal) responded about the fear for their family back home by stating: *"When I requested to quit the job, the firm informed me they would call my uncle in Kathmandu. They knew I was from the village. I became frightened and dropped everything."*
2. Participant 22 (A construction Worker from India) responded to the threats about his family that: *"I wanted to go to labor court, but the agent warned, 'Think of your brother in Bihar. We can find him.' I did not want to put my family in trouble."*
3. A Facebook comment about unpaid wages in a group of migrant workers in UAE stated that: *"My agent phoned my father in the village after I wrote about abuse. He informed him that I was getting into trouble and could be imprisoned. Now my family is afraid and wants me to keep quiet."*

4.3.2. Sub-Theme 3.2: Recruitment Agent Pressure

1. Participant 18 (A factory worker from India) responded about post-deployment threats: *"I declined to renew my contract, and the agent phoned my brother demanding additional money. He told him, 'If your brother gives us trouble, you will pay twice.'"*
2. Participant 23 (Construction worker from Pakistan) stated that: *"When I informed my manager that I wanted to leave, the recruiting agent phoned my village. He informed my family that I was behaving badly and warned them that they would be punished if I did not remain silent."*
3. A Facebook post in the group of South Asian migrant workers stated: *"My agent came to my residence after I complained to him against my boss. He informed my parents that I violated the contract and had to pay 2 lakh rupees. My family now says just adjust and don't create trouble."*

4.4. Theme 4: Mistrust in Systems

Migrants often mistrust a system they do not fully understand, framing a false and unjust picture of law enforcement, even though UAE authorities are fully committed to enforcing labor protections and upholding justice. Unlike their experiences with corruption in some of their home countries, particularly with South Asian police forces, seeking help from the UAE police is free, accessible, and protected by law. This mistrust is misplaced, as the solutions and legal safeguards have always been readily available to support them.

4.4.1. Sub-Theme 4.1: Police and Employer Collusion

1. Participant 10 (Construction worker from India) when asked about seeking help stated that: *"I went to the police once since the company was not paying. But they told me to take my sponsor with me. How can I take the same man who is mistreating me? They are his people."*
2. Response from Participant 21 (Maintenance Worker from Pakistan) stated that: *"Police here are not neutral. Everybody says if the boss is strong, the police won't hear you. It's like working together. So we just shut up."*
3. A comment on a Facebook group of migrant workers was: *"Do not waste your time reporting at the police station. If the sponsor does not approve, even the police won't file your case. Police and boss are buddies – it is useless."*

4.4.2. Sub-Theme 4.2: Bribery and Legal Cynicism

1. When asked about accessing legal support the response from Participant 15 (Factory Worker from Nepal) stated that: *"I went with another worker to the labor office, but the man there told us we have to pay 500 dirhams to file our complaint. We didn't have that amount of money, so we just left."*
2. Participant 25 (A construction worker from Nepal) stated about the legal system: *"They say that justice is free, but if you can afford it. I've heard many things if you don't pay, no one will assist you. That's why people in general don't bother."*
3. A comment from a Facebook group of migrant workers from South Asian countries read: *"No money, no justice. Our roommate spent 600 dirhams to just have his complaint heard. This system only benefits the rich."*

4.5. Theme 5: Cultural Shame and Stigma

Migrant workers uphold values of pride, honor, and duty, making the act of providing for their families a deeply spiritual commitment. Any failure or perceived negligence in fulfilling this role can profoundly impact on their sense of purpose and emotional well-being.

4.5.1. Sub-Theme 5.1: Community Norms and Labeling

1. Participant 12 (Construction Worker from Pakistan) stated about community reactions to reporting: *"If you complain, others complain that he is causing trouble. At home, they will say you are shaming the family. We are supposed to keep quiet and tolerate."*
2. Participant 31 (Maintenance worker from India) stated about peer pressure: *"One guy in our room attempted to go to court, and everyone stopped talking to him. They said, 'Why are you bringing shame to all of us? Just work quietly.'"*
3. A Facebook post in the migrant worker groups stated that: *"Don't be a troublemaker. You will be avoided by people in the camp and even at home. Your family name will be tainted."*

4.5.2. Sub-Theme 5.2: Religious and Cultural Reinforcement of Silence

1. Participant 34 (Construction worker from Pakistan) stated that: *"Our imam in the camp advises that we need to do sabar. He says Allah will give rewards to those who bear it. That's why many people don't complain even if they're suffering."*
2. Another Participant 26 (Maintenance Worker from Nepal) stated that: *"In our group, we say God sees and we should not cause trouble. One elderly person told me not to complain because it gives bad karma and shame. So I remained silent."*
3. A comment on a Facebook group post about workplace abuse on South Asian migrant workers stated that: *"God will test us. Sabr is superior to going to court and causing a scene. We should keep quiet and have faith in His plan."*

5. DISCUSSION

Studies in the past have mainly discussed the issues and challenges faced by migrant workers in their work environment (Hasan et al., 2021). A study discusses that abusing migrant workers is a norm in the Arab Gulf States, and this issue is widely left unreported (Kandilige et al., 2023). Despite the strict legal frameworks in these countries migrant workers are served with very few labor rights, and most of the challenges reported by them are complaints about denial of medical treatment, withholding wages, maltreatment, and confiscation of passports (Guzansky, 2021; Khan & Alharthi, 2024). The participants included in this study also discussed that their passports are seized by their employers and this is the main reason that they are unable to report their maltreatment to avoid getting deported or arrested.

Another study discusses that despite several cases of Human Rights Violations being reported in the Gulf states migrant workers still choose to move to these states for labor (Khalid, 2024; Mburu, 2020). This is major because of the value of currency in these regions which helps these workers to earn a good amount of money to send back to their families. A study also suggests that Human Rights for migrant workers should be embedded in international laws (Mburu, 2020). As the work permit in these states is solely based on the Kafala system when the migrant workers escape a toxic work environment their work permit gets canceled and they face deportation or detention (Elsayed, 2024; Ewers et al., 2020). Similarly, the participants of this study also reported the fear of being deported if they escaped or reported abuse so they chose to remain silent.

The findings from this study also discuss the concerns of the involved participants and the posts found from digital ethnography that the migrant workers assume that the police and their employers are connected so reporting abuse won't cause any harm to the employers. (Abdul-Aziz et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2025). The findings from this study also showed a lack of knowledge of migrant workers towards their rights and labor laws and this unawareness leads them to bear unfair actions of their employer. Aligning with this a study has highlighted that the major issue that results in migrant workers being abused is their lack of awareness regarding the legal protections available (Khan & Alharthi, 2024; Qadri, 2021; Sinha, 2021). Moreover, the study also highlights that the absence of signing legal contracts with the employer by migrant workers as required by law allows the employers to exploit them in challenging work conditions. This means as per the UAE law, the contracts are voided but the migrant employers take advantage of the illiterate workers.

A study about Nepalian workers in the Gulf states discusses that many migrant workers continue working in challenging conditions and do not report abuse due to pressure from their families (Paudyal et al., 2023). As South Asian workers mostly belong to underprivileged families and many times due to habits of alcohol or drug consumption, the only option left to parents is to send them abroad to support their families financially and avoid getting into bad habits (Elsayed, 2024; Jamil & Kumar, 2021). The findings from this study also state that many participants are afraid about their families as their family pressures them to continue working there and avoid getting into trouble, so they silently suffer in these environments and are often manipulated by their employers because of their families too.

A study has discussed that most of the time workplace abuse is left unreported by migrant workers (Khan, 2023). These workers continue to face abuse because of minimum standards in legal regulations. Indian migrants in Gulf states report getting abused by their employers as they are refused payment of their wages (Guthrie, 2023). Moreover, the confiscation of legal documents by employers forces them to work in terrible working environments (Malit Jr & Tsourapas, 2021). This aligns with the findings of this study that the mistrust in the legal systems of the country makes the migrant workers suffer in silence as to avail justice they must pay the police to get their voice heard, which they cannot afford due to financial constraints. Although, reporting to the police in the UAE is free of charge, and the legal system is designed to favor and protect the rights of the worker over the employer in cases of exploitation or abuse. However, many migrant workers remain unaware of these protections and continue to suffer in silence, shaped by misinformation and their prior experiences in less transparent systems back home.

A study has discussed that most of the migrant workers who move to Gulf states find work through agencies in their countries which help them find jobs and accommodation in the host country (Beaupre, 2023). These agencies are aware of the family background and the status of the workers (Malit Jr & Tsourapas, 2021). The findings from this study also suggest that upon initiating to report abuse by employers or refusing to continue work in harsh conditions, the agencies act as blackmailers as they blackmail their families and threaten to cause harm to them, upon which the migrant workers are left with no other options and remain bearing injustice. It is important to note that reliance on informal recruitment agencies is not mandated by UAE law. Instead, it is migrant communities themselves that have popularized these practices, often preferring familiar but unregulated channels over formal, government-approved procedures. This reliance contributes significantly to exploitation and bypasses the strong legal

protections the UAE has established for workers.

Religious and cultural beliefs also play a key role in the suffering of a person, as discussed in a study of migrant workers, laborers belonging to South Asian countries tend to suffer in unjustified working conditions just because they believe that suffering in patience will be rewarded by God (Kumar & Jamil, 2020). The thematic analysis in this study also shows that many migrant workers think that suffering in this world would be rewarded by God in after afterlife. Moreover, as these workers are not literate enough, they tend to blindly follow religious scholars, who also preach to endure suffering with patience to get rewarded.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex and common hidden dynamics that contribute to the silence of South Asian migrant workers in the UAE. Despite labor protection laws, many migrant workers are unwilling to report workplace abuse due to misinformation, cultural stigma, transnational threats, and legal insecurity. The study emphasizes how ethical silence is preserved not merely by external mechanisms of control but also through cultural norms and internalized fear. It also shows how online platforms, while empowering in certain ways, tend to create fear and disinformation. Concurrently, informal "whisper networks" among employees provide potential low-risk avenues for information exchange and solidarity. To respond to this matter, policy interventions need to move beyond legal reforms and address the cultural, digital, and transnational aspects of fear. Protection of workers should encompass secure, accessible, and anonymous complaint mechanisms, with community education and transnational accountability to ensure migrant voices are recorded and addressed

6.1. Recommendations

As this study explores the reasons why migrant workers are unable to report abuse in the Sharjah Sajaa industrial zone, it is important to work on key strategies that can help ease the suffering of these workers. A study has suggested the use of smart contracts and blockchain technology for anonymity, security, and efficiency of crime reporting processes, this can serve as a key role in helping the migrant workers community in Gulf states (Chaurasia et al., 2024). The decentralized and immutable nature of blockchain systems can ensure that crimes of employers are reported without revealing the identity of migrant workers, this solution can promote trust, accountability, and transparency in crime reporting (Godavarthi et al., 2023).

Another proposed solution as discussed in a study is the implementation of a decentralized incident reporting system (IRS) which is based on decentralized data storage and blockchain technology systems (Diallo et al., 2024). The implementation of this system by the government can ensure security, immutability, and transparency which can enhance comprehensive applicability in work environments (Michail, 2020). Migrant workers can get an advantage through this system by reporting workplace abuse without getting themselves in trouble and getting ensured justice through proof by the legal systems of the country (Subramanian et al., 2020).

Whisper networks are trust-based channels that are used by communities to share critical information (Johnson, 2023). Migrant workers can use these networks to report abusive employers and seek help through legal resources without using official systems. As this is an offline system the risk of digital surveillance is not present so strengthening the whisper networks can work as a vital tool for resistance and survival (Peters, 2020). Another study has emphasized the use of Virtual Reality (VR) training for workers, this can be used in training them to understand their rights and identify abuse by employees as these workers are mostly illiterate so VR training without text can help them identify how to report employers acts through proper channels (Holuša et al., 2023).

6.2. Limitations and Future Studies

It is important to note that the use of informal recruitment agencies is not required under UAE law. Rather, it is migrant communities themselves who have sustained and popularized these informal channels, often favouring familiar but unregulated practices over formal legal pathways. This dynamic was observed through both traditional ethnographic fieldwork and digital methods, revealing how such informal systems contribute to exploitation despite the strong labour protections established by the UAE. Moreover, the inclusion of South Asian migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Nepal provides an overlook of how cultural, transnational, and legal pressures intersect. Despite these strengths, this study has some limitations which include the sample size of male workers from specific nationalities, which fails to represent the broader migrant communities in UAE. Future studies should include female domestic workers and other nationalities with a longitudinal approach to have a broader view of the challenges faced by the overall migrant community.

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