Defying the "Illiberal" Gig Economy: Coping Strategies of Freelance Domestic Workers in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

How do low-skilled migrant workers navigate restrictive gig economies in illiberal host states of the Global South? Despite the growing gig economy, scholars have yet to examine the linkage between the politics of the gig economy and migrant resilience in illiberal host states in the Global South. Using a single case study of freelance Filipina domestic workers in the UAE (N = 20), I argue that, despite facing legal and economic risks (penalties), freelance migrant workers have produced an informal freelancing visa system to contest the formal and hierarchical segmentation of the gig economy via three diverse strategies: co-optation, tapping and brokering. These evasive social coping strategies mirror their collective resistance against structural labour exploitation and reinforce their autonomous role in the social (re)production of community solidarity within informal gig economies. Overall, this study contributes to empirical and theoretical discourse on the politics of illiberal migration management and the gig economy by featuring female migrant freelancers' complex social agency within illiberal gig economies in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Labour rights, social protection, freelancing, UAE, Gulf, labour migration

Introduction

In September 2021, Dr Thani AlZeyoudi, the UAE's minister of state for foreign trade, announced various future strategies via The Projects of the 50 to accelerate the UAE's key economic sectors such as entrepreneurship, digital economy, space and advanced technologies. More specifically, Dr AlZeyoudi introduced the new flexible freelancing visa to attract and retain highly skilled migrants in the gig economy, marking this liberalising critical juncture as a "new era of prosperity and development" (Tolley and Reynolds, 2021). However, despite the growing gig economy (Larsson and Teigland, 2020; Ness, 2023), the Emirati state has only extended skill or investment-based visa pathways (green and golden visas) to highly skilled migrants (Ali and Cochrane, 2024), reinforcing the hierarchical segmentation of UAE's gig labour market and society (Manal, 2015; Thiollet, 2022). In fact, low-skilled migrant populations – specifically domestic workers – were legally restricted from accessing any freelancing visa options for gig employment. Thus, the Emirati state inevitably created a contested "site" that was rooted in complex mobility restrictions and weak social protection rights in the long yet understudied labour history of the UAE's "illiberal" gig economy.

Unlike Western liberal migration regimes, scholars contend, the UAE – the largest regional host of labour migrants in the Global South – and other Gulf states illiberally govern their gig economies via their *kafala* sponsorship system (Thiollet, 2022; for critiques, see Natter, 2023).

This state-sponsored temporary migration system legally binds a migrant worker's employment and residency rights to an official sponsor, with varying degrees of internal mobility rights (see critiques from Vora and Koch, 2015). Scholars argue that the illiberal-oriented *kafala* grants sponsors disproportionate legal power, serves as a tool for policing migration, and offers limited mobility, rights and welfare for migrant workers (Al Shehabi, 2019; Gardner, 2010; Thiollet, 2022). However, despite legal exclusions from the gig economy, low-skilled migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, have increasingly obtained "freelancing visas" outside of the formal legal migration process, thereby contesting the illiberal *kafala* structures of the UAE gig economy (Parennas and Silvey, 2016; Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019) and across the Gulf states (Babar, 2024; Johnson, 2011).

This article examines how, and to an extent why, low-skilled migrant populations navigate illiberal host-states' restrictive gig economies in the Global South. Using a single case study of freelance Filipina domestic workers (N = 20) outside the UAE's Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE)-licensed or Tadbeer domestic-work recruitment systems, I argue that, despite facing legal and economic risks (in the form of penalties), freelance migrant workers have produced an informal freelancing visa system to contest the formal and hierarchical segmentation of the gig economy via three diverse strategies: co-optation, tapping, and brokering. These evasive social coping strategies mirror their collective resistance against structural labour exploitation and reinforce their autonomous role in the social (re)production of community solidarity within informal gig economies.

I define a freelance domestic worker as any individual who performs domestic work under an employment arrangement in which they make direct money by offering short-term, contractual services to individuals or organisations that are not their direct employers. Taking inspiration from Thiollet's (2022) scholarly work in the Gulf, I conceptualise illiberal gig economies as a form of precarious-labour workforce environment (short-term, contractual and independent employment) which does not fully comply with international labour standards and norms (such as the right to organise or form unions). Illiberal host states are state actors that directly or indirectly promote restrictive labour migration policies (such as restrictions for low-skilled migrants and criminalisation of trade unions), while challenging existing international labour and human rights norms. While extensive literatures have focused on full-time domestic workers in the UAE (Fernandez, 2020a; Ishii, 2019; Parennas, 2021), less attention has been paid to *freelance* migrant domestic workers and their complex legal status and social coping strategies in navigating illiberal gig economies. They operate independently without an official sponsor or employer, thus enabling them to gain (conditional) autonomy and empowerment to work flexibly (on a part-time, contractual basis). At least 40 per cent of the 750 000 domestic workers in the UAE originated from the Philippines, but little is known about the actual number of freelancers (Zaman, 2017) due to the absence of official state data (De-Bel Air, 2018).

This article aims to offer the following contributions: first, it builds on the emerging literature on the gig economy and migration in Asia and the Global South (Katta et al., 2024; Ness, 2023; Ray, 2024), offering a critical gendered analysis of the understudied case in the Gulf states, specifically the UAE. It features the hierarchically tiered and segmented structure of the UAE's informal migrant gig economy, and temporary low-skilled migrant workers' resistance against skill-based discrimination. Second, the study unpacks the role of illiberal Gulf host states in shaping migrant gig work by highlighting their strategic use of *kafala* to hierarchise, segment, and control migrant freelance workers. Third, the study expands socio-spatial resistance literature (Ray, 2024) by highlighting migrant freelance workers' community solidarity strategy to sustain the social reproduction of the informal domestic gig work sector in illiberal gig economies.

Fourth, it expands on a long line of scholarly work (Babar, 2024; Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019; Fargues and Shah, 2017; Ishii, 2019) by underscoring the informal, digitally organised labour market and migration industries operating below illiberal host states.

This article is structured as follows: first, I examine the international politics of migrant gig work in the Global South. Second, I contextualise the illiberal gig economy in the Gulf. Third, I explain my qualitative research design, including my single case study selection and methods for studying freelance Filipina domestic workers in the UAE. Fourth, I examine the social coping strategies of freelance Filipina domestic workers and their implications for community solidarity and social (re)production of the informal gig economy. The concluding section summarises empirical and theoretical findings on the politics of the gig economy and informal migrant freelancing in illiberal host states, highlighting potential new research agendas across the Global South.

International Politics of Migrant Gig Work in the Global South

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly examined the rise of global gig work and the strategic commodification of labour migration in the global labour economy (Katta et al., 2024; Van Doorn et al., 2023). However, despite their central contribution, scholars have yet to theorise the complex relationship between the emergence of global gig work and labour migration beyond the Global North (Katta et al., 2024). Much of the existing scholarship has examined the connection between neoliberal gig work and digital technology platforms within the economic systems of the Global North, specifically of migrant gig workers employed within cosmopolitan cities. A long line of scholarly literature analysed gig work's impact on health and well-being (Bajwa et al., 2018; Vucekovic et al., 2023), the different types of organisation of gig work (such as algorithmic control and managerial oversight), the legal protections for gig workers, and their classification status on platforms (Van Doorn et al., 2023). The rise of the gig economy – facilitated by digital platforms and freelance work – has resulted in increased work flexibility, improved service quality, increased work autonomy, market efficiency, and competition, leading to the provision of low-cost services in the Global North (Athey et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2018).

Yet scholars have also emphasised how neoliberal degradation in gig economies impacts temporary migrant labour within urban city centres, and scrutinised the gig industry's exploitation, degradation, and precarisation of migrant labour in the Global North, specifically in North America and Europe. They have demonstrated that the absence of a minimum wage, employment discrimination, and a lack of career-enhancing professions, all operating under strict algorithmic surveillance (April, 2024; Prassl, 2018), reinforce structural exploitation and precariousness, linked to the employers' strategic use of digital gig platforms. Chen and Carre (2020) note that gig industry employers strategically exploit the complex formal/informal arrangements between digital platform entities and migrant labourers to capitalise on the precarious conditions of gig labour through legal, institutional and financial means. Van Doorn et al. (2022: 1099) contend that reclassifying gig workers as employees is not enough to combat the "digitally mediated commodification of migrant labour"; thus multiple intersecting immigration, social welfare and employment policies are critical.

Moreover, scholars have largely sidestepped the Global South as an analytical site to examine the consequences of gig work on migrant labourers, who face greater precariousness due to their temporary legal status (Arriagada et al., 2023; Ray, 2024). Despite the distinctive differences between the Global North and the Global South (in host country labour laws, market

regulations), the literature has neglected how illiberal host states govern migrant gig work within urban centres (such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Riyadh), which is imperative to comparative development of theory. Ray (2024: 1227) acknowledges that existing scholarship tends to "overlook the wider informal, unwaged, and self-organised foundations of gig work and labour in the Global South". Parennas (2021: 22) acknowledges "the relative lack of research on South-South as opposed to South-to-North migration flows" and highlights the higher numbers for labour migration within the Global South – 90.2 million – compared to 85.3 million in the Global North. This bias towards the Global North hinders the development of scholarship on South-South migration, particularly concerning migrant gig economy workers, justifying the need for a "Southern perspective" to broaden our understanding of migration governance dynamics (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Levitt et al., 2023; Munck, 2009).

As scholars increasingly recentre the Global South (Larsson and Teigland, 2020; Ness, 2023), they feature other critical regions, including South Asia (Tandon and Rathi, 2021), Southeast Asia (Ford and Honan, 2019), and Latin America (Arriagada et al., 2023), with large concentrations of digital, app-based and informal gig workers. These literatures emphasised that both digital and informal work arrangements – reinforced through self-organised community organisations, unregulated intermediaries, and other "collaborative" employment structures – continue to dominate the gig sectors. However, the Middle East region, specifically the Gulf states, has largely been ignored. In fact, the regional and global labour practice of the "gig economy" existed in the Gulf long before its conceptual emergence in 2009 (Fargues and Shah, 2017; Flanagan, 2019). Despite their rapidly developing gig sector, existing scholarship has obscured the Gulf states as a pivotal site for the study of the gig economy and migrant labour in the Global South (Hertogg, 2019). While a long line of established labour migration scholarship has examined the Gulf (see Ennis and Blarel 2022; Kamrava and Babar, 2010), few have examined the critical role of political regimes in shaping the type of labour market in the Gulf (except Thiollet, 2016). Illiberal Gulf states use an "overarching differential or segmented exclusion of migrants (i.e., pathway to citizenship or naturalisation)" and the *kafala* to keep migrants "in check" (Longva, 1999: 26). Scholars have often overlooked the complex roles of illiberal labour migration regimes in shaping temporary migrant workers' labour conditions and coping resilience. The restrictions aim to hamper the presence of precarious informal markets (Hertogg, 2019; Thiollet, 2016). The illiberal Gulf labour markets are precarious, characterised by significant segmentation and hierarchisation of migrants operating in domestic labour markets, including the gig sector (Thiollet, 2022). These distinct differences necessitate the adoption of a southern perspective for a global, holistic understanding of the gig economy.

Recent scholars have also questioned the structural precariousness and the migrant strategic agency to contest illiberal host states in the Global South. Mainstream scholars highlighted the diverse informal strategies employed by temporary labour migrants to contest existing power asymmetry in the Gulf labour markets (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019; Fernandez, 2020a; Iskander, 2021; Parennas and Silvey, 2016, Parennas, 2021). Iskander (2021) explores how Gulf states, specifically Qatar, employ skill distinctions to limit temporary migrant workers' rights, mobility and freedom, contributing to their growing dehumanisation and discrimination in the domestic labour markets. Parennas (2021) provides a nuanced analysis of the structural violence and slavery-centric approach to the Gulf *kafala* sponsorship system, contending that the exploitation arising from this system is not inherently inevitable but rather a result of the absence of consistent labour standards and enforcement. However, there is a lack of empirical knowledge regarding the pathways, strategies and responses of freelance domestic workers. Jamal (2015) highlights how liberal Gulf host states have hierarchically "tiered' the class structures of migrant

communities in the Gulf, inevitably restricting their citizenship or permanent residency pathways. Others have also delved into the daily precarious experiences of temporary migrant workers, specifically focusing on the "structural violence" (Gardner, 2010), "racialised institutional humiliation" (Fernandez, 2020b), and asymmetric power relations (Malit and Naufal, 2016; Piper and Saraswathi, 2024) that operate within the Gulf's *kafala* system (Gardner, 2010; Halabi, 2008; Vora, 2013; Vlieger, 2011). Therefore, it remains unclear how temporary migrant gig workers navigate illiberal host states' labour markets across the Gulf and beyond.

To date, scholars have neglected the *gendered* dimension of gig work and migration in the Gulf beyond the existing literature on male temporary migrant workers in the food delivery and transport sectors (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022; Hertogg, 2019; Qamhaieh, 2021). Hertogg (2019) acknowledges that the influx of new digital technology has already transformed the Gulf states' diverse business sectors, including the transport sector, via gig economy platforms (Uber, Careem) and new online delivery services, decreasing employment for both citizens and migrant workers. Kagan and Cholewinski (2022:1) investigate how the rise of the gig economy has led to complex subcontracting arrangements and disguised employment across the Gulf, specifically among taxi and delivery drivers. AlTurkey (2024) emphasises that in Saudi Arabia, a gig economy under lax regulation exposes a landscape fraught with precariousness, instability and exploitation, particularly for expatriate labour. Qamhaieh (2021) investigates how the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated social inequalities between classes, placing workers such as migrant delivery drivers in the Gulf, particularly in Dubai, in precarious working conditions due to their limited employment options. While these literatures broadened our understanding of the gig work and labour migration nexus in the Gulf, they tend to neglect the gendered dimension of the Gulf gig economy.

By focusing on freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers in the UAE, a key node of global migration flows in the Gulf, the study allows us to examine the interplay between illiberalism, gig work, and temporary labour migration. Overall, an examination of the gig economy and illiberal labour markets is a novel method to gain a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the diverse effects of the gig economy on various sectoral types of migrant labourers under various liberal/illiberal regimes. This single case study offers a detailed analysis of feminised gig work within illiberal host states, thus moving beyond the traditional Global North-focus on gig economy-labour migration scholarship.

Methodology

I employed a single case study to examine, in-depth, processes of engagements, ideas and experiences of freelance Filipina domestic workers within the UAE's illiberal gig economies (Creswell, 2014). I selected freelance Filipina domestic workers for the following reasons: first, given the absence of low-skilled migrant gig work literature in the Gulf (AlTurkey, 2024; Johnson, 2011, 2018), Filipino migrant workers, specifically freelancers, hold a highly visible presence in the domestic work gig sector in the UAE, given a strong employer preference. Second, despite the wealth of literature on domestic workers, specifically Filipinos, in the UAE and across the Gulf (Ishii, 2020; Parennas, 2021; Sabban, 2020), limited literature exists on *freelance* Filipina migrant domestic workers. Third, drawing from Emirati-state news media sources (*The National*), freelance domestic workers, notably Filipinas, have become a public labour concern since the Emirati state promulgated warnings against employers' hiring freelance migrant domestic workers (WAM, 2023).

In terms of data collection, I used semi-structured interviews with freelance Filipina

domestic workers (N = 20) between December 2023 and May 2024 in UAE, thematically examining the following issues: migration backgrounds, employment histories, labour market strategies and future migration plans. While most came from Dubai (70 per cent), 50 per cent (10) of my respondents were legally documented (employment and residence visa holders) yet work – mostly hourly or part-time – for multiple sponsors to earn a living. The other half were legally undocumented; they were either runaway domestic workers or they were working with expired employment, residency or tourist visas. They also had access to smartphones (IPhones and Samsung) and reliable mobile network coverage, allowing them to access gig-related work virtually through Facebook, WhatsApp and other UAE-specific jobs sites such as Dubizzle. The respondents' average age was 46, with ages ranging from 35 to 53 years old. All my respondents had previously worked as full-time domestic workers in the UAE and other Arab (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar) and Asian (Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong) countries; the workers had an average of 12 years of experience in full-time employment before working as freelance migrant domestic workers. They had high school degrees, while a few have pursued technical or college education. The respondents had an average of three children, all of whom resided in the Philippines at the time of the research, under the custodial responsibility of either their fathers or extended family members. Lastly, they all noted that they had plans to migrate to higher income countries such as Canada, the United States and Europe, given their existing social ties.

Additionally, I employed participant observation during my fieldwork to substantiate my analysis by hiring freelance domestic workers, having lived and worked on labour migration issues in the UAE for more than a decade. I conducted secondary analysis of existing government policy and newspaper publications to analyse how state institutions frame the freelance domestic work sector. To protect my respondents' confidentiality and privacy, I anonymised their real names and used pseudonyms to conceal any personal or institutional affiliations. All field interviews were recorded in hand writing and I received oral consent before and after the interview to uphold ethical research integrity.

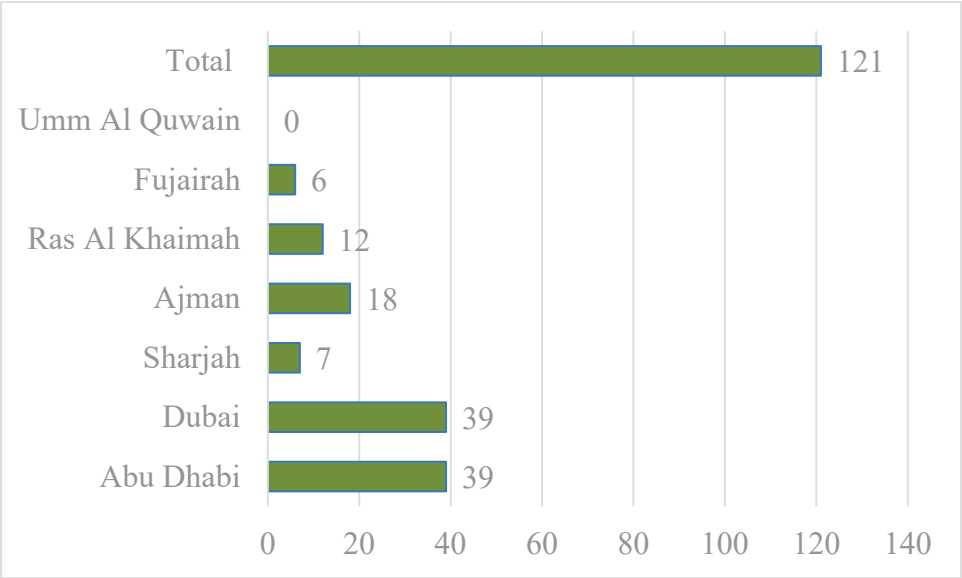
Contextualising Freelance Domestic Work in the UAE Gig Economy

Since the 1970s, the Emirati state's *kafala* permitted only full-time domestic work primarily governed by the UAE Ministry of Interior (MOI). By December 2016, the Emirati state had transferred the legal labour governance mandate from MOI to MOHRE, signalling the growing formalisation and institutionalisation of the domestic work sector (Gulf News, 2016). Former MOHRE minister Saqr Ghobash acknowledges, "We intend to build on past achievements in taking over the administration of this sector. As in most countries, all sectors of employment now become the responsibility of a single government agency." This institutionalised labour reform development led to the passage of the UAE Federal Law No. 10 of 2017 concerning domestic workers in November 2017, and the establishment of Tadbeer Centers in May 2018, which centrally offered one-stop services (recruitment, labour relations and domestic workers' placement) for employers in the UAE (Zakaria, 2018).

However, the Emirati state's MOHRE expanded Tadbeers and subsequently in March 2022 issued the Cabinet Resolution No. 92 of 2022, regulating the licensing of domestic work agencies (AlAmir, 2022). This domestic work governance model reversed the 2018 reform and created inclusive (rather than exclusive, like Tadbeer) participation of the private sector to acquire licenses to operate as domestic work agencies. The Federal Law No. 10 was later amended by Federal Decree Law. No. 9/2022 and Cabinet Resolution No. 106, 2022 outlining the Executive Regulations, specifically addressing issues related to licensing requirements and obligations,

employment conditions, leave, remuneration, sick leave, the obligations of the employer and domestic worker, end of service gratuity, dispute resolution, inspection and penalties, and rescission of contract (MOHRE, 2023). As of November 2024, as Table 1 indicates, MOHRE licensed 121 domestic work recruitment agencies in the UAE, largely dominated by Dubai (32%), Abu Dhabi (32%) and the Northern Emirates (36% combined) (MOHRE, 2023). These labour governance reforms in the domestic work sector reflected the institutionalisation and growing marketisation of domestic work in the UAE.

Table 1: UAE Domestic Work Services Centres



Source: UAE MOHRE (2024) https://www.mohre.gov.ae/assets/4d5f436c/domestic-workers-services-centers-30-05en.aspx

However, despite rapid modernisation, the Emirati state continued to legally exclude gig-related work domestic work, unless legally authorised or licensed by the MOHRE. The Emirati state tightened control over the labour mobility and rights of freelance domestic workers. Al Zaabi (2020: 4) acknowledges that despite such domestic work institutional reforms, Emirati employers do not view migrant domestic workers as "rights holders", believing that their own moral values take precedence over the labour laws in the country. Parennas (2022) similarly emphasises that Emirati employers tend to infantilise, dehumanise, and recognise migrant domestic workers' rights within the *kafala* sponsorship program. In light of domestic workers' restricted access to independent and formal gig work and growing employer prohibition and campaigns, the Emirati state set a punishment for violators through penalties between US$13,623 and US$54,495 or administrative actions (detention and deportation) for non-compliance. Under Section 8, Article 11 of the UAE Federal Law No. 10 2022, MOHRE acknowledges that employers need to "refrain from hiring any domestic worker unless he/she has a valid license to work", particularly within the domestic work sector. Mainstream UAE public discourses via *The National* newspaper further stipulates that "a domestic worker cannot work part-time for anyone other than their sponsor unless they are agency staff employed via a registered company on an hourly basis" (Bobker, 2022). Therefore, the freelancing domestic work pathway is not only legally prohibited and publicly condemned but also reinforces the traditionally hierarchical segmentation of migrant domestic labour.

As the UAE's economic growth expands from 3.3 per cent in 2024 to 4.1 per cent in 2025 and attracts more global foreign direct investments (World Bank, 2024), the influx of wealthy

local and expatriate families has triggered high demand for (freelance) domestic workers. In fact, the demand for migrant domestic work has intensified and led to what Malit et al. (2018) call "*khadama* (Arabic for helper) dependency syndrome" – in the local domestic work sector, which simultaneously led to more labour precariousness and mistreatment (Blaydes, 2023). Because of structural, legal and institutional exploitation, scholars have pointed to complex factors that influence migrant domestic workers to opt for freelance domestic work in the Gulf's gig economy. Naufal and Malit (2018) found that financial abuse (delayed wages or non-payment of wages) prompts migrant domestic workers to either move to another country or turn to informal labour economies. Johnson (2011) examines how the exploitative labour conditions compel domestic workers to abscond from their employers. In turn, he reveals that they often seek freelance visas to "buy their freedom". However, while these existing literatures largely focus on the economic factors for absconding, they neglect the socio-spatial coping logic and strategies of freelance domestic workers. In other words, existing scholarship has ignored how this strategy of turning to freelance work impacts the UAE's gig domestic work sector, or how it influences the broader informal economies in the host country.

Social Coping Strategies of Freelance Filipina Domestic Workers

Because of the "illiberal" UAE gig restrictions, freelance Filipina domestic workers have mobilised social coping strategies to circumvent the legal *kafala* restrictions. Rather than framing their status in powerlessness and precaritisation (Halabi, 2008; Juireidini, 2019), I instead build on the growing Gulf migration literature which recognise the complex social agency of migrant workers, specifically domestic workers (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019; Fernandez, 2020a; Hosoda and Watanabe, 2014; Ishii, 2020; Parennas, 2021) in the UAE. Taking on this existing scholarship as a vantage point, I feature the range of freelance Filipina domestic workers' strategies such as co-optation, tapping and brokering in the UAE. Through informal community-based social networks and digital platform technologies (access to mobile technologies and apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp), they have effectively employed these strategies to access the gig domestic work sector, build sectoral diaspora solidarity, sustain the "informal" gig economy and contest the illiberal restrictions of the Emirati state's *kafala*.

Co-optation

Co-optation is defined as complicit negotiations between migrants and industry actors (visa sellers from a "ghost" company, travel agencies and employers) that aim to provide legal immigration status and facilitate internal mobility in the host country. To legally operate as a "regular" or "documented" freelancer in the informal UAE gig economy, freelance Filipina domestic workers have to co-opt to various migration industry actors to secure an employment visa ("visa selling") and work freely in the UAE gig sector. This freelance visa arrangement legally grants them the "freedom" and the right to work and live for at least two years (renewable) without an official *kafeel* (employer), while enabling them to avoid everyday state and community policing and surveillance networks in public spaces such as buses, train stations and parks (Lori, 2011). Shah (2017: 2) conceptualises freelancers in the Gulf region as individuals who, despite having a legal residence permit, work for someone other than their *kafeel* (sponsor), in violation of Gulf laws. This freelancing pathway is considered illegal and punishable by deportation or other penalties in the Gulf. Thiollet (2022: 29) emphasises that freelancers' legal (visa) status is in "a gray zone where arbitrary enforcement, negotiations, and power relations rule", thus making them vulnerable to expulsion and precariousness. In terms of the total average cost of a

freelancing domestic work visa, Filipina migrant domestic workers paid AED14,000 for two years (US$3,800) in 2014, and AED8,000 for two years (almost US$2,000) in 2024, which directly contributes to the Emirati state's revenues across the Gulf states – a phenomenon coined by Thiollet (2023) as 'migration rent'.

With high-demand for freelance visas among Filipina migrant domestic workers, many middle-class Filipino entrepreneurs and their business partners (often Emirati or South Asian Arabs) have established non-compliant companies to sell freelance visas to Filipino migrant workers, specifically domestic workers. The large demand for freelance visas among domestic workers, who seek "freedom" against the *kafala* system within the UAE migration industry, gave rise to multiple freelance visa sellers, operating both openly and discreetly in the UAE's public spaces (for example, distributing flyers indicating freelance visa for sale). As a result, the market cost of freelance visas dropped significantly over time, as freelance visa sellers enabled monthly instalments with some corresponding interest rates. Although selling freelance visas falls outside the UAE's legal framework for low-skilled migrant workers, this practice has, for many decades, been an existing pathway for migrant workers, including domestic workers, in the UAE and across the Gulf states, specifically for various South Asian, Arab and African migrant workers due to their lucrative nature (Babar, 2024; Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019; Shah, 2017). Thus interpersonal co-optation between and among various migration industry actors became a central strategy of low-income, freelance migrant domestic workers in the UAE illiberal gig economy.

Furthermore, the co-optation strategy of freelance migrant domestic workers is conditional on the quality and range of social ties grounded in people of similarly intersecting identities (in terms of ethnicity, religion and residency) in the host country. In studying Filipino migrant workers in the UAE, Christ (2012: 691) acknowledges that "ethnicity and not formal education is the prevalent feature to determine job opportunities, wages, and even the social structure". My fieldwork interviews reveal that, in addition to understanding the full risks associated with freelancing, Filipina domestic workers use their ethnic social ties (family and friends) to determine the safety of the visa seller, particularly in light of the recent massive state crackdowns on illegal migrant workers in the country. A freelance Filipina domestic worker in Dubai, Sherlen, emphasised: "I got my visa from my brother's friend, who started his own company. They sell visas too, and he is a family friend to us, and I know it's very safe." Marlen, a part-time freelance domestic worker, added:

> I don't buy visas from other nationalities, only Filipinos. With Filipinos, they understand you better culturally. I've known my (proxy) employer for at least 11 years, so I know I'm safe and he will not cause me any problems (such as filing an absconding report with the police).

The rise of an ethnic-based freelance visa-selling industry has become not only an integral part of the highly co-optative UAE migration industry, but also a critical integration strategy to circumvent the "unfree" status and achieve internal mobility under the highly restrictive gig economy as well as the *kafala* sponsorship system.

To sustain co-optative practices, freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers have developed a highly organised informal gig sector linked to the formal labour market process of the UAE gig economy. Both companies and freelance migrant domestic workers have collaboratively developed agreements – either written or orally – identifying the scope of the agreements (the payments, duration and other responsibilities). Jennifer, a freelance migrant domestic worker in Dubai, asserted:

> We follow the official recruitment regulations. But we also write and sign a document in case of an

> employment issue, so everything is clear for both of us. I try to keep a good relation to the company because I know they can cancel me anytime and make problems and there's nothing I can do about it too.

Employers provide a range of possible job titles, which they stipulate in the employment/immigration visa, depending on the payment provided by the applicant. Common job titles for freelance domestic workers include sales lady, executive assistant, and IT assistant, which serve to conceal and allow migrant domestic workers to justify their titles based on their level of education. By collaborating with individual agents or company owners, freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers then are able to 'legally' operate within the formal economy using their 'informal processes' mediated by various migration industry actors in the UAE (Fargues and Shah, 2018).

The co-optation strategy is a key survival coping mechanism for freelance Filipina domestic workers, allowing them to secure conditional, short-term internal labour mobility within the UAE gig domestic work sector. Because of the two-year, renewable nature of the employment and immigration visa, temporary domestic workers have to co-opt closely to the company owner to negotiate the duration of their mobility rights, and plan for their income and outward remittances to maintain their payments (either monthly instalments or biannual payments) and keep "good relations" with the visa sponsor. Failure to provide payments leads to the termination of their employment visas, and thus limits their labour market access in the domestic gig work sector. Securing a legal identity in the form of documentation is vital to their ability to access the labour market, economic survival, and employment reputation; most clients require legal documentation, especially clients who source freelance domestic workers from services online. A worker's legal status is paramount because buildings and apartments require temporary workers to surrender their Emirates ID at the gate or reception in order to determine the domestic worker's access. One Filipina domestic worker in Dubai, Terry, concurred with this, stating: "I cannot access gated villas, apartments or other buildings if I don't have an Emirates ID. I've got to leave it at the front desk. They are now strict because many of the clients are VIP people." WithoutUAE national identification, they are precluded from accessing gig employment work or building new clientele; specifically, without documentation, they are not able to find employment with Westerners, Arabs or South Asian employers living and looking to hire freelance workers in Dubai. Thus, despite their "documented" status in the host country, freelance domestic workers still have to navigate legal, institutional and social constraints to access gig domestic work in the UAE gig economy.

Tapping

Tapping refers to the process of accessing social migration infrastructure (social networks, actors and information) for the sole purpose of achieving mobility and economic survival in the host country. Ishii (2020) and Hosoda and Watanabe (2014) both emphasise the importance of a "loosely" formed Filipino community as a survival mechanism for Filipino migrants in the Gulf, which is often reinforced via strategic use of social media digital platforms (Facebook group chats and WhatsApp). To ensure their survival in the gig domestic work sector in the UAE, freelance Filipina domestic workers have not only co-opted themselves to various migration industry actors, but also increasingly adopted a tapping strategy within their community's networks, leveraging a variety of social networks or ties within the Filipino diaspora community and beyond. Because of the uncertain, temporal nature of their gig work, freelance Filipina domestic workers have to rely on their existing social networks such as friends, former clients and their

social networks to build a broad base of, or access to, potential clients. As Josie, an Abu Dhabi-based Filipina freelance domestic worker, highlighted:

> I take clients from Facebook postings (online group chats). But I also mostly get my clients from my *kababayans* (diaspora compatriots) who work for different companies, whose employers ask for either cleaners or helpers. I do both. I need to take as many clients as possible from different sources and that's how I survive.

With the rise of digital technology penetration in the UAE, freelance migrant domestic workers were able to quickly exploit social migration infrastructures and find gig employment through various digital and social references. Unlike in the early 2000s, they had little or no access to their mobile phones, and lacked industry knowledge of digital online community groups that provide jobs in the UAE gig economy. My field data highlights that the vast majority of freelance Filipina domestic workers have previously worked full-time, either for a Tadbeer domestic recruitment company or for other agency-run cleaning companies, earning between AED1,500 (US$408) and AED3,000 (US$816) per month. In fact, freelance domestic workers' previous employment enabled them to develop skills, confidence and social networks to pursue and afford a freelance domestic work option within the UAE gig economy. Marlene, a Dubai-based Filipina domestic worker, acknowledged:

> I worked as a cleaner for three years and my salary was only AED2,000 (US$550) per month. When I saw my other friends buying their freelance visa and having more freedom (on their Facebook posts), I said to myself I should do it too. I didn't send all my money to my family so I can buy on an instalment basis my freelance visa. Now I make at least AED6,000 or US$1,635 monthly [the average wage for regular Filipino domestic workers is US$400] and I have my day off and control freedom of my schedule.

While freelancing allows Filipina domestic workers to earn more than those within the government-regulated Tadbeer centres or other recruitment agencies, tapping strategically allows freelance migrant domestic workers to access the gig economy using their expansive social diaspora networks – their social ties - as well as maintain their internal mobility and mitigate potential labour precarity in the gig economy.

Social relations built through personal and social media digital interactions over a period of time become an importance source of transnational and informal social protection and remittances (Levitt et al., 2023), which remains relatively weak in the country's enforcement even during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Brik, 2022; Lowe et al., 2024). Tapping enables freelance domestic workers to exploit existing organised migrant communities, which operate through personal or digital mediums to provide freelance domestic work service to high-income local and expatriate families, specifically those who do not want to hire full-time domestic helpers or pay large recruitment fees to Tadbeer companies. Because of the competitive nature of gig domestic work, Filipina freelance domestic workers help each other by sharing various virtual links and contact information of clients, and finding safe employers who hire a specific type of helper in the UAE. Katrina, a Filipina domestic work freelancer in Dubai, explained:

> Some European employers only want freelancers with childcare background or certified nursing certification. If I don't have these requirements, I send them to my other friends who have this so we can help each other find opportunities. We need to work together because that's why we are here in the UAE, to make money and support our family.

As a result of these virtual online social media digital platforms for employers, freelance Filipina domestic workers strategically depend on personal and social media information sources (Facebook and other group virtual chats in UAE, specifically Dubai) to locate potential clients or employers, while simultaneously providing "*kababayan* solidarity" for their fellow compatriots to compete in the UAE gig domestic work sector. As a result, tapping has not only produced some form of community solidarity or a "community of coping" (Jiang and Korczynski, 2024), but also a social protection mechanism vital in times of labour market uncertainty or unemployment crisis in the UAE (Levitt et al., 2023).

Tapping also allows freelance domestic workers to avoid exploitative employers and sponsors under the host country's *kafala* system. While a long line of scholarly work has linked the *kafala* sponsorship system with exploitation of domestic work (Blaydes, 2022, 2023; Fernandez, 2020a; Malit and Naufal, 2016; Naufal and Malit, 2018; Sabban, 2020), Parennas (2022) further found that employers leverage their own morals in order to address the absence of domestic work labour standards in the host country. Similarly, freelance domestic workers have also leveraged their own moral version of who is a "good" and "bad" employer, since digital descriptions of freelance employers' backgrounds is virtually limited. They do so by using their existing social knowledge (specifically, previous work experience) and other freelance domestic workers' vetting process in order to guarantee a safe employer for their compatriots. A freelance Filipina domestic worker in Dubai, Lorna put it:

> We know a good from a bad employer because we worked with them before. We blacklist those abusive like not giving us food or delaying our salary and we tell everyone. Filipinos like to gossip a lot so this is easy for us to educate others about these bad employers.

Unlike the restrictive *kafala*, tapping also enables freelance domestic workers to use their social, economic and moral knowledge of the market to avoid exploitative employers or sponsors and extend some form of informal social protection to their compatriots. More importantly, online digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Dubizzle allow freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers to tap into existing local gig work. By using phones or mini-laptops, they were able to exploit a range of community networks of employers or clients who seek a range of gig-related services such as part-time cleaning for their family apartments or villas. These potential employers or clients do not only seek to avoid the high cost of domestic work recruitment of at least US$10,000 per worker, but also proactively mobilise such digital online platforms to address their freelance gig related demands. In fact, unlike the past decades of little or no access to digital technology platforms, freelance Filipina domestic workers now have access to information about labour market demand, which has allowed them to become more easily mobile in the labour market regardless of their immigration status. In other words, this digital technological proliferation has not only subverted the status quo of the *kafala* sponsorship system, but has also virtually diffused employment, labour opportunities and employer-employee dynamics in the UAE's gig domestic work sector.

Brokering

Brokering is broadly conceptualised as the act of facilitating socio-economic opportunities (specifically, part-time jobs) between and among labour actors (in this case, freelance domestic workers and employers) for the purpose of building community solidarity. In the case of UAE's gig domestic work sector, freelance Filipina domestic workers employ the brokering strategy to provide a "community of coping" (Jiang and Korczynski, 2024), which is a critical support for

other freelance domestic workers in case of uncertain, difficult circumstances such as injuries, vacations or pay discrepancies rooted in the gig domestic work sector. This particular social coping strategy is technologically mediated by digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, whereby freelance domestic workers leverage their existing work-performance reputations to directly refer other freelance domestic workers to employers (mostly Westerners and Arabs) for employment. This brokering strategy empowers freelance domestic workers to develop co-ethnic community networks for employment purposes. While brokering enables Filipina domestic workers to provide referrals for other freelancers, it also enables them to temporarily maintain their work in case of health or work-related issues. As one Filipina domestic worker in Dubai, Anne, put it:

> Last year, I got sick a lot. I gave my close friends, who are also freelancers, to my clients to continue my part-time work while I was recovering. Because I work there long time and my employer trusts me a lot, they were OK with it. Now, I'm back working, and I thank my friends for helping me keep those contacts and clients.

This brokering strategy effectively allows freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers to have a back-up for their clients in times of uncertainty (getting ill or taking a month-long vacation), so that they are able to sustain their gig work and maintain the work relationships. Another Filipina freelance domestic worker, Marilou, emphasised:

> I always refer my friends to other clients because I can only take on a maximum of five clients. They help me when I get sick because we switch, and they continue my work for the client to keep my part-time work going.

Due to the precarious and unpredictable nature of gig work in UAE's domestic work sector, freelance Filipina domestic workers have increasingly employed this brokering strategy to maintain their part-time domestic gig work regardless of labour market uncertainties in the host country.

Beyond building *kababayan* solidarity, brokering also produces informal social protection when workers face exceptional challenges in the UAE gig labour market (Levitt et al., 2023). Since freelance domestic workers do not have formal employment contracts with their clients, they have no legal basis to seek claims from the Philippine embassy or UAE labour offices. As a result, freelance domestic workers source their clients from their employers' friends or friends' employers, and they often use these kinds of social networks to put external pressure on the client-employer if they face labour malpractices such as underpayment, non-payment or abuse, through naming and shaming strategies within their social circles (via their WhatsApp groups) or social media (Facebook). As one Filipina domestic worker in Abu Dhabi, Bena, highlighted:

> We work in a very lose community. Because we know our employer or client's friends, we make sure we help our other friends get their money if they don't get paid on time or fairly. We put pressure on employers by telling our co-workers on social media about their treatment. We support and respect each other, that's why we are friends for long time.

Because sending states lack formal diplomatic interventions in informal gig domestic work, brokering strategies help freelance Filipina domestic workers to leverage their existing social contacts as "mediators" in case of employment-related disputes.

Brokering has proved pivotal to the survival and reproduction of the gig domestic work sector; it influences freelance domestic workers to perform at the optimal level in order to

maintain good client relations in the gig market. Because the nature of their work is based on referrals and market reputation, Filipina freelance domestic workers have to protect their own reputation as well as that of their friends and colleagues in order to maintain a strong position within the work sector. Because word of mouth is a central element of their success (or failure) in the gig economy, they need to ensure that they execute their part-time gig work capably to maintain their reputation. As one Filipina domestic worker, Rose, noted:

> I receive my part-time work from my friends' referrals, and I make sure I do a good job to keep them (clients) coming. If I perform bad, they will talk about me and to my friends, and they will not help me anymore. So, I take care of my reputation and work all the time.

Unlike the restrictive *kafala* sponsorship system, brokering thus has the capacity not only to expand social networks and clientele and contribute to the reproduction of the informal gig domestic work sector and Filipino enclave community in the UAE, but also to liberate them from the host country's internal mobility restrictions and wage discrimination.

More specifically, freelance Filipina migrant domestic workers also facilitate brokering to their undocumented freelance domestic workers in the UAE gig domestic work sector. They often provide economic opportunities and referrals to undocumented Filipina freelance domestic workers by recruiting them to work as cleaners, gardeners and caretakers for their employers or employers' friends. While they receive lower wages, undocumented Filipina freelance domestic workers still accept this gig work in order to cover their monthly living costs, remit funds to their families, and save for future freelance visa options. They also embed their brokering logic in moral and religious justifications. As one Filipina domestic worker in Dubai, Tonya, noted: "If I help other Filipina, like those *tago nang tago* (TNT, or illegal worker in Filipino), I also help their family and it is a good karma. God will give me more blessing." Lyka, a documented Filipina freelance migrant worker in Dubai, pointed out:

> We all came here to have a bright future for our children. It's just right to help my fellow *kababayan* as long as I can if I see opportunities. Yes, I refer them to my employer and they get good salary because I give them good referrals and support.

In a way, brokering is not only used as a social coping survival tool, but is also harnessed as a positive force in the (re)production and expansion of the gig economy and community solidarity in times of crisis, and, to a large extent, the expansion and maintenance of the Filipino diaspora community in the UAE.

Conclusion

This article examined the strategic autonomy and resilience of freelance, temporary domestic migrant workers under an illiberal gig economy of the Global South. Using the case of Filipina freelance migrant domestic workers in the UAE, I emphasised that the development of an alternative freelancing visa system mirrors their collective resistance and mobilisation against illiberal host states' skill-based mobility and rights-related restrictions. Rather than conforming to the *kafala* restrictions or framing them as "powerless" subjects, I demonstrated how they manipulated the existing illiberal host migration infrastructure by employing co-optation, brokering and tapping to survive and mitigate socio-economic precariousness. They also leverage their socio-spatial community networks to exploit the pre-existing social migration infrastructures of illiberal host countries, including co-ethnic Filipino enclaves and social ties. As a result,

temporary Filipina freelance domestic workers have effectively managed to gain conditional freedom and internal labour mobility within the UAE gig labour market. While the social coping strategies of these freelance migrant domestic workers, such as co-optation through the purchase of employment visas, pose legal risks, they also foster economic empowerment and mobility, enabling them to transnationally fulfil their financial obligations to their families back home. However, in certain instances, freelance Filipina domestic workers face financial challenges such as the high cost of renewal and detention, which can turn their regular, autonomous legal status into an irregular vulnerability. Ultimately, these social coping strategies are dependent on the quality of the host country's migration infrastructure.

The case of Filipina freelance migrant domestic workers in the UAE offers novel insights into the complex, bottom-up socio-institutional resistance operating within illiberal gig economies in the Global South. As the UAE, like other Gulf states, continues to host the largest proportion of labour migrants in the Global South, future research should examine the macro-institutional dynamics of gig digital platforms in the Gulf and their implications for various types of low-skilled migrant gig workers (Uber drivers and freelance domestic workers). Further comparative analysis of low-skilled migrant gig workers from Southeast Asia, South Asia and Arab and African countries operating within the Gulf region (specifically Saudi Arabia and Kuwait), is imperative to examine the various micro-spatial strategies employed to counter exploitative labour practices in the illiberal host country gig economy. Given the rapidly expanding literature on gig work and labour migration, scholars must closely examine the diffusion and implementation of various gig employment models in the Gulf states, as well as their differential effects on the temporary migrant workforce (by gender, skill or sector) compared to other geographic Global South regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa. This is necessary to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework that explains the determinants and consequences of illiberal host states' policies towards migrant gig workers, across the Global South and beyond.

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