

# Labor Trafficking in Dubai: A Case Study

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## The Issue:

Labor trafficking, a harmful criminal practice, occurs when threats, violence, or coercion are used to force individuals to work against their will (11). Traffickers often target those in poverty by offering them a well-paying job in another country or area. Oftentimes victims are asked to pay a large fee, purportedly to cover travel and passport costs, with the promise that they will be able to pay off these debts later. Once the victims arrive at their destination, the trafficker makes it difficult for them to leave by confiscating their visas, or using other forms of manipulation. Victims are often paid little to nothing, making it impossible to pay off their debts or send any money home to their families as promised. Though not as widely popularized as sex trafficking, labor trafficking is 9 times more prevalent globally, based on available data (11). Labor trafficking often occurs cross nationally, meaning that the victims are taken to another country, where they are likely unfamiliar with the language and laws, making it difficult to escape. Rene Ofrenco, director of the Center for Labor Justice, describes how labor trafficking differs from traditional slavery:

*“The old way of slavery was that the boss really owned you ... But now legal recruiters and employers work in tandem to deceive workers who, vulnerable and isolated in a strange culture, are forced to accept harsh terms. It is in that context that you have endemic forced labor today.”(12)*

It is difficult to know exactly how many victims of labor trafficking exist because of the criminal activity involved. Finding and researching

individuals who are being hidden by their traffickers presents many challenges. However, available studies suggest that the practice has many detrimental health outcomes, as we will explore later on.

## The Situation in Dubai:

Dubai, one of seven city-states located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has recently developed into an extravagant metropolitan area, attracting tourists from around the globe with its impressive architecture and pristine beaches (1). While on the surface, Dubai is an unexpected oasis of urban tourism, the workers who build and maintain the cities have a contrasting and hidden experience from the tourists who visit. Most of the laborers who work in Dubai come from the Indian subcontinent, and evidence suggests that many of these workers are lured to Dubai under false pretenses (2). Unfortunately, data on these laborers is scarce due to the criminal activity involved. In an effort to gather firsthand information about the foreign workers in Dubai, Ben Anderson, a journalist for BBC, travelled to Dubai to seek out these individuals and hear their stories. The result of this trip is a heartbreaking documentary about individuals who are promised a high salary working in Dubai by labor traffickers. The victims are required to pay an expensive fee for travel costs and a visa, but the trafficker reassures them they can pay this debt off quickly. Once the victims arrive in Dubai, their visas are taken, they are relegated to substandard living conditions, and paid much less than promised, making it impossible to pay off debts the trafficker demands (2).

Pardis Mahdavi, a scholar who has written many publications on trafficking in Dubai, heard this in an interview of a young man working as a taxi driver in Dubai:

*“I want to go back home, back to India. I haven’t seen my family, my wife, my kids, not in four years. No one told me it would be like this here. No one said that we would live like animals, twelve people to a room, fifty people to a bus...I’m not allowed to stop, to eat or drink during the day. I have been sick, but what can I do? I just have to go on. Why did nobody tell me Dubai was like this?”* (8)

National Public Radio also discussed the unprecedented development of Dubai at the cost of these laborers. In the report, the host interviews Baya Sayid Mubarak, an employee of the Indian consulate in Dubai, who states that “most of these men make about \$150 a month and many are trapped in a cycle of poverty and debt, which amounts to little more than indentured servitude” (5). It is clear from these firsthand accounts that though economic prosperity is promised to these workers from other nations, this promise is not fulfilled.

Anderson of BBC also notes the atrocious conditions at the construction sites many of these laborers work at for 10-12 hours a day. When he inspects the bathroom, Anderson actually vomits because of the horrific state of the facility. Overall, this unjust, hidden, and largely ignored instance of labor trafficking is likely to have detrimental health effects on these workers, as well as their families at home which have often lost the income of their primary provider.

### **Health outcomes:**

Determining the health outcomes for those who experience labor trafficking, as many migrants in Dubai do, is exceedingly difficult. These migrants likely have little access to healthcare services, and are generally not well accounted for. Additionally, as Ben Anderson discovered when trying to get access to victims of labor trafficking, their supervisors were quite hostile, making it even harder to study these individuals. However, some studies have been done on labor trafficking victims who have escaped. For example, a recent study examined the health of individuals receiving post-

trafficking support from an NGO called Migrant Help in the United Kingdom (6). A majority of these labor trafficking victims were young men from South Asia, in concordance with the norm in Dubai. Forty percent of these victims experienced violence while they were in enslaved. Many also reported poor and unsafe working conditions, poor living conditions, hunger, and lack of access to medical services. Most subjects reported physical problems, such as back pain, chronic headaches, vision and dental problems, and gastrointestinal issues.

Also concerning is the high prevalence of mental health issues amongst these victims of labor trafficking, particularly depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Many reported thinking frequently about their time in slavery, nightmares, and trouble sleeping (6). Though this study was not done in Dubai, certainly many of those who are being exploited for labor worldwide will have similar health outcomes to these victims. There may also be additional issues that face victims in Dubai, including communicable and infectious diseases as a result of their substandard living conditions, close quarters, and unclean bathroom facilities. It is important to note the limitations of research done on post-trafficking victims. The sample size in these studies is generally small. Additionally, those who escape trafficking may differ systematically in their health issues and outcomes from those who do not. For example, healthier individuals may be more likely to escape. Therefore, we can conclude that while labor trafficking likely has these adverse effects discussed above, these outcomes may differ greatly by situation.

Besides the obvious injustice and danger victims of labor trafficking face, these individuals often lack access to healthcare, which exacerbates any health problem they might have. However, when victims are able to access healthcare, providers often do not recognize them as victims of trafficking. A study by Baldwin et al. (2011) interviewed rescued trafficking victims in Los Angeles who about their interactions with healthcare while enslaved (7). Amongst victims of labor trafficking, they usually received health care in the case of injury or respiratory and systemic illness. The researchers found that trafficking victims were unlikely to disclose their status to health care providers because

of shame, fear, language barriers, or limited interaction with the provider (7). These obstacles present more possible barriers keeping victims of labor trafficking in Dubai from getting help.

### **Solutions:**

In light of the increased scrutiny of Dubai by the media, the government is seeking to enact some changes. Human Rights Watch gave the UAE a critical report in 2006, stating that “the UAE government is turning a blind eye to a huge problem” (4). In response, the UAE is drafting a law allowing laborers to form construction unions, according to BBC (4). Clearly human trafficking in Dubai is receiving global attention, and the continuation of this scrutiny is necessary to keep pressuring the UAE to change. However, Mahdavi warns against some of the laws that have been put into place, such as those stemming from the Trafficking in Persons report, a tool the US government uses to interact with foreign government surrounding human trafficking (8). Mahdavi asserts that the increased regulation of immigration instated by these laws may actually force those desperate for employment to use irregular means of migration, such as that offered by middle-men and recruiters, which often ends up being an abusive situation (8). If those in poverty are desperate for work, and cannot migrate legally, they may be more likely to fall prey to a trafficker. The US government should carefully consider the outcomes of the suggestions it makes in the TIP report, in case it actually increases labor trafficking.

If stricter immigration laws are not helpful in reducing labor trafficking, then what types of laws are? A paper by Hila Shamir discusses an approach to reducing human trafficking which targets the labor market (9). One important measure that Shamir suggests is ensuring that vulnerable workers have access to the justice system without fear of being deported or criminalized. Other suggestions include disallowing visas that tie workers to a specific employer, or result in an insurmountable debt for the migrant. Vulnerable workers, such as those in manual labor occupations, should also be allowed to unionize (9). For example, in Dubai, laws allowing construction workers to unionize are being drafted, as previously mentioned. For any of these suggestions to be effective, information about these laws needs to be disseminated to those who

might be victims or are at risk of becoming victims, because individuals might not know the laws in the country they migrate to.

The US Department of Justice funded a study to explore how to reduce barriers that trafficking victims experience in getting help when they access healthcare and other services (10). The researchers asked service providers, such as healthcare providers, law enforcement, resources for immigrants, as well as survivors of trafficking, about barriers to providing services for trafficking victims. The researchers used telephone surveys and focus groups to collect this data. In the end, the researchers mainly suggested more training for service providers surrounding how to identify and help trafficking victims, as well as language services and cultural sensitivity training (10). While this study focuses on the US healthcare system, healthcare providers in Dubai should also take note of these suggestions in order to identify and aid victims of trafficking.

What is evident from all research done on labor trafficking, health outcomes, and solutions, is that very little research has actually been done in Dubai. However, using research done in the US and other nations can provide a basic understanding of the issues in Dubai and possible steps towards solving them.

### **To Learn More:**

1. Watch Anderson’s documentary:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMh-vlQwrnU>
2. Learn about how to promote fair labor:  
<http://www.verite.org/>
3. Learn how to recognize trafficking victims as a healthcare provider:  
[http://journals.lww.com/smajournalonline/Fulltext/2008/05000/Human\\_Trafficking\\_and\\_the\\_Healthcare\\_Professional.23.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/smajournalonline/Fulltext/2008/05000/Human_Trafficking_and_the_Healthcare_Professional.23.aspx)

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