LENA SGORSALY

AFRICAN MIGRANTS AND PLACES OF CONSUMPTION

(Auto-) ethnographic insights into Dubai's informal economy

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PREFACE

In the face of the European Union's relentless efforts to limit and control migration from the Global South, alternative destinations have gained currency. Among them are the countries of the Arab Gulf region, which stand out for their continuous demand for foreign labour. At the heart of the study of Lena Sgorsaly is the question of the opportunities and challenges that these destinations offer to migrants from Africa.

The thesis of Lena Sgorsaly was supervised by Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican and Dr. Jonathan Ngeh, and was realized in the context of the research project "Communication during and after Covid-19", funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (https://socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/projects/special-project-communication-during-and-after-covid-19). The study builds on three months of fieldwork in Dubai, conducted in spring 2022, and integrates inductive, qualitative and auto-ethnographic approaches.

Sgorsaly's thesis zooms in on East African migrants in Dubai and their strategies to straddle the city's thriving informal and formal economy during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. It looks at different places of consumption, both formal and informal, and explores why and how African migrants navigate the risks and uncertainties of working outside the formal economy. The study's strength is the author's access to migrants' day-to-day lived experiences in informal spaces, which is often not accessible for research. This allowed Sgorsaly to generate comprehensive and nuanced data that contributed to a better understanding of informality in the city.

Sgorsaly fuses a rich, in-depth ethnography of African migrants' participation in Dubai's informal economy with reflections on her experiences and interpretation of her data. Focusing on "places of comfort and consumption" (private homes serving bars) in low-income migrant residential areas in Dubai's old city centre, the study provides a vivid account of informality in the housing and hospitality industry, street vending, commercial sex, and freelance shipping. Adding to the rich ethnography are the author's reflections on her positionality and relationship with the study participants.

Michael J. Casimir

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
AED	United Arab Emirates dirham
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Pelican and Dr Ngeh whose guidance, support and expertise have been invaluable throughout the whole research process. I would also like to thank Dennis Iegbuta and Sophia Mayer for their insightful feedback and constructive criticism. I am grateful to my friends and family for their love, support, and encouragement. Their unwavering support has helped me to stay motivated, especially during challenging times. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all participants who generously gave their time to participate in this research. Without their cooperation, this research would not have been possible.

1. Introduction

As I embarked on my journey to Dubai, I was filled with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, having two different images of the city in my head. On the one hand, the mainstream media portrayed the city as a glittering metropolis, overflowing with opulence and sophistication, huge shopping malls, impressive skyscrapers, and luxurious cars. On the other hand, the global discourse painted a vastly different picture of exploitation and neglect of basic human rights for the numerous labour migrants in the Gulf region. But nothing could have prepared me for the reality I encountered in the city. Within my first week, I found myself caught up in Dubai's duality. One moment, I was surrounded by a group of Kenyans, sharing stories over drinks in a bustling informal drinking place in Deira, the historical heart of Dubai. Next, I was dancing in a luxurious club in Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world – for now – surrounded by an entirely different group of Kenyans. This discrepancy between the extravagance of the luxurious lifestyle and the harsh reality of the less prosperous truly struck a chord within me and served as the spark that ignited my autoethnographic study.

African migration has been a defining feature of globalisation in recent decades[1]. As many African migrants search for better economic opportunities and improved living conditions, they have become an increasingly important part of the global labour force (Atong et al. 2018). Dubai's informal economy is vast and diverse, encompassing everything from street vending and small-scale enterprises to illegal activities like black market trade and human trafficking. Despite the challenges posed by the informal sector, many African migrants see it as a key source of livelihood and a pathway to financial stability. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the reasons why African migrants choose to participate in the informal economy and how they navigate the risks and uncertainties that come with working outside of the formal system. This master thesis will examine how African migrants participate in Dubai's informal economy, for instance by owning or visiting informal places of consumption, namely the beer parlours. Furthermore, the

[1] African migration has been a relevant aspect of human history since before prehistoric times. However, this thesis will primarily focus on African migrants in the current era of globalisation.

thesis will investigate the interplay between Dubai's informal economy and the *kafala*[2] system, which regulates the employment of foreign workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. With migration and labour being deeply intertwined, the *kafala* system holds power over the city's economic landscape. Hence, this study aims to demonstrate that despite this stringent and regulated system, the *kafala* framework enables and even fuels the growth of the informal economy among migrants. Through a comprehensive examination of the correlation between the *kafala* system and the informal economy, this thesis sheds light on how the *kafala* system affects the experiences and livelihoods of African migrants in Dubai and contributes to the growth of the city's informal economy. Ultimately, this study will provide new insights into the complex relationships between African migration, globalisation, and the informal economy, and contribute to a broader understanding of how migration shapes the urban landscape and the lives of those who participate in it. Using an inductive[3] research approach, the research questions were constantly adapted to the new insights of the research and only settled on in the process of writing. Against this backdrop, the thesis will answer the following research questions:

1. What role does the *kafala* system play in the irregular migration of African migrants to Dubai? How does the interplay between the *kafala* system and the informal economy shape the experiences and opportunities of African migrants in Dubai?

2. How does the formal economy contribute to the development of an informal economy for African migrants in Dubai? Why does the informal economy thrive alongside the formal economy?

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[2] The word "kafala" is derived from the Arabic word كَفَلَ which means "to guarantee" or "to take responsibility for".

[3] Inductive refers to a reasoning process that involves moving from specific observations to broader generalisations and theories. In this process, researchers observe specific phenomena, patterns, or events and draw conclusions based on those observations, which are then used to develop theories or hypotheses that explain the observed phenomena (Copi et al. 2016).

3. How do African migrants navigate the informal economy, and what factors influence them to choose beer parlours over formal drinking places?

This master's thesis delves into the complex interplay between African migrants and Dubai's informal economy through the lens of autoethnography. Following this introductory chapter, and a profile of the field, the next section reviews the most relevant publications to understand the topic in all its complexity, examining the *kafala* system, irregular migration, the informal economy, informality in Dubai and sex work (one of the major components of the informal economy) as well as the lived experiences of African migrants living in bed space communities. Chapter three outlines the methodology used to complete this study, following the theoretical framework, featuring intersectionality in the context of gender and migration studies (Christou and Kofman (2022); Danaj (2022); Ngeh and Pelican (2018)) The ethnographic part of this study, presenting the data gathered during my research stay in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), starts with chapter 4, and will be dedicated to African migrant's experiences in the formal economy, as well as the reasons that led them transition to the informal economy. Chapter 5 focuses on the informal economy, introducing places of comfort and consumption, namely the beer parlour scene. Chapter 6 investigates other informal livelihood strategies, such as street vending, commercial sex, or freelance shipping. Further, this chapter will have a look at Covid-19 and how it affected the participants of this study. To complete the picture, gendered patterns of the informal economy will be investigated. In chapter 7, I reflect on my positionality as a white, female researcher, as well as my relationship with the participants of this study. Ultimately, the thesis concludes in chapter 8 by summarizing the findings with regard to the research questions.

1.1 Introducing the field: The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a country located in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by Saudi Arabia to the south and Oman to the east. The UAE is comprised of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm AL Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. The country has a total area of 83,000 square km and a population of approximately 9.9 million people, of which around 85% are expatriates of more than 200 different nationalities. 69 % of the total population is male while 31 % is

female. Indians make up 27.5%, and Pakistanis make up 12.7% and thus constitute the largest number of migrants in the country (Dubai Statistics Center 2021). The number of African migrants has increased in recent decades (Alexander 202l:1). However, recent numbers are difficult to access, but as of 2016, the percentage of the African workforce in Dubai constituted 2.9 % and exceeded the percentage of the European workforce (2.7 %) (Ngeh and Pelican 2018: 176f). However, most of the academic research about migrants in the UAE focuses on Southeast Asian migration, while sub-Saharan African migration has received significantly less attention in scholarship (Alsharif and Malit 2020: 1).

The UAE has a diversified economy that is heavily dependent on oil and gas reserves, which account for approximately 30% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Furthermore, the country is also a leading tourism destination, as well as a hub for trade, and financial services with a thriving business sector and a highly developed infrastructure. In less than a century, the UAE has rapidly developed from small fishing villages into a modern and prosperous nation with a thriving economy (Pacione 2005).

The UAE has a rich cultural heritage that is primarily influenced by its Arab and Islamic roots. They are known for their traditional markets, festivals and stunning architecture, such as the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, located in Dubai. Renowned is also its luxurious shopping malls, dining experiences as well as a vibrant nightlife. Combined with the UAE's diverse and multicultural society, the UAE appears progressive and tolerant and is known for its commitment to cultural and religious diversity (Pacione 2005).

Underneath this facade, however, lies a harsh reality. The UAE has been heavily criticised on several fronts, including for its record on human rights, such as restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, as well as the treatment of migrant workers (Katzman 2010: 9f). The UAE's labour laws and working conditions have been criticised, especially concerning its treatment of low-income migrant workers, who have been subjected to exploitation, abuse, and forced labour (Katzman 2010: 9f; Atong et al. 2018: 16ff). Others have been critical of the UAE's rapid economic development (from pre-industrial to industrial to post-industrial in 50 years) which has had a significant impact on the environment, as well as raised concerns over air and water pollution, desertification, and

the loss of wildlife habitat (Pacione 2005). According to the Living Planet Report 2010, the UAE had the largest ecological footprint globally (WWF 2010). Additionally, while women in the UAE have more legal rights than in other Arab countries, they still face legal disadvantages to men, especially regarding the treatment of women in relation to marriage and divorce, inheritance, and property rights. The country's legal system also imposes restrictions on women's dress and mobility, however, in recent years there has been some progress made (Katzman 2010: 9). Lastly, the UAE's political system is an elective semi-constitutional monarchy[4] with limited political representation and has been criticised for the lack of political freedom and the absence of free and fair elections (Freedom House 2022).

2. Literature review

Before discussing data analysis and data representation, it is necessary to define a few important concepts and ideas to address the topic of this study and answer the research questions, using the most relevant publications. As this research focuses on African migrants, their involvement in the informal sector, and places of consumption, it is vital to examine the system that controls and regulates immigration, the *kafala* system, which at the same time fuels irregular migration to the UAE (research question 1). As a next step, a sketch of the informal economy in Dubai including sex work, one of its primary components, will be drawn (research question 2). Finally, the review will summarise existing literature on places of consumption, such as beer parlours and bed spaces (research question 3).

2.1 The *kafala* system

Immigration to the UAE, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, is governed through the *kafala* system,

[4] The political system of the UAE has been described as a 'tribal autocracy'. The Sheikh of the UAE is elected among the rulers of one of the seven emirates. However, it is always the ruling family of Abu Dhabi (Al Nahyan) to be elected (Freedom House 2022).

usually translating to “sponsorship system”, which essentially means that every migrant is obliged to have a sponsor (*kafeel*) who is legally and economically responsible for them. The *kafeel* who is simultaneously the migrants’ employer may either be a national person, or a company owned at least 51 percent by nationals. Domestic employees, such as housemaids, nannies, gardeners, drivers, chefs, cleaners, etc. are exempt from this rule, which means the *kafeel* may be a non-national if their salary is high enough (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016: 165).

This system has been heavily criticised for its exploitative and restrictive nature. The control that the *kafala* system gives the sponsor over the migrant worker has been compared to a modern kind of slavery (Migrant Forum in Asia 2012). Mahdavi (2013: 426) argues that the *kafala* system works in favour of the employer as it protects their interests over the migrants’ rights and safety. Highly problematic is that the employee automatically becomes a migrant in an irregular situation, in case of termination of the work contract, as the employer and sponsor are the same people. Domestic and agricultural workers are exempt from labour laws protecting the migrants, as regulated in Article 3 of the labour law. Female migrants are especially at risk since the majority of female migrant workers in the UAE are in the sector of domestic and care work. The precarious circumstances in which female labourers find themselves through the conditions imposed on them by the *kafala* system are unique. While domestic workers have to surrender the *kafala* system, meaning they rely on their sponsor and employer for residence and healthcare, in return, there are no laws protecting them. For example, disputes between domestic workers and their employers are considered ‘private matters’ and should not be solved in court (Mahdavi 2013: 427). Further, the UAE’s laws also prohibit the formation of labour unions, making it impossible for migrants to organise protests and advocate for their rights. Unsurprisingly the UAE has not ratified the UN’s *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* which was adopted in 1990 (Mahdavi 2013: 427f).

However, it is within the framework of this restrictive legal ground for labour migrants, which at the same time regulates the formal economy, that the informal economy not only exists but even thrives. While the structure of the *kafala* system, as well as the policies, have the intention to combat the dangers of ‘human trafficking’, they instead have led to

a situation where migrants are actively choosing irregular migration routes, as well as irregular employment. In other words, the labour laws are built in such a way that irregular migration often is the only possibility and working in the informal sector is better than having to endure the dehumanising conditions of the *kafala* system (Mahdavi 2017: 186f). Furthermore, she argues that the discrepancy between migrants' lived realities, and policies result from viewing them "through the lens of their circumstances or labour" (Mahdavi 2017: 1).

According to Jureidni (2017: 137) the *kafala* system has received intensified criticism following the awarding of the 2022 World Cup. This criticism focuses on the abuses of the system as well as corruption in recruitment, wages, long working hours, poor living conditions and inadequate health and safety standards, for instance for construction workers. However, comparatively little attention has been given to migrants in an irregular situation in the Gulf.

2.2 Irregular migration

Irregular migration[5] usually refers to the movement of people across national borders without proper authorisation or documentation, often involving individuals who do not meet the legal requirements for entry into a destination country. Typically bringing to mind people crossing the Mediterranean Sea or climbing barbed-wire fences, irregular migration has been a complex phenomenon that has garnered significant media and political attention since the early 2000s. Even though irregular migration makes up a relatively small proportion of overall migration, it has received a disproportionate amount of political and media attention, particularly in the European context (Triandafyillidou and Bartolini 2020a: 11). According to Triandafyillidou and Bartolini (2020b: 140), irregular migration is driven by a combination of factors, including the demand for cheap labour in receiving countries and the economic and demographic pressures faced by

[5] This thesis will employ the terms "irregular migrant" or "migrant in an irregular situation" rather than using the word "illegal", to reflect the idea that no human being should be illegal. By using these terms, I aim to promote a more respectful discourse around the experiences of migrants and acknowledge their humanity and dignity, as well as emphasise the systematic barriers that lead to their irregular status rather than framing them as criminals.

young populations in sending countries. Many irregular migrants are employed in low-skilled, low-wage jobs that are often stigmatised and marginalised in the labour market. However, the situation in the Persian Gulf differs greatly from the situation in Europe, as migrants usually arrive with valid documentation and only become irregular after entering the country (Frantz 2017: 63).

Frantz (2017: 57) claims that policies limiting migration, residency, and employment are responsible for the large number of migrants in an irregular situation living in the Gulf states rather than insufficient migration controls. It is difficult to collect regular data about irregular migrants in the GCC countries, some countries do reveal the numbers of infiltrators entering the country or those who have overstayed their visas, however those who are in other kinds of irregular situations, such as freelance workers, are hard to estimate (Shah 2017: 3). Estimates on the stocks of undocumented migrants is inconsistent and often related to amnesties and crackdown campaigns[6] (De Bel-Air 2017: 39). Further, the number of irregular migratory paths to the Gulf region can vary depending on the author and publication. Shah (2017) for instance, differs between five different irregular migratory ways to the Gulf:

> "(i) entering unlawfully into a country;
> (ii) overstaying a valid residency permit;
> (iii) being employed by someone who is not the sponsor;
> (iv) running away from an employer, or absconding; and
> (v) being born in the Gulf to parents with an irregular status." (Shah 2017: 4)

The first category, entering without the required papers is found in all GCC countries, however, it is particularly common in the case of Yemenis entering Saudi Arabia illegally. Overstaying a residency visa falls under the second category, which occurs in all six GCC nations. Some of these nations even publish data on the number of migrants falling under this category. The third category—in which a migrant is hired by someone who is not his

[6] The Gulf States have launched campaigns to facilitate the departure of migrants in irregular situations, including detentions and deportations. It is within these measures that various data sets have been released, however, the data available remains limited (De Bel-Air 2017: 34).

sponsor—is reported to be the most prevalent throughout all GCC nations. Selling or trading visas to migrants is a widespread practice among Gulf sponsors. So-called "free" visas give the impression that the migrant has the authorisation to find a job, however, he is only authorised to live in the UAE, but not to work there. The fourth type of irregular migration results from absconding and running away from employers. For instance, in Oman, about 85% of all irregular workers arrested were absconders. A worker who escapes instantly becomes irregular since they are no longer in contact with their sponsor, who serves as their guardian in the host nation. As it is still customary for the *kafeel* to retain their passports, the fugitives typically lack any paperwork. The fifth category is relatively uncommon, as it includes individuals born in the Gulf whose parents have an irregular status. It should be noted that these categories are not mutually exclusive, as an individual may fall into multiple categories, such as being a runaway who has overstayed their visa and is now working as a freelancer. Further, irregular statuses are not permanent and those in this situation may be legalised, the Gulf countries sometimes host amnesties to legalise those in irregular situations (Shah 2017: 3ff).

The migratory path this research found to be very relevant is entering on tourist or visit visas, to work in the informal economy. As Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican (2019) report, a significant number of African migrants are entering Dubai on temporary business, tourist or visitor visas with the primary goal of securing a salaried job later and upgrading to an employment visa. Often this plan did not materialise before their initial visa expired, forcing migrants to explore alternative strategies, such as overstaying, visa changes, or obtaining a "free visa" (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019: 162).

In conclusion, according to Shah (2017: 10), "irregular migration is a complex, multifaceted, and deep-rooted phenomenon that will not be eliminated by simple policy changes." Despite existing legal frameworks in both sending and host countries, migrants continue to find ways to circumvent these rules. As long as migrants and those who assist them in maintaining their irregular status stand to benefit from the current situation, irregular migration will remain difficult to control (Shah 2017).

2.3 The informal economy

The informal economy, also known as the informal sector or grey economy, is characterised as the part of the economy that operates beyond governmental regulation and taxation. Further, it usually lacks social protection, such as health coverage, as well as a written contract (Charmes 2012: 106f). Economists describe the informal economy as legal activities in which participants fail to pay taxes or comply with rules, such as street vending, unregistered businesses, or casual labour. In the past, the informal economy was commonly believed to be primarily survival-based activities and often is associated with negative aspects such as illegal or criminal activity. However, most informal economic activities involve the production and distribution of legal goods and services and are not necessarily intended to violate labour regulations. While the informal economy may include some illegal or irregular operations, such as dealing drugs or commercial sex, it should not be equated with the criminal economy (Becker 2004: 11). Furthermore, the previous decades have demonstrated that the informal sector has enormous employment and income potential and thus calls for suitable policy frameworks that do not limit the potential for job creation and economic growth (Becker 2004: 3).

The informal economy is often found in developing countries[7] with poor populations, according to a report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the informal economy accounts for about 61% of the world's employment and 86% of employment in Africa. However, the informal economy tends to be smaller in developed countries with stronger legal and regulatory systems. According to the ILO, the informal economy accounts for about 18.3% of the total employment in developed countries (ILO 2018: 13f). As this thesis is focusing on African migrants, it is crucial to note that the informality proportion, as the main source of employment in Africa, is typically higher for women,

[7] This thesis has adopted the terminology from the ILO report. However, it is important to acknowledge that the categorisation of countries as "developing" or "developed" is problematic because it perpetuates a colonial mindset by placing Western countries at the top of a hierarchy of nations. Further, it is based on arbitrary criteria, such as the GDP which does not necessarily reflect a country's well-being. It can be stigmatising and ignores diversity within countries. It is important to move beyond this categorisation and adopt a more nuanced understanding of development that takes into account the complexities and diversity of each country.

young people, and older people, as well as that the level of education is closely linked to informality (ILO 2018: 87f).

While informalisation processes are becoming increasingly common across the world, they are being examined primarily in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Europe, and to some extent in the former Soviet Union. The literature on informal practices is divided into two opposing camps: Positive and negative perspectives (Turaeva 2018: 60). Literature often focuses on the motives and reasons behind the transition from the formal to the informal economy. For instance, Turaeva (2018) who is investigating informal economies and the role of Islam in the post-soviet context divides state and non-state employment into three categories that offer different motivators to seek employment informally, and which resemble those in other low-income countries. The first group consists of positions within the state system, such as police chiefs and customs officers, that do not pay well but may provide additional income through payments such as bribes. The second group includes state workers, who have low salaries and limited opportunities for additional income, making it the least desirable option. The third group, called "biznes", includes both formal and informal self-employment opportunities, and may incorporate oral agreements, rule enforcement through various mechanisms, reciprocity, trading, and religious beliefs (specifically, Islamic principles). Sometimes there is no clear divide between formal and informal activities (Turaeva 2018: 63f.). Turaeva also notes that Islamic standards are not fixed, but rather emerge through debates and disagreements about the interpretation and understanding of literary rules and other verbal requirements for being a "good Muslim". Overall, this suggests that Islam can play a significant role in shaping informal economic activities, particularly through the incorporation of religious principles and values into trade and other forms of self-employment. (Turaeva 2018: 67ff.).

2.3.1 Informality in Dubai

Elshetawy (2008: 165) argues that despite Dubai's reputation for luxurious commercial centres, there are simultaneously lesser-known spaces of consumption that exist in the shadows of the city's carefully maintained image. By exposing these hidden spaces and contrasting them with the city's vibrant shopping centres his work aims to provide a more

equitable perspective of the city. The author contends that citizens are not passive consumers of the spectacle, but instead actively employ circumvention strategies.

The author further states that the setting of Dubai, compared to other cities of the region, such as Cairo, does not allow for a visible and vibrant informal sector. This is primarily due to the lack of a rural local population migrating to the city in search of employment, and the absence of a congested metropolis in which an informal activity can thrive. However, it is important to note that there is a rural migrant population that comes to Dubai to work. Further, irregular migrants are actively pursued and deported and there is a strong security presence in the street to ensure that laws and order are respected. Therefore, the city appears – superficially – to be orderly and regulated. However, informality does exist in Dubai; indeed, it has been argued that the city owes its entire existence to informality. This includes smuggling gold in the early days to becoming a hub for moving unauthorised amounts of money and a centre for money laundering. Although these activities remain abstract and invisible, they connect the formal legal world of democratic peace to the informal extra-legal world of conflict, economic hardship, and instability. To examine informality in Dubai, the author suggests looking at the daily markets frequented by the city's poorer migrant population, which contrasts sharply with the stunning mall landscape. Places such as Souk Naif, Hudeiba Street, Karama District and Meena Bazaar are associated with middle to low-income migrants (Elsheshtawy 2008: 172f).

Elsheshtawy (2008) suggests that these settings can be viewed as an attempt to circumvent the other, more luxurious, and off-showing Dubai, using certain mechanisms such as writing graffiti, taking over abandoned spaces, personalisation of semi-public spaces (balconies), overt display of ethnicities and restaurants/supermarkets catering to different ethnic groups. He further suggests the selling of counterfeit goods as a visible manifestation and a form of contesting Dubai's official retail scene, even though it is officially illegal to sell fake brands, however, the Karama market for example proves these activities are going on. The author further argues that due to numerous different ethnic restaurants, the Karama district is a popular hangout area for the lower-income population, especially a centrally located park and various street corners that serve as meeting points (Elsheshtawy 2008:176). For instance, some markets, while not informal,

offer a contrasting picture to the extravagant malls. Places such as Souk Naif, situated in the Sabkha area of Dubai, are known for their dense population of low-income expatriates and are considered one of the older parts of the city. Sabkha is famous for its various commercial establishments and features a significant bus station (Elsheshtawy 2008: 179f).

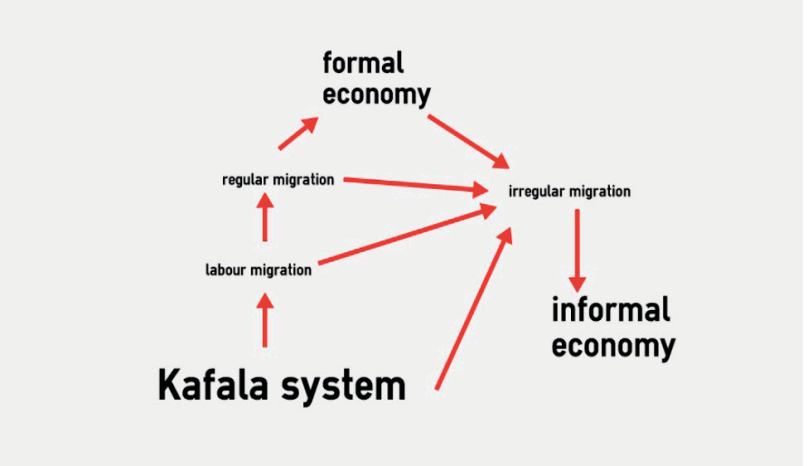

Figure 1: Interplay between the *kafala* system and the informal economy.
Credit: Lena Sgorsaly.

Figure 1 represents the interplay between the *kafala* system, migration, as well as formal and informal economies. The *kafala* system is the legal framework that underlies and governs labour migration. While the official route of regular migration will lead to the formal economy, the *kafala* system simultaneously allows for irregular migration e.g. entering the country with a tourist visa and starting to work in the informal economy, as a tourist visa does not include a work permit (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016).

Many people intentionally choose to migrate irregularly, to avoid the poor working conditions in the formal economy (Mahdavi 2013). Instead, they choose to work in the informal economy, for instance as migration brokers, real estate agents or in beer parlours (Ngeh and Pelican 2018). Often, they have heard about the poor working conditions of the formal economy, and thus want to ‘save a few steps’ and directly start in the informal

economy. Moreover, these conditions also lead from the formal economy to irregular migration, for instance, if a labour migrant is fired, they automatically become an irregular migrant and thus have to work in the informal economy (Shah 2017).

2.3.2 Sex work

Sex work[8] refers to the consensual exchange of sexual services for money. While its legal status differs from country to country, prostitution is illegal in the UAE under Articles 363-368 of Federal Law No. (3) of 1987 on Issuance of the Penal Code and is considered a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment or deportation. Therefore, sex workers' stigmatisation is high and access to sex workers remains difficult. Although there has been relatively little academic research done on the topic, reports of a thriving underground sex market in the UAE are widespread and indicate the existence of commercial sex and other illegal activities in the country. Exact numbers are difficult to determine, but according to a newspaper article from 2010, there are around 30.000 foreign sex workers in Dubai (Butler 2009). This number must have increased by now. The UAE has taken steps to address the issue, such as cracking down on prostitution rings and increasing penalties for those found to be involved in such activities (Ahmed 2021). Despite these efforts, the issue of prostitution and sex work remains a complex and challenging one in the UAE, as it does in many parts of the world.

Pardis Mahdavi, one of the key authors looking into commercial sex work in the UAE, uses the frame of the global human trafficking discourse and policies, as well as local responses to these discourses and policies (Mahdavi 2011, 2013, 2017). While sex workers remain invisible in the setting of labour and formal migration, their hypervisibility in the global discourse of human trafficking constitutes a sharp contrast. However, this discourse is largely based on rumours and stereotypes, such as the global narrative that women engaged in commercial sex work are trafficked and thus forced into the situation (Mahdavi 2011: 62f). Instead, she argues that more and more women are choosing to engage in sex work as a way out of the exploitative sector of domestic work,

[8] In this thesis the term "sex worker" is used to refer to all individuals who sell or trade sex for money, commodities, or other services, irrespective of whether they personally identify as sex workers or engage in it sporadically.

as it provides more freedom, more financial benefits, and overall, a better opportunity to make a living than domestic work (Mahdavi 2013: 429).

The city of Dubai has one of the biggest sex industries in the world, which in recent years has expanded to include women from all parts of the world. Sex workers from various ethnic backgrounds performing labour in Dubai have resulted in a hierarchy based on racism which simultaneously influences and is impacted by the locations within Dubai where commercial sex is practised. According to Mahdavi (2011), women perceived as white, such as Iranian, Moroccan, and Eastern Europeans, earn the highest price and hence work in the expensive and comfortable bars of Jumeirah and Dubai Marina and inside luxury apartments in higher-end parts of town. Whereas women perceived as brown, such as women from South and Southeast Asia, form a middle class and often work in lower-end bars and clubs in Deira or Bur Dubai, or brothels, and massage parlours throughout the city. Women from sub-Saharan Africa, frequently operate in the most dangerous sectors of the sex industry, namely in street work (Mahdavi 2011: 59).

2.3.3 Bed spaces and beer parlours

To gain a thorough understanding of the informal economy in Dubai, it is essential to have a look at bed spaces and beer parlours. Bed space typically refers to a type of shared accommodation provided for low-income migrant workers, while beer parlours serve as informal consumption spaces. Jonathan Ngeh (2022) investigates bed spaces and the challenges that African migrants living in these spaces face. The author conducted his research in different bed space hostels in Deira's Abu Hail neighbourhood. Typically consisting of a single room with up to 15 beds, bed space hostels can be overcrowded, with inhabitants even sharing the same bed. Sometimes, basic amenities such as clean water and toilets are lacking (Ngeh 2022). He claims that the *kafala* system as an exclusionary system contradicts the UAE's official cosmopolitan values such as tolerance and Islamic universalism (Ngeh 2022: 3). In return, African migrants cope with these extreme housing situations by challenging and modifying the existing practices of exclusion that confine them to the urban slums through strategic responses (Ngeh 2022: 5).

For instance, despite grievances over economic exploitation, social isolation, and legal/political exclusion, African migrants simultaneously not only participate but actively use the system for their benefit, such as by working as travel agents and supplying fellow Africans with visas and travel-related services (Ngeh 2022). Furthermore, the state and large companies profit from the exploitation of migrants who reside in company housing or bed space, nevertheless, African migrants take advantage of this, by renting out bed space to other migrants. This can result in a loss of profit for investors and hence threatens Dubai's economic structure. According to Ngeh (2022), the migrant's involvement in bed spacing and beer parlours should be viewed as a transgression of economic and housing norms effectuated by the state and thus as resistance. The author argues that African migrants' mixed responses to exploitation, both accepting and resisting it, show the complex relationship postcolonial subjects have with oppressive state power. African migrants' use of a tourist visa to find direct employment or freelance work shows their strategy for bypassing UAE regulations and avoiding exploitation (Ngeh 2022).

Another shared accommodation type in the UAE is the labour camps, or company housing, which are bed spaces provided by the employer. Usually located in remote areas and far from urban centres, workers often have limited access to healthcare and recreational facilities. Ngeh (2022: 12) found that African migrants, who usually migrate independently, are more likely to arrange their housing by themselves, whereas Asian workers often are directly recruited from their home countries and placed in labour camps. While technically migrants can choose where to live, they do not have access to affordable alternatives.

Beer parlours are establishments that primarily serve beer and other alcoholic beverages and exist in many countries, often used as a gathering place for friends and family to socialise and enjoy a drink. They may also serve food and offer entertainment such as live music, sports events, and games. The nature and purpose of beer parlours can vary depending on cultural and legal factors, with some countries having strict regulations on the sale and consumption of alcohol, such as the UAE, which makes beer parlours illegal. Nevertheless, the beer parlour business in the UAE, especially in Dubai's historical centre Deira is booming. There has not been much academic research about beer parlours. Ngeh

(2022) states that beer parlours are highly profitable and established businesses among bed space communities and that they are divided into sections for VIP guests and normal guests. Due to their illegal status, they sometimes get raided by security. Further, he states that the owners, who are mostly female, stand at the top of the bed space social hierarchy.

In contrast to this, Adenugba et al. (2018) who investigate socio-cultural perceptions about women operating beer parlours in Nigeria claim that beer parlours are often subject to negative stereotyping due to moral, religious and cultural issues. Additionally, due to the predominantly male customer base, beer parlours often perpetuate patriarchal power dynamics and reduce the status of women as business owners, while female employees are at risk of facing insults, physical violence, abuse, and harassment. Furthermore, they may still face being labelled as "immoral" within their workplace.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted in spring 2022 as part of the research project "Communication during and after COVID-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China" (funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, project number 96966-2). Initially scheduled for two months, the stay was then extended by one month. The research was conducted mostly in Deira, Dubai and Sharjah, however, two short trips to Abu Dhabi were also undertaken.

This study is based on an autoethnographic approach, a qualitative method of research and writing that involves the methodical investigation and description of personal experience to understand and describe the cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011: 273). In autoethnography, the researcher is both the subject and the observer of their own experiences and the experiences of others. Blending elements of personal narrative and ethnographic fieldwork, an autoethnography is written retroactively about selected past experiences. Typically, these experiences are not lived through with the intention to be written about, rather they are reflected on and put together in the aftermath. The autoethnographic approach embraces subjectivity, emotions as well as the researcher's impact on the research rather than ignoring or denying these factors (Ellis,

Adams & Bochner 2011: 274). Due to the subjective nature of the collected data, an autoethnographic approach was deemed appropriate for this research.

The research objectives and research questions were reflected on the ground but only formulated after leaving the field, based on observations and experiences made while in the UAE. This approach, known as emergent design, allows for flexibility and responsiveness to the context, as well as modifications of the research objectives and questions as new insights and observations are gained. The key idea underlying this approach is to learn about a problem or issue from participants and to shape the research to gather that information (Creswell and Porth 2016: 39). Furthermore, this approach is useful for gaining a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena and for generating new insights and perspectives. However, it also means that the researcher may not have had a clear understanding of their research goals before conducting their fieldwork and that their findings may be less focused or have less direction than if they had developed a well-defined research plan in advance. Yet, this approach seemed most promising as it also matches the researcher's personality and way of life.

This research is of exploratory and qualitative nature and is therefore rather limited in its scope. Further, it does not intend to draw generalisations about African migrants in the UAE. Flexibility was of critical importance to the completion of the research. Methods like participant observation were conducted coincidentally and unplanned, and thus notes were written afterwards. These observations included for instance visits to beer parlours and clubs. The exploratory and qualitative nature of this research, along with the flexibility and adaptability of the research process, can lead to a rich and nuanced understanding of the topic being studied.

Interviewees were recruited whenever possible. Due to the stigmatisation as well as the legal implications underlying the beer parlour scene, most interviews were written down in a notebook rather than recorded. This step was necessary to reduce the formality of the interview process and to make both the researcher and the interviewee feel more comfortable. The notes were usually digitalised the following day. This method of conducting interviews can result in less accurate and detailed data, as the researcher must rely on their notes and memory to record what was said. However, it also creates a more relaxed and informal atmosphere, which can help to build rapport with the interviewee

and increase the quality of the information gathered. In some cases, the stigma or legal implications surrounding a topic can make it difficult or even impossible to conduct recorded interviews and writing down the interviews is an effective alternative.

Before the fieldwork, general readings were completed to gain basic knowledge about the UAE, migration, and the *kafala* system, but also about sociolinguistics and gender-related topics. Having an academic background in African linguistics, I entered the field with the intention of writing about linguistic practices. However, given the fact that I had never been to Dubai, I also kept in mind to stay open and flexible, which led me to find myself in Dubai's African beer parlour underground scene.

As I prepared for my research trip to Dubai, I utilised various resources to make connections with the African migrant community. One of these resources was the hospitality exchange networks Couchsurfing and Trustroots. By using the language filter, I was able to connect with Swahili-speaking individuals in Dubai. Being a Swahili speaker myself, the shared language seemed a convenient way to establish connections with others. This approach was successful, as my first Couchsurfing contact, Brian[9], not only picked me up from the airport and guided me to my accommodation but also introduced me to my first informal drinking place, a beer parlour. Through him, I was able to gain valuable insights and observations into the informal underground beer parlour scene. My second Couchsurfing contact, Farouk, invited me to the above-mentioned Amani club located in the iconic Burj Khalifa. This experience provided a sharp contrast to my previous observations and fuelled the idea for this thesis.

After being introduced to the first beer parlour, most participants were encountered coincidentally in this beer parlour and then introduced me to new beer parlours as time went on. This approach is called snowball sampling in which initial participants are used to identifying and recruiting subsequent places or participants. The interviews were conducted in different settings, including my room in Al Barsha, a restaurant at the Dubai Creek, the Ethiopian coffee shops in Deira, the beach, or a beer parlour, when no clients were there. I developed a close relationship with many of my participants, especially the

[9] To protect the privacy of individuals, all names and identifiable characteristics have been changed.

females. Building a relationship with Lydia, the owner of the first beer parlour, proved crucial as her trust in me helped earn the trust of the other participants. I doubt that I would have had the same uncomplicated access to people without Lydia's trust. Further, the shared experience of being in a bit messy and congested environment like Lydia's beer parlour helped to put participants at ease and less worried to welcome me into their bed space or introduce me to other beer parlours. In total, I frequented about seven different beer parlours.

Name	**Position**
Boris	Freelance shipping
Brandon	Employed, Airline
David	Employed, Taxi Company
Eddy	Freelance, visa business
Farouk	Employed, Airline
Hannah	Freelance, shipping clothes
Julia	Sex work, nails and cosmetics
Liam	Employed, IT
Lydia	Beer parlour owner
Mia	Beer parlour owner
Nour	Freelance street vending
Paul	Employed, driver for doggy day-care
Zoey	Sex work, hair and cosmetics

Table 1: Key participants.

Throughout my research, I conducted interviews with 16 individuals, of which ten were male and six were female. Most of these were interviewed at least twice, as I was able to reflect upon the information gathered in the first interview. I also conducted participant observation with some of them. However, some people I interacted with were not interviewed properly, but our experience was reflected on afterwards and written down. A short list of the key participants will be provided here, as not all the participants were of relevance for the thesis, but the complete anonymised list of all participants will be listed in the appendix for reference. After leaving the field, contact was maintained with some of the key participants. Such contact allowed for the sharing of pertinent information and updates on their and my life.

After conducting the research, the collected data were completed. While most interviews and participant observations were documented the following day, some experiences were

only written down after returning from the field. As a next step, the data were analysed and coded using the MAXQDA software. This software is a qualitative data analysis tool that helps researchers to make sense of complex data, providing tools to efficiently analyse data, including tools for coding, categorising and visualising data.

The main language of communication between me and the participants was English, even though Swahili was spoken to some extent by those proficient in Swahili. However, the communication in Swahili was restricted due to the different varieties in Swahili, and many of the participants speak *sheng*, a Kenyan Swahili variety that I am not as familiar with. French and Swahili were spoken with the Burundian participants, as the Burundi Swahili dialect is closer to the standard variety which I learned during my bachelor's degree. One of the beer parlours I frequented a lot, was led by Ugandans, therefore Luganda was also a prevalent language, and I was taught how to order beers and say thank you in Luganda.

As this thesis is part of a broader research project about Covid-19, Covid-19-related questions were also addressed in most interviews to contribute to the general data pool. These questions included vaccination status, the situation during the lockdown, the general perception of Covid and the vaccine, as well as new opportunities that arose thanks to Covid. However, despite the significance of these questions, many of the participants expressed a level of frustration and fatigue with talking about the pandemic. This led me to believe that many people were eager to move on from it.

Meeting African migrants as well as conducting interviews was relatively easy, however, some difficulties that were encountered included navigating the unclear boundaries and the discomfort that arose with some of the male interviewees. As the research was conducted in the underground beer parlour scene, as well as unclear and blurred boundaries between the researcher and participants, leading to some male participants trying to initiate romantic relationships. This resulted in discomfort for me. Furthermore, the frequency of these attempts, ranging from verbal to physical, prompted me to include a more in-depth examination in chapter seven of this thesis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This thesis is about the experiences of African migrants working and navigating within the informal economy in Dubai. The contemporary labour market is a dynamic and multifaceted space where social, cultural, and gendered dynamics intertwine, influence, and shape the opportunities, and experiences of individuals. Gender also has an impact on migration processes, therefore engendering research is crucial in contemporary academia (Christou and Kofman 2022: 1). It becomes evident that a conventional lens on gender is insufficient to capture this study's multifaceted and diverse nature. Thus, using a feminist framework emerges as a well-suited instrument for dismantling the labour market and the labour migration dynamics that underlie this research.

In the past, feminist research often primarily focused on women and their experiences, overlooking the diversity among men and women. Gender was seen as binary concept, with little consideration for how other social variables like class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and more intersect with gender and shape different experiences (Christou and Kofman 2022: 2). However, this began to change with the development of the concept of intersectionality, which recognizes that an individual's identity and experiences are shaped not by a single factor like gender but by the complex interplay of multiple social identities and systems of oppression. This concept, originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), became a central theme in feminist scholarship, challenging the oversimplified view of gender and emphasising the need to consider various intersecting identities. While recognising the diversity among women, it is simultaneously essential to study men and masculinity to understand how gender operates in society (Christou and Kofman 2022: 2).

Incorporating gender relations into our understanding of migration processes and fostering gender-inclusive migration research is imperative for several reasons. Not only do women globally comprise nearly half of international migrants, but gender represents a fundamental dimension of differentiation within societies, intersecting with other vital social divisions like age, class, ethnicity, nationality, race, disability, and sexual orientation. Both, labour markets and border crossings can be highly gender-segregated spaces (Christou and Kofman 2022:1). Women in various regions across the Middle East

and North Africa may encounter restrictions on solo movement, employment or obtaining travel documents. These restrictions often are imposed by patriarchal conditions, such as male guardianship policies or the adoption of an obedience-maintenance framework[10] into the personal status law. For instance, in Libya, as of May 2023, women traveling solo need to provide an official declaration outlining the purpose of their travel and an explanation for traveling unaccompanied. In Qatar, airport officials stopped a 30-year-old mother of five children, demanding her to reach out to her male guardian to confirm that she had permission to travel. Despite advancements in women's ability to secure travel documents like passports since the 2000s, certain countries, including Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Yemen, persist in requiring women to obtain their guardian's permission to apply for a passport (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In the UAE, women's mobility within the country is generally unrestricted. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, women are not required to obtain their husband's permission to leave their homes. However, potential sanctions may arise if a woman permanently abandons her residence or if the court deems her departure unlawful, unnecessary, or contrary to the family's interests (Human Rights Watch 2023: 107). Interestingly, the UAE Federal Personal Status Law applies to all UAE nationals and foreign nationals, excluding non-Muslims who may follow their respective religious laws. A recent introduction is a new law on Civil Marriage with improved protections for women and mostly equal rights between spouses regarding marriage, divorce, and decisions relating to children. But this applies exclusively to non-Muslim foreign national couples living in Abu Dhabi, thereby establishing different rights to women based on their religion, nationality, and where they reside (Human Rights Watch 2023: 108).

Previously, the migration of women was often examined through a simplistic push-pull framework, occasionally incorporating some social factors. However, a more recent and comprehensive perspective has emerged, highlighting that female migration, in

[10] This framework requires husbands to provide their wives with spousal maintenance (food, clothing, shelter, and other living expenses), whereas women are mandated to reside in the marital home, obey their husbands, ask for permission before departing the house or travel. If they 'disobey' they can lose their entitlement to spousal maintenance (Human Rights Watch 2023: 18).

comparison to male migration, can be influenced by a desire to escape socially discriminatory institutions and social control. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), which assesses discrimination against women within social institutions, provides evidence that gender inequalities can both motivate and impede women's migration (Christou and Kofman 2022:5). On one hand, women facing discrimination in their home countries may seek opportunities for migration abroad, opting for destinations with lower levels of gender discrimination within social institutions. Conversely, gender-based discrimination in their home countries can also act as an obstacle to women's migration. Factors such as significant family responsibilities, limited access to resources and social networks, minimal bargaining power, or the inability to initiate migration can hinder women from pursuing migration. Qualitative research corroborates these findings, illustrating that women may choose to migrate within their own countries or across borders to escape child, early, and forced marriages, as well as other forms of violence against women within their families (Christou and Kofman 2022:5).

Women only became visible in migration studies in the mid-1980s. Before that, they were mainly seen as family members, responsible for the domestic sphere and regarded as dependents of men (Danaj 2022, Schrover 2013). Morokvasic (1975) was one of the first scholars to introduce a gender perspective into migration studies. Since then, studies have shown that gender significantly shapes migrant's life trajectories, work prospects, family dynamics and social connections. Women have been portrayed as active and independent individuals, supporting their families economically and, for instance, engaging actively in decision-making or remittance transactions (Danaj 2022: 2f.).

Research focusing on migration to the UAE often considers women's migration as domestic workers, revealing complex connections between gender, class and other inequalities. Scholars such as Mahdavi (2011, 2013, 2017) view migration through the lens of human trafficking and focus on female migrants' stories. Often not knowing what they will have to go through, these women leave their families with the goal of providing economic support. However, once in the UAE, due to abusive working conditions in the formal sector, many migrants prefer to work in the informal sector which offers no financial or social security. It is against popular narratives portraying these women as

victims that Mahdavi (2011, 2013, 2017) shows how they choose their own pathways and thus should not be victimised.

Ngeh and Pelican (2018) are among the first scholars to use an intersectional approach to investigate the experiences of African migrants in the UAE. Their study sheds light on the segregated nature of the labour market, revealing a pattern where migrant workers are systematically directed towards specific occupations associated with their nationalities, also known as institutionalised racism. Furthermore, they also reveal that segregation extends beyond the workplace, as citizenship is not merely a legal status, but a complex system of inclusion and exclusion, also affecting the labour market. The public sector is mostly reserved for nationals who typically secure high paying positions, whereas non-nationals work in private sectors. Gulf Arabs are more likely to work in the public sector, conversely, higher-paying jobs in the private sector are for migrants from the Global North, perpetuating a hierarchy based on nationality. These discriminatory practices extend to the entrepreneurial sphere, where migrants can only establish a company, if partnering with an Emirati national, reinforcing the exclusive nature of economic participation (Ngeh and Pelican 2018:173).

Intersectionality has only been included in migration studies in recent years. Allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how various inequalities intersect and impact African migrants in the UAE, this framework also shows that affected individuals not only experience disadvantages and limitations but also actively negotiate and make use of their diverse and intersecting identities (Ngeh and Pelican 2018; see also Lutz et al. 2013). By adopting this framework, this thesis contributes to the existing literature on African migrant women in the UAE in several ways. First, it endorses the increasingly prevalent notion of migrant women as agents and decision-makers who chose their own migration and employment trajectories, and thus offers a more nuanced and empowering perspective. Further, it challenges stereotypes and acknowledges the active roles African migrants (women) play in shaping their own lives.

4. The formal economy

While the focus of this study is on the informal economy, it is essential to understand the reality of African migrants in the formal economy, as many migrants enter the informal economy due to the poor working conditions in the formal one. The formal economy refers to the officially recognised and regulated economic sector of a country. It encompasses activities such as wage-paying jobs, financial transactions, and other organised commerce that are governed by laws and regulations. In this chapter, I will examine the experiences of African migrants within the formal economy of Dubai and provide insights into the lives and struggles of these individuals as they navigate the complexities of the formal workplace. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the challenges faced by African migrants in formal employment positions in the UAE and shed light on the wider implications of the informal economy and the formal sector.

Being an employed migrant in the UAE under the *kafala* system is challenging, as the system works in favour of the employer and not the migrant. The situation for African migrants is especially challenging, as integration into the labour market remains difficult. Factors of inequality include for instance gender, class and ethnicity (Ngeh and Pelican 2018). While African migrants confront significant deskilling[11] in the UAE labour market, they may also leverage their positionality to their advantage. In comparison to the Western labour market, the UAE places greater emphasis on soft skills, job experience, and entrepreneurial spirit than on education and professional qualifications (Ngeh and Pelican 2018).

There are two main routes that the participants of this study used to enter the UAE to work: (1) through a recruitment agency in the worker's home country, which can possibly lead to fraud, coercion, and exploitation, or (2) on a tourist visa with the intention of

[11] 'Deskilling' refers to the redesigning of tasks so that they require less knowledge, skill, and expertise and take less time to learn. This can occur through automation, the use of specialised tools or the division of labour into simpler tasks. As a result, workers become less specialised and more interchangeable, with a corresponding reduction in salary, status, and job satisfaction. While it reduces costs for businesses, increases productivity, and reduces barriers to entry, it often results in a loss of employee motivation (Bravermann 1998).

seeking formal ones in the country. However, due to poor working conditions, formal employment has become less appealing, and many migrants prefer to work in the informal sector. It is also a common occurrence to immigrate via (1), and then end up in the informal sector due to unprecedented incidents, which for instance resulted in the termination of a contract or absconding.

Zoey, a thirty-year-old woman from Uganda, was lured into a trap set by a recruitment agency. She was promised a job in security, but upon her arrival in Dubai, she was taken to a house in Ras al Khaimah and told she would be working as a housemaid. Little did she know, she had fallen victim to a common scheme where agencies deceive individuals about their prospective occupation. The once aspiring security guard found herself trapped in a foreign country, forced to perform menial tasks for a wealthy family. However, she didn't receive any salary for three months, and her passport was kept by her employer. She saw herself forced to run away and as a result of not having a passport, overstayed her visa and ended up as an irregular migrant. Her story will be further examined in the next part.

The illegal practice of passport withholding is a widespread issue for migrants in the GCC countries. Despite being technically against the law, employers often justify the practice by claiming it is for the convenience and safety of the workers. However, in reality, it serves as a means of control, trapping workers in exploitative and oppressive work conditions (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016). According to reports by Human Rights Watch (2014: 38f), the practice prevents workers from leaving unsatisfactory employment situations and is a clear violation of their basic rights. As Damir-Geilsdorf (2016) highlights, this practice not only leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse but also denies them their freedom of movement and the ability to seek better job opportunities.

Another case is a transport company which may seem like a viable option for those seeking employment in Dubai. However, beneath the surface lies a harsh reality for many African migrants who find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt bondage and exploitation. While they can choose to work in a 12 or 24-hour shift system, they have to meet stringent targets which pushes their limits. Further, the conditions in the company housing in the Al Khail industrial area, where many of the drivers live, can be cramped as rooms are usually shared with up to five drivers and lacking in basic necessities. Taxi

driving in Dubai has been described as slavery by Paul, one of the Kenyan interviewees. He has been working for DTC for about six months, before they set him free, without giving him a specific reason. Despite the long shifts, the drivers are expected to make a certain amount of money each day. If these targets are not met, the company deducts their salary by "borrowing" them money, causing many to find themselves in a never-ending cycle of debt. In Paul's case, the situation was so dire that he was forced to stay in the country illegally and homeless, as the DTC kept his passport until he paid off his debt and kicked him out of the company housing. This system, it seems, is designed for failure, trapping unsuspecting migrants in a vicious cycle of exploitation and hardship. According to Damir-Geilsdorf (2016) who is looking into contract labour and debt bondage in the Arab Gulf States, although the Arab Gulf States indeed have labour laws governing employment contracts, maximum working hours, breaks, and other aspects of employment, there are insufficient control to ensure that these laws are effectively enforced. As a result, fines and penalties may be imposed for violating these regulations but are not consistently upheld (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016). Paul's situation is yet to be resolved. After he reached out to his former employer who agreed to return his documents after receiving his outstanding debt of approximately 8500 dirhams (2170 Euro), which includes expenses related to his driver's licence, residence, and good conduct certificate (view figure 2).

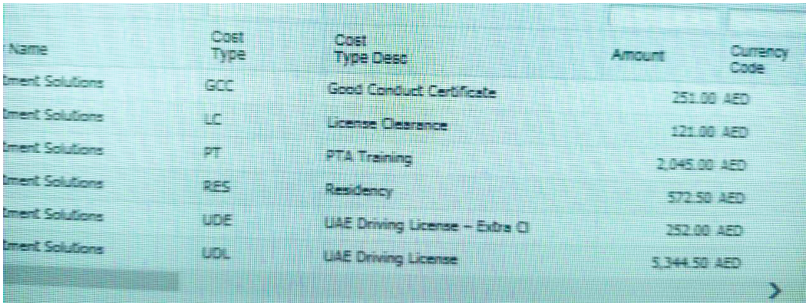

Figure 2: Paul's debt.
Photo credit: Paul (17.02.2023).

However, a few days later, he was asked to pay an additional 3000 dirhams for the cancellation of his visa. It is important to note that Paul has not been employed by the company since November 2020, nor has he lived in their company accommodation or received any salary during that time. The request for payment highlights the unreasonable and unfair nature of the formal economy in the UAE.

Liam, a Ugandan IT professional in his late twenties found himself facing a common challenge among African migrants in the formal economy in the UAE: Deskilling. Despite holding a bachelor's degree, he was forced to take on a job as an outdoor salesman, delivering water bottles to offices and homes, while his supervisors barely spoke sufficient English. But Liam was determined not to let his skills go to waste. Through persistence and determination, he negotiated with his company's managers and was eventually – after two years – able to secure a position more fitting for his qualifications. It took him several negotiations with the company's managers, and he was ready to leave the company before they agreed to give him a position as Data Assistant Manager. Despite the struggle, Liam's story highlights the resilience and determination of African migrants in the face of discrimination and deskilling.

Brandon, the Kenyan guy I had met through Couchsurfing, was 23 when he first arrived in the UAE. I visited him in his shared flat in Sharjah, where he lives with his two Kenyan roommates. Working as a ground handling agent with Emirates Sky Cargo, his salary is 10.000 AED (2600 €). He was recruited via Skype while still in Nairobi and received a job offer within two days, including housing allowance, transport allowance, and basic allowance. Since the Emirates offer was more attractive than his previous job at Swissport, he decided to switch to Emirates. One of the main factors leading to the decision was the potential of travelling internationally, while with Swissport he only had the option of travelling to Switzerland. However, he sometimes regrets taking the job at Emirates, because he hasn't been promoted since he came to the UAE; while at Swissport, he has been promoted five times. To increase his career advancement, he has tried to further his education, by taking online classes and getting a diploma in aviation ground handling from Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia.

Brandon is one of the few individuals I have met who experienced positive outcomes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In March and April 2020, when the pandemic caused the world

to shut down, Brandon was able to continue travelling due to his job. While passengers were not flying due to lockdowns, closed airports and travel restrictions, many airlines around the world converted some of their passenger planes into cargo planes to transport goods during the pandemic, as the reduction in passenger traffic led to a decrease in cargo capacity. Emirates, as well as Lufthansa, were among the airlines that implemented this change (Cirium 2020). Brandon and a few colleagues received special training on how to load and unload these converted freighters. As a result, Brandon flew to different parts of the world to load and unload. Additionally, he taught workers at outstations, such as in Germany, how to unload. While this special position was a positive outcome of the pandemic, he describes Covid as a "blessing in disguise", since many people who were not working with Sky Cargo lost their jobs (pass services, cabin crew, etc.). However, he still faced a pay cut of 50 per cent, while he worked full time, whereas other Emirates staff were able to stay home but also received 50 per cent of their salary. Due to the travel restrictions in many countries, he had to do a lot of turnaround flights, which means sometimes he had to work for 21 hours straight without a proper break.

In conclusion, the formal economy in the UAE presents unique challenges and obstacles for African migrants who are seeking employment opportunities. Despite laws and regulations in place, enforcement remains lacking. While the *kafala* system is working in favour of employers and not the workers, it is leading to the exploitation and oppression of the migrants. African migrants may face deskilling, debt bondage, passport withholding, and cramped living conditions, among other issues. However, there are also examples of African migrants, such as Liam, who have overcome these challenges and succeeded in finding fulfilling employment that aligns with their skills and qualifications. Brandon's case highlights that a career can have its ups and downs. While he is unhappy about the stagnation of his career, Covid has brought unexpected positive changes.

4.1 Between formal and informal economies

While switching between the formal and informal economy and between regular and irregular migration status frequently coincides, however, it does not have to. Mahdavi (2013) in contrast to the prevalent narrative that portrays female migrants as victims of trafficking, contends that an increasing number of women are purposefully leaving the

formal and semi-formal economies due to poor working conditions in domestic employment. This subchapter is going to examine both cases by reporting two different stories of two women I met.

Zoey, whom I have mentioned in the previous subchapter, switched from the semi-formal economy to the informal one by absconding, facing betrayal from her recruiter, as well as withholding of payment and long working hours. She was promised a job as a security guard when she was recruited from Uganda in 2019, but upon arriving in the UAE, she was told she would be working as a housemaid. Despite her initial reluctance, she agreed to take the job due to pressure from her mother and the need to repay the agency the 8000 AED. Zoey worked for three months without payment for a large Pakistani family in Ajman, enduring gruelling conditions and an overwhelming workload. Tragically, her daughter broke her leg during this time, and when Zoey asked her employer for help paying for the surgery, they refused. In desperation, she fled and spent three nights sleeping at a metro station, without her passport which had been taken by her employer. Eventually, a Nigerian man offered her a place to stay in exchange for a sexual relationship, providing her with food and shelter. She has been living without her passport since then and thus overstayed her visa.

When Zoey asked her employer to return her passport, they refused, demanding the money back that they used to 'buy' her, which now has increased to 7000 dirhams. Her employer ignored her attempts to negotiate down to 2000 dirhams. She also tried asking the police for support, but they told her to go and wait for them to call back, which they never did. She contacted the labour office, who told her to negotiate with the Pakistani family. They also called the family, however, they spoke Arabic, so she did not know what they said. Legally, she counts as a runaway who absconded, even though she was told that she will work as a security agent, on her visa it always said 'housemaid'. After some time, she realised it was partly her fault because she had accepted the housemaid visa, as the recruitment agent told her the word 'housemaid' is just there so she could enter the country. Then she started to do 'streets' to earn some money, as she urgently needed money to support her parents and children in Uganda.

While living in Ras al Khaimah, she overheard some fellow Ugandans in the supermarket and when she went to their house, they told her they were working as sex workers and

making good money, so she decided to join them. Mahdavi's article also includes accounts from women informing women about the financial benefits of sex work, leading them to engage in it (Mahdavi 2013: 436). With time passing by, Zoey eventually decided to move to Dubai in February 2021, where some people approached her asking her to braid their hair. This is how she started doing hair as another business. Zoey's journey began as a regular migrant, suffering contract fraud and poor working conditions, she ran away from her employer who retained her documents which resulted in her being irregular and entering the informal economy. Her trying to get support from the labour office as well as the police fails, due to no laws protecting migrants in the domestic work sector, as it is regarded as a private matter (Mahdavi 2013).

However, many migrants prefer to work in irregular employment settings as it offers a more beneficial alternative to the limited employment setting within the *kafala* system (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016, Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019). This is the case of Lydia, who came to the UAE intending to take over her sister's beer parlour, who had returned to Kenya to deliver her child. She had been in Dubai for approximately five months when I first met her, and she was just about to re-establish the business after her sister's departure had caused a decline. Lydia had previously been employed as a cashier in a Kenyan hotel, but she was fired during Covid. Since she has three children and two grandchildren, she needed money for food and school fees, which is why she decided to go to Dubai and overtake her sister's business.

This chapter has presented cases of African migrants who have transitioned from the formal economy to the informal economy, as well as those who have entered the informal sector directly. As the examples demonstrate, the informal sector is seen as a means of escaping the exploitation and suffering of the formal sector as well as a viable alternative that bypasses the need for regular employment and can lead to economic well-being. The informal economy will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

5. The informal economy

The informal economy in Dubai refers to unregistered and unregulated economic activities that exist outside the formal legal framework. These activities often take place

in the dark and are not subject to government regulations or taxes. Examples of informal economic activities in Dubai include small-scale informal businesses such as street vending, freelance migration broking, real estate, renting out bed space, operating beer parlours or sex work, among others. This chapter is dedicated to exploring the informal economy in Dubai, with a thorough examination of informal drinking establishments, known as beer parlours.

5.1. Places of consumption

Even though the consumption of alcoholic beverages is considered taboo in many Islamic nations, and hence requires a special licence, informal beer parlours can be found all over Dubai, especially in Dubai's historical centre, Deira. While they are usually known as *Kayembe* among Ugandans, *Pima* among Kenyans, or *Nganda* in Burundi Swahili, beer parlours are well-established informal businesses with an organised supply as well as a security network.

Figure 3: Typical night in Lydia's beer parlour, Deira/ Dubai.
Photo credit: Lena Sgorsaly (20.03.2023).

Beer parlours are places that have not been given much academic attention yet. In the global context, as well as in the Gulf region, there are only a handful of studies that talk about beer parlours or bed space. Adenugba et al. (2018) are looking at beer parlours through an entrepreneurial lens and discuss socio-cultural perceptions of women in beer parlour businesses in Ibadan, Nigeria. Jonathan Ngeh's (2022) research focuses on African migrants living in bed space accommodations in the UAE and argues that beer parlours are an established business for bed space communities in the UAE. Divided into sections for VIP guests and normal guests, these businesses are highly profitable, even more so than renting out bed spaces. The owners of beer parlours are usually female and stand at the top of the bed space social hierarchy. During my research, I found that many beer parlours are at the same time bed spaces, or that bed spaces can become beer parlours. This leads to the assumption that beer parlours and bed space are not mutually exclusive.

The first beer parlour I found myself in, was Lydia's *Pima*, which was shown to me by Brandon, right after I landed in Dubai. Brandon is a 30-year-old guy from Kenya who has lived in Dubai since 2015, working in Aviation. He was kind enough to pick me up from the airport and showed me the way to my hotel. After I checked in – it was 6 am – Brandon suggested going out for a beer. As we navigated through the unfamiliar streets of Deira, I was filled with nervousness and excitement because I had heard that drinking in Dubai is only allowed in fancy hotels. The building we entered was run-down and dingy. There was barely any light, and I was a bit worried about what would happen next. As the lift didn't come, we made our way up the stairs to the second floor. It took a few minutes and a few knocks to open the door. A lady opened the door a crack wide first, but then she opened the door completely and let us in. She looked at me in surprise, not used to seeing a white girl in her beer parlour. Despite the dingy and run-down exterior, I felt a sense of warmth and hospitality as we settled in for a beer and a chat.

Lydia's *Pima* (figure 3) is divided into three sections, a kitchen, a main consumption space, a sleeping area, and a bathroom. After entering the space, one stands right in the kitchen, which is a small hallway, with the bathroom door to the left. The bathroom has a toilet, a sink, and a shower which constitutes a bottom part of a shower cabin. The ceiling is missing a few panels, and when the AC is on, water drops through a hose into a bucket. From the kitchen, one can enter the main consumption space. It is separated

from the kitchen through a curtain. The main room is filled with four couches, two large couch tables, and a few stools. To the left, there is a huge fridge, which is full of beer and other alcoholic beverages. On the wall, there is a TV installed, which usually plays Nigerian Bollywood movies or music videos from YouTube or soccer. At the end of the main room is a pink wooden wall that leads to two private bed areas, separated by curtains. Lydia's bed is on the left and the other one is rented out occasionally.

Beer parlours are often associated with a specific nationality, often reflecting the nationality of the owner. For example, Lydia's beer parlour was primarily frequented by Kenyans, as she is from Kenya. Despite this association, beer parlours are often not exclusively frequented by one particular nationality and may also welcome patrons from other nations. For example, Lydia's beer parlour was sometimes frequented by Zanzibaris, Tanzanians, Burundians, Ugandans, Cameroonians, or even Bangladeshis. This shows that although beer parlours may have a strong connection with a particular nationality, they are still open to and welcoming customers from other backgrounds.

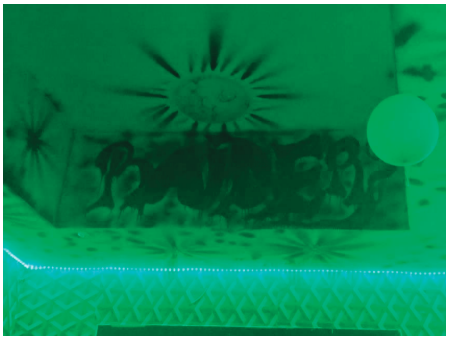

Figure 4: Raiders' ceiling, Deira/Dubai.
Photo credit: Lena Sgorsaly (15.04.2022).

During my research stay, I found four different types of beer parlours. The first group includes those places which are pure places of consumption. These places usually are rented only for the purpose of selling alcohol without a licence. In some cases, they are owned by a group of people, such as Mia's beer parlour which is owned by her, and two other people. She has a special agreement with her landlord, who knows about the business and tolerates it. However, the rent is higher than it normally would be, in order

to compensate for the risk. Another example of this type of beer parlour is “Raiders” (figure 4), the biggest beer parlour I visited in Deira. Raiders is owned by multiple people as well. This place has one big room, with multiple tables and chairs and they even employed a DJ who plays loud music every night. Both places feature LED lights that create a club-like vibe and serve shisha as well for 20 dirhams. While these places are typically loud and crowded, the atmosphere is similar to a legal bar or club, it is riskier to be inside, as there is a significant chance of being raided by authorities.

The second group are beer parlours which have a dual purpose, serving as both a place of residence and consumption. These establishments have separate areas designed for sleeping and consumption, often divided by a partition or curtain. Lydia’s *Pima*, for example, falls into this category. While she is the only person officially living there, she sometimes rents out the second bed or lets friends crash on one of the couches.

The third group of beer parlours includes those that serve primarily as bed space but also sell alcohol. These places are rather small with sometimes only two or three chairs in one corner, where people can sit and drink. Julia’s bed space for example consisted of one room with six bunk beds, separated from the kitchen with a curtain, and three chairs in the hallway that lead to the bathroom. The whole room was not more than 10 square metres big. Sometimes they even let you sit on one of the beds if you are trusted enough.

Figure 5: Outdoor consumption space near Al Khail mall.
Source: Google Maps. (2022, February). Google Street View [Al Khail neighbourhood]

Another category of consumption spaces can be allocated to those outdoor places where beer is available, usually in Dubai's outskirts or company housing areas, like in the Al Khail area (see figure 5) or Sunapor. In Al Khail, the beer was served from a large thermal container in the centre of an empty and dusty area, surrounded by many groups of people either sitting or standing. Special about this spot was that there were many Asians as well, whereas, the first three categories, primarily attracted African customers. Interestingly Asians were usually sitting cross-legged on blankets while drinking beer, whereas Africans were either standing or sitting on random stones or boxes. However, this fourth category needs further investigation to fully understand its extent. But why are beer parlours such a successful business? To answer this question, one has to consider the following: Due to Dubai's Islamic norms and rules, alcohol is only accessible to non-Muslim residents with a special licence and tourists at well-hidden liquor shops, as well as in rather expensive locations, such as clubs and bars, which can be found everywhere throughout the city. Prices fluctuate but remain quite high when compared to prices in liquor shops. One beer in an official bar starts from 40 dirhams (10 Euro), which is expensive, whereas, in beer parlours, beer is much more affordable. For example, Lydia sells one beer for 10 dirhams, two beers for 15 dirhams, and three beers for 20 dirhams. By employing marketing strategies, such as selling a bigger quantity for less, which is common practice also in official bars (for example a bucket of five beers for 120 dirhams), she invites her customers to stay for a certain while, until they finish three or six beers, and come back more often, as it is easier to buy and consume beers from Lydia's, as going to the liquor shop themselves. Plus, with her living room atmosphere, Lydia offers a safe space for everyone to drink and hang out. Other beer parlours in Deira have a more party-like atmosphere, with loud music and flashlights. Hence, for migrant Muslims and residents without a licence, a beer parlour often is the only alternative to find alcohol. There have been reports that even sometimes Emiratis send someone to buy drinks from beer parlours.

I have visited seven beer parlours in Deira, which probably constitute only very few of the actual number. Most interestingly, beer parlours co-exist alongside formal sites of consumption, such as hotels and bars. The Fortune Hotel, for example, boasts two nightclubs on the premises, one on the ground floor with loud music, room for dancing, snacks et cetera. The other one is on the rooftop next to the pool; shisha is available too.

Other nightclubs in Deira include the Fortune Pearl Hotel, where the club features East African and Swahili DJs. Given the existence of formal and informal places of consumption, one must ask oneself, why are beer parlours so popular, and even thriving, when one can also avoid the risk of participating in illegality?

People frequently choose beer parlours over formal pubs or clubs due to financial reasons. The price for alcohol in beer parlours is very low, a Carlsberg for instance costs between five and ten dirhams, and prices can vary depending on offers and sympathies with the beer parlour owner. While formal clubs have to pay for their licence and the alcohol is expensive, beer parlours need to compensate only for rent and electricity which enhances the lower price. As many African migrants have financial responsibilities, such as supporting their families back home (Ngeh and Pelican 2018), cheaper beers in the beer parlour seem to be a good choice. Another reason why beer parlours are so popular is the atmosphere. Beer parlours are much more intimate and private, for two reasons: On the one hand, they are smaller than clubs in terms of size and thus are only able to accommodate a limited number of people. On the other hand, they are not accessible to anyone, as they are unofficial and there are no signs or any form of advertisement on buildings indicating the beer parlour. To find a beer parlour, one must be guided there by someone, which ensures that only trusted people from a certain community enter these spaces. Furthermore, beer parlours can act as a place of comfort, like a living room, or even a second home for the bed space community, who otherwise only have their bed to hang out. Zoey and Julia regularly spent the whole day at Lydia's or Mia's place to watch TV and cook food together. Other customers often spend hours on their phones watching soccer or the news. It is not uncommon to be on the phone watching soccer or the news with your headphones on while having a beer or not in the beer parlour, whereas in formal places of consumption, such as a nightclub, the music often is too loud and talking to other people is difficult. However, this party atmosphere can also exist in beer parlours, but in contrast to clubs, which are open for the purpose of partying, it is not a continuous party atmosphere. Lastly, beer parlours usually are open all day long if someone can open the door. However, sometimes after a long party night, people can pass out in the beer parlour and no one is physically able to open the door. To sum up, one can say that beer parlours are a cheaper, more intimate alternative to legal places of consumption, where people can party, meet friends and relax all at the same time all day long.

Although beer parlours operate without a licence and are therefore illegal, they are sometimes tolerated by law enforcement. Lydia explained to me, as long as they don't cause too much disturbance and keep the volume down. However, Lydia also expressed her fear of potential police raids and even went so far as to develop an emergency plan. In the event of a raid, she would vacate the beer parlour and seek temporary lodging elsewhere. Once the coast was clear, she would resume her business but hire someone to manage the business for her to keep her profile low. This highlights the fact that even though the situation is somewhat relaxed, Lydia is always living in fear of being raided, which can be stressful.

6. Entrepreneurship and livelihood strategies

This chapter aims to present an overview of various business opportunities and livelihood strategies used by African migrants in the UAE, including street-vending, second-hand clothing businesses, sex work, and freelance shipping services. The text highlights the experiences and challenges faced by specific individuals in each industry, providing personal anecdotes and insights into the nature of the businesses and their impact on the lives of African migrants. Further, this chapter will delve into the experiences related to Covid-19 and its impact on various aspects of the formal and informal economy. Ultimately, the gendered patterns of the informal economy will be examined, to gain a deeper understanding of how gender intersects with the economy.

6.1 Street vending

Boris, one of the interviewees, introduced me to a popular meeting point for Swahili-speaking Burundians, in the Sabkha district in Deira called *marangi* (figure 6), which means colours in Swahili, as it is in front of a shop for paint. Due to the slightly elevated pavement, this spot welcomes pedestrians to sit down and have a chat. It is at *marangi* where I met Nour, a Burundian woman in her thirties selling *chapati*, an East African

flatbread, and *uji*, a popular porridge drink made of corn flour, on the street. Normally street vending is prohibited in the UAE, and it is indeed very rare to see people doing it[12].

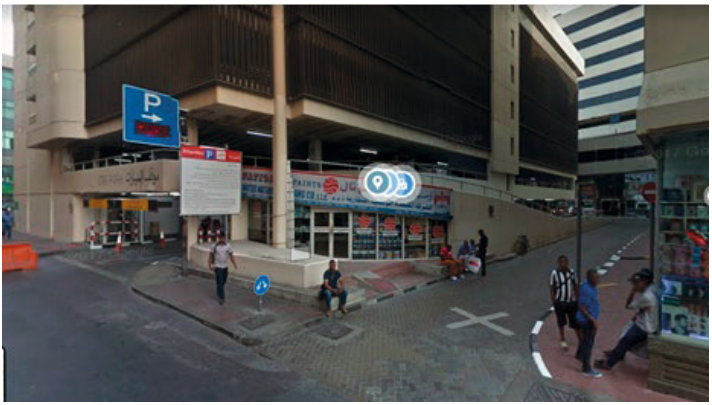

Figure 6: *Marangi* on Al Burj Street, Deira.
Source: Google Maps. (2021, November). Google Street View [11 Al Burj Street, Deira, Dubai].

Nour moved to the UAE in 2018 following her divorce to search for work to support her five children. She sold her clothing, earrings, and other possessions to fund her three-month tourist visa ($270) and $300 one-way ticket. She found a job in a restaurant, but after two months the restaurant was closed. She couldn't find another employment since she didn't speak English well enough, but as the sole provider for her five children, she began selling *chapati* and *uji* on the streets, even though street vending is illegal in the UAE. The police told her to stop a few times at first, but she managed to convince them to let her sell her goods. According to her, the police were acting in her favour for two reasons: because she is a Muslim and wears a hijab, which proclaims her Islamic faith, and because she is a woman, and the police are generally gentler to women. This is also confirmed by Ngeh (2018:16) who found that the police in Dubai tend to be more indulgent towards African women, and harsher with African men. As a result, it appears that African women have more trust in the police compared to African men and which

[12] Apart from Nour, I only saw one other woman selling food (*mandazi*) on the streets, close to the Gold Souk.

could explain why Nour was having no problem negotiating with the police. Nour even made an oral agreement with a CID (Criminal Investigation Department) officer that if the police ever came again and tell her to stop selling, she could refer to him. Nour's business is booming, and she is working every day, except for Sundays. She has been selling 60 *chapatis* a day for 2.5 AED each, as well as a cup of *uji* for 5 AED, resulting in an average salary of 70 $ a day. She has many stable customers, who come by *marangi* to buy her food. She can pay for her tourist visa every three months, and she even bought a piece of land in Burundi. During Covid, when the lockdown prevented people from going out, she expanded her business to home-cooked meals (*ugali*, *marague*[13]etc.) that she was selling to customers, but since the UAE government has been giving out free meals as well, she didn't earn as much as from the chapati street business.

In conclusion, Nour's story illustrates how intersectionality shapes the experiences of African migrant women in the informal economy in the UAE. Her initial job search in the formal sector highlights the linguistic barrier she faced. English or Arab language proficiency is a crucial factor in accessing formal employment opportunities in the UAE. Nour's struggle in this regard indicates how language intersects with gender, as it often disproportionately affects women, particularly those who may not have had access to formal education or other opportunities of language acquisition. Furthermore, Nour's identity as a divorced, single mother, a Muslim woman, and a street vendor intersects with economic necessity, linguistic barriers, and law enforcement dynamics, all of which influence her journey and ability to negotiate the challenges of the informal labour market. Her success demonstrates the capacity of individuals to navigate and overcome obstacles by leveraging their intersecting identities and resources.

6.2 A look at freelance shipping[14] and other small-scale businesses

Selling and shipping goods to Africa is a common way to make money in the UAE. Hannah, a young businesswoman I encountered at Mia's beer parlour during my research

[13] *Ugali* is Swahili for maize porridge, usually eaten with hands and a delicious sauce in sub-Saharan Africa, it has many different names, for example, *Foufou* in francophone countries, *Pub* in South Africa, or *Nzima* in Zambia. *Marague* are cooked beans.

[14] Freelance shipping is often referred to as 'cargo' by my respondents.

ships second-hand clothes from Sharjah to a boutique she runs together with her sister in Uganda. When she first came to the UAE, she worked as a housemaid in Abu Dhabi, but after two years when her contract finished, she decided rather to return to Uganda and to open a boutique there, as the workload as a housemaid was too much and exhausting. However, since she returned to the UAE, she has been looking for a job in the formal sector. As she hopes to find employment after Ramadan, she continues to ship second-hand clothes to Uganda until then. She said she could never work as a housemaid again because it is too tiresome. Hannah's journey reflects the intersection of her identities as a young businessperson, an African migrant, and a woman in the UAE. Initially working as a housemaid, she struggled with the workload and physical demands of the job. Her decision to open a boutique in Uganda with her sister underscores her entrepreneurial spirit and the importance attributed to family support. The choice to engage in the import and sale of second-hand clothes to Africa reflects her resourcefulness and the economic opportunities available to African migrants in the UAE (Pelican 2014). Importantly, Hannah's decision to seek formal employment after returning to the UAE highlights the complexities of navigating the labour market as an African woman. Her preference for formal employment suggests a desire for economic stability and better working conditions than what she experienced as a housemaid.

Liam, the IT professional from Uganda, whom I introduced in chapter 4 also rents out his apartment in Deira as bed space. Currently, he has six beds in the room, but only four are occupied. As he is not actively seeking roommates, he does not need to make a profit from renting out the space. According to him, sometimes people were not paying on time, so he threw them out. Liam is well off and could rent a place on his own. While he does not need to stay in bed space, he wants to as he enjoys the bed space community. He feels responsible for the ones staying in his shared apartment, as they would have nowhere to go if he was to stay on his own. His story shows that not everyone living in these spaces is hustling and contrasts the situation where migrants are struggling to make ends meet.

Liam's experience as an IT professional and his decision to rent out his apartment for bed space also reveal the intersection of his class status/professional identity and economic choices. As an IT professional, he occupies a relatively privileged position within the labour market, reflecting his education and qualifications. Renting out his apartment

highlights his ability to leverage his financial stability and prioritise values such as community and shared living over maximizing profits.

Another tantalising opportunity to make a living in the UAE is working as a freelancer in the cargo industry, which involves the transportation of goods and materials by sea, air or land. These goods can be anything from raw materials for manufacturing to finished products for consumers. This job opportunity seems to be rather common among African migrants, Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican (2019: 162) report for instance that many Cameroonian migrants participate in the cargo industry, connecting Africa and the Gulf. In addition to storage and transportation of goods, their services include visa assistance, business support and money transfer.

I have encountered several individuals engaging in the cargo industry in Dubai, among them Boris, a 37-year-old Burundian, who has been in the UAE since 2016 and is working for Laxman, a shipping company. He is staying on a tourist visa that must be renewed every three months. His duties include finding clients, bringing them to the Al Rahidiya warehouse, and navigating the complex bureaucracy of shipping goods. He relies solely on commissions from his clients, which can be precarious and subject to fluctuations in demand. Among his primary shipping destinations are Matadi (DRC) and Luanda (Angola), as well as Kenya and Tanzania. As his salary comes solely from commissions from his clients, he usually receives it through Western Union. Due to his tourist visa, he is only permitted to withdraw a limited amount of money, which can cause problems. Another challenge for freelancers in this industry is that it might take months without finding any clients, which means no income.

I first encountered Boris at Lydia's beer parlour, and the next day we had an interview where he shared some valuable insights into Dubai's beer parlour scene. He introduced me to three other beer parlours – two Kenyan and one Cameroonian – each with its unique atmosphere. At the first Kenyan parlour, we enjoyed the VIP room, ordered shisha, and listened to loud music from a TV. In the second Kenyan parlour, we were the only ones in the VIP room, and the ambience was quite boring, so we headed to the Cameroonian beer parlour. The door was opened by Tahmid, a tall and skinny Algerian with long hair. He seemed to be friends with everyone and communicated easily in French, the main

language of the parlour. Tahmid shared that he too was a freelance shipping agent, with upcoming travel plans to Cameroon and Turkey for business. His story highlights the welcoming nature of beer parlours to people from various cultural backgrounds. While individuals working in the informal sector often frequent beer parlours, personal and religious beliefs play a significant role in visiting or not visiting these consumption spaces. Nour for example, as a religious woman stated that she would never enter a beer parlour. Nour's religious identity intersects with her values and beliefs, influencing her decision to avoid beer parlours. This highlights how individuals' choices regarding informal social spaces are shaped not only by cultural and professional factors but also by deeply held personal and religious beliefs.

6.3 Commercial sex

The commercial sex industry in the UAE is one of the largest in the world, driven by a high demand for sexual services due to many single bachelors residing and working in the UAE. The cost of hiring a sex worker can vary widely, from 100 (25 Euro) to 5000 dirhams (1275 Euro) depending on their nationality (Mahdavi 2011: 59). Many women work in this field on the side-line to increase their income, such as Julia, a Ugandan woman in her thirties. Julia initially kept the nature of her work a secret and told me she was freelancing in the cosmetic industry. As our relationship developed, she became more forthcoming and revealed that she sometimes sought clients for sexual services. However, even though it was her primary source of income, she continued to seek employment opportunities in the cosmetic sector. She engaged in sex work to support herself financially, as well as to send money back home to care for her son. As noted by Mahdavi (2013), not all women in the sex industry identify as sex workers and many do not have a background in this field from their home countries. It is frequently viewed as a temporary means of earning money, rather than a long-term career choice (Mahdavi 2013: 74).

Before coming to the UAE, Julia worked as a housemaid in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as in Jordan, where she experienced good as well as bad treatment. While the Omani family was very big, including eight adults, she had to work a lot, but they were treating her in a friendly way. However, in Jordan, she experienced physical abuse. When she

tried to leave the family, they wouldn't let her go and called the police, who arrested her. She came to the UAE in November 2020 on a tourist visa, which she got through an agent, for 10.000 AED (2600 Euro). The agent who brought Julia to the UAE had significant control over Julia's freedom, financial situation and work choices. She took Julia's passport and demanded that she pay back her debt. The agent also placed Julia in a living situation where she was encouraged to work in the streets and clubs to earn money. Further, the agent exerted pressure on Julia to pay back the recruitment fee through phone calls, which she eventually did with the help of her boyfriend and her earnings from her job. After some time, Julia had some regular clients whom she met at hotels in Deira, as well as clients obtained through word of mouth or referrals from beer parlours. They call or text her and then go to a hotel or some private rentable beds in Deira. This freelance work is very challenging, as she has no financial stability nor protection, and requires payments for visa renewals, housing and daily expenses, as well as her son in Uganda, who lives with her brother and his wife. Eventually, Julia landed a position at a beauty salon. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the salon offered home services and required strict adherence to safety protocols, such as wearing masks, regularly sanitising equipment, and frequently washing hands. Unfortunately, her employment came to an end because her employer refused to provide her with a visa, and her co-workers already held costly freelance visas, which she couldn't afford (7500 dirhams), and led to her engaging in sex work again.

Julia has worked mostly in Deira and Dubai Marina, however, she has faced challenges in securing higher-end clients in places like The Pointe. To attract clients in these more upscale areas, she had to dress nicely and put in additional effort. Her earnings varied depending on location, in Deira she received up to 300 dirhams, while in Jumeirah or The Pointe, she could earn up to 1000 dirhams. This experience contrasts with the argument made by Mahdavi (2011: 59) that women from sub-Saharan and East Africa are mainly involved in street-based sex work, while women from Iran, Morocco, and Eastern Europe work in the more expensive parts of town. However, Julia's experience suggests that this distinction is not always clear-cut and that various other factors, such as physical appearance, language skills, and personal connections, can play a role in determining where sex workers operate as well as their earnings. Additionally, the dynamic and

rapidly changing nature of the industry means that these patterns can change over time, making it difficult to generalise the experiences of sex workers in Dubai.

Julia organised most of her clients through WhatsApp. As social media usage has increased over the past ten years, and technology has advanced, it has become more common for sex workers to search for clients on apps like Tinder or WhatsApp. Many guys told me that Tinder is mostly used by sex workers to acquaint clients. While finding customers for sex workers has supposedly become safer and easier than finding them on the street, the risk of fraud for the clients has increased at the same time and scams are frequent. For instance, one of my friends was tricked into going to a hotel, where he was ambushed by his tinder match, who turned out to be three armed Nigerian women, threatening him and stealing his money.

However, Julia's situation remained difficult, and the struggle eventually became too much. By the end of my research stay, she had expressed the wish to return to Uganda as she couldn't gather the money for her next visa and also missed her son a lot. I attempted to help her by providing her with the contact details of an NGO that helps people who have been trafficked. Even though she did not see herself as a victim, she contacted them, hoping they would assist her in returning home. However, the organisation does not offer immediate assistance but instead provides counselling. She was informed that the process is lengthy and complex. She would have to report to the police and seek legal action against the person who brought her to Dubai, ultimately forcing that person to take her back to Uganda. As the agent who brought Julia is in Uganda, it is difficult to proceed.

After my departure from Dubai in early July 2022, I received several messages from her requesting financial support to cover the cost of her visa, as she was afraid of overstaying and facing penalties. Additionally, she provided me with her ex-boyfriend's email address, asking me to contact him and request 5000 dirhams to purchase a ticket to Uganda and start a small business. She promised to repay the amount within five months. She believed that since he and I share the same nationality and I am familiar with the situation in Dubai, it would be easier to persuade him to trust her with such a significant amount of money. When I declined to ask a stranger for money, she suggested that I

simply send her our pictures. However, I did not feel comfortable contacting a stranger and asking him to borrow money.

By the end of summer, somehow, she must have raised the money, because she texted me that she and Zoey had both returned to Uganda. In total, she spent four years in the UAE. Julia's story shows that for many migrants, Dubai serves as a temporary destination for making money, but their experiences and outcomes can vary. While Julia was trying to find permanent employment and receive a stable income in the informal economy, it did not work out, and she always struggled to find money. Julia's and Zoey's stories shed light on the struggles faced by sex workers in the UAE and the challenges they face in finding financial stability and legal protection.

Julia's experience underlies several intersecting factors which contribute to her income and overall experience and highlight that sex work is not a homogeneous occupation. Instead, it is influenced by a complex interplay of location, appearance, language skills, and personal connections. Additionally, the market demand, general economic conditions, or cultural norms and attitudes towards sex work can also shape the experiences of sex workers and collectively contribute to disparities in income.

6.4 Life during the Covid-19 pandemic

This chapter will discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of African migrants in Dubai while considering migrants in the formal and informal economy. While the informal economy may offer advantages such as freedom from sponsorship and exploitation, it also comes with several disadvantages like low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of legal protections. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has also reinforced some of the vulnerabilities faced by African migrants who often are on tourist visas, as they are ineligible to receive vaccinations, which are only available to legal residents. This exclusion has left them facing higher costs for PCR tests and restricts their mobility, as they are unable to participate in normal activities.

For instance, Lydia was unable to join a concert I had invited her to at Expo 2020, featuring Davido, one of Nigeria's most popular Afrobeats musicians, due to her unvaccinated status. Because unvaccinated individuals were required to provide a

negative PCR test result to enter, Lydia had to find a testing facility. However, she didn't know where to find one and also was scared to get tested without being a regular resident. The limited accessibility of vaccinations for irregular residents adversely affected their mobility and restricted their ability to participate in significant events. Lydia was devastated to miss out on the concert, which highlights the profound impact these exclusionary policies have on people's mobility. Julia also had a difficult time during the pandemic. She worked at a cosmetic salon, but due to her employer's reluctance to pay for her work visa, she had to work on a tourist visa. When the pandemic hit, the salon switched to home visits. Unfortunately, some clients were unwilling to be treated by unvaccinated personnel, and this was the primary reason for Julia's job loss. Additionally, she reported when engaging in sex work, some clients inquired about her vaccination status, compelling her to provide false information to retain her clientele. Nour tried to adapt to the pandemic by selling home-cooked meals, but her business suffered due to restrictions on public gatherings because her success depended strongly on people gathering at *marangi* and hanging out there. Boris, who offers freelance shipping services, couldn't work during the lockdown, as the port was closed for people. To sum up, the Covid-19 pandemic intensified African migrants' vulnerabilities, because they couldn't work as usual.

Looking at the formal economy, as described in chapter four, Brandon experienced some positive outcomes due to Covid-19. While the whole world had to stay home and was not allowed to travel, he was flying to many destinations due to new tasks. However, he did not receive more money, contrary he received less, even though he worked more.

In summary, while the informal economy has both advantages and disadvantages, the pandemic has exposed some of the disadvantages faced by migrants on tourist visas. Covid-19 has limited people's mobility and access to certain activities, making life even more challenging for those who are already vulnerable.

6.5 Gendered patterns in the informal sector

The gender dynamics of employment and places of consumption revealed in this study provide important insights into the gendered challenges faced by women in Dubai and emphasise the importance of understanding the impact of structural inequalities on

women's employment opportunities in the labour market. Interestingly, while most male participants were employed in the formal economy, all female participants were working in the informal sector (see table 1) due to limited formal employment opportunities. Only Lydia came to Dubai purposely to have a beer parlour, and thus choose to work in the informal sector. Julia and Zoey came initially to work in the formal sector but were more or less forced to enter the informal sector at some point to make ends meet. This gendered pattern is mirrored in the African context, where women are statistically more likely to engage in informal activities than men, with education playing a crucial role (ILO 2018: 87f.). In many societies, women did not have access to formal education, as families often prioritise the education of boys over girls, given traditional gender roles and expectations. This highlights how structural inequalities limit the opportunities available to women in the labour market. According to the UNESCO (2022) report on global education and gender disparities, over the past two decades, there has been a global decrease in gender disparities in education access and completion. Girls are making significant progress in closing or reversing the gaps. As a result, the gender gap in enrolment and attendance is less than one percent. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, there has been no progress in achieving gender parity since 2011 in lower secondary education and since 2014 in upper secondary education, putting girls at a disadvantage. Furthermore, gender gaps in sub-Saharan Africa increase in timely and ultimate completion rates. While in lower secondary education, boys have a one percentage point advantage over girls in timely completion, in ultimate completion it increases to eight percentage points (UNESCO 2022: vii). These gender gaps in education limit opportunities for women in the labour market.

Further, this study highlights the gender dynamics of places of consumption, as most participants were encountered and recruited in beer parlours, which according to my observations are generally male-dominated spaces. While men usually frequent those spaces to socialise and consume alcohol, the owners of beer parlours are often female (see Ngeh 2022), and they employ women to work as waitresses or to engage in sex work. Women who frequent beer parlours may also try to find male clients to buy them drinks or provide other forms of financial support. This dynamic becomes clear when looking at Lydia's beer parlour, where Lydia informed Julia and Zoey of clients in need of sexual services. However, she did not act without expecting that they would

stay in her beer parlour to consume and buy beers. Sometimes they took the clients to other beer parlours, causing frustration for Lydia. Farouk, the co-owner of Mia's beer parlour as well texted Julia to inform her about a potential client at his beer parlour and to meet the guy. These experiences illustrate how gender shapes employment patterns as well as influences the dynamics of places of consumption.

Furthermore, this study reveals the gendered dynamics found in sex work. First of all, there are gender disparities in the sector of sex work. No male sex workers were encountered, giving the assumption that most sex workers in Dubai are women, which is also a global trend (Global Network of Sex Work Projects 2017: 1). Also, sex work is often stigmatised and criminalised, which directly contributes to discrimination against sex workers (NSWP 2017: 1). In addition to this, the power dynamics between the client and the sex worker often leave the sex worker at risk of abuse and exploitation.

Nour's story demonstrated that being a woman can also have a positive outcome, as the police tend to be gentler to woman. Her gender, as well as the fact that Nour is a female Muslim helped her to negotiate with the police and allows her to sell food on the streets. At the same time, Nour's story also indicates the relevance of language proficiency for accessing formal employment opportunities in the UAE, and hints to the intersection with gender, as women are often disproportionately affected due to restricted access to education.

Gendered patterns of employment in the informal sector reflect the broader structural inequalities that women face in many societies. Education plays a crucial role in determining employment opportunities, and promoting gender equality in the labour market requires addressing gender disparities in education access and completion. However, the study's qualitative nature means that it does not provide scope for generalisations, and further research is needed to understand the factors that contribute to gendered patterns of employment in the informal sector and promote gender equality in the labour market.

7. Reflections: Being a white woman in the field

This chapter aims to examine my position as a white female researcher and explore the implications of my positionality through my personal, subjective experiences during my research stay in the UAE. It is crucial to recognise and reflect on these experiences to grasp the influence my positionality may have had on my research outcomes and conclusions. However, it is important to acknowledge that individual experiences vary, and my experiences should not be assumed to be representative of all white female researchers or considered universal.

Undertaking fieldwork as a white European female researcher in a predominantly black space within the global context of the United Arab Emirates presents a complex set of advantages and disadvantages that need to be taken into consideration. First, my good knowledge of the East African vernacular language Swahili allowed me to easily gain access to Swahili-speaking individuals in the UAE. Most Swahili-speaking people were positively surprised that I know their language, as they were not used to Europeans being interested in African languages. Thanks to a shared language, and the fact that I have lived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and travelled to several East African countries before, I was able to build trust and rapport more easily with participants. Secondly, being a woman also gave me access to female sex workers, allowing me to gather information about their work and experiences. The shared gender increased their comfort level in discussing such a sensitive topic, as they might not have been as forthcoming if I were a man.

Additionally, given the highly gendered and stratified nature of the UAE, with race, class and gender having a significant impact on social organisation and spatial accessibility (Mahdavi 2011: 53), my German and European identity led to be perceived as non-threatening to participants. This likely increased their comfort level in sharing sensitive information with me. Moreover, my level of education and socio-economic status likely added to my credibility and facilitated access to certain individuals.

7.1 Relationship with male participants

During my research stay, I encountered several situations with male participants that made me feel uncomfortable and frustrated. One individual I interviewed early on attempted to kiss me in an elevator, but I was able to prevent it. Another person inappropriately touched me, disregarding my repeated requests to stop. It took raising my voice to get him to stop. While this topic is barely addressed in anthropological research, it is an experience that many female researchers encounter in the field and has been normalised to the extent that it is silently accepted. However, the harassment of women shouldn't be normalised. Especially in more recent years, women are speaking up on social media platforms like Instagram, connecting with each other, and sharing their experiences. This is what inspired me to expand on my own experiences.

Being a woman in this environment had both advantages and disadvantages because the men I encountered often saw me as a potential sexual partner and therefore were eager to spend time with me and thus assisted me with my research, but this also resulted in me experiencing discomfort. Mahdavi (2011: 77) encountered similar experiences during her research in Dubai, namely a persistent flow of attention from mostly foreign men while conducting her research. However, she experienced it from mostly unknown men, approaching her in broad daylight, and offering her money in exchange for sexual services. In my case, it was rather the people I was engaging with on a friendly basis, or my male interviewees expressing romantic feelings towards me. Some of these claims were made long after I had left Dubai, via WhatsApp or Instagram. The way in which these romantic claims were done was irritating and often made me feel uncomfortable. Further, the frequency of these romantic claims made me question their authenticity. Therefore, I had the feeling that most of them were only pretending to have romantic feelings for me because I am white and German and they were seeking a connection to Europe. Perhaps these feelings could also result from my intense interest in the respondent's personal life, as I was interviewing them and asking personal questions about their background for instance. Furthermore, the informal setting in which I conducted interviews, such as beer parlours, coffee shops, and apartments, may have contributed to the situation by decreasing the perceived level of professionality.

One evening, I experienced quite an irritating event. It was the evening before I interviewed Nour, we went out shopping for hijabs for her daughters ahead of her trip back to Burundi for Eid (the end of Ramadan). As we walked through the gold souk and the surrounding markets with three young Burundian men that she knew, we entered a shop and were offered water and a chair. One of the young men jokingly said, "He wants to go to Europe, take him to Europe", referring to Eddy. In a light-hearted moment, I gave Eddy a ring I was wearing, pretending to marry him. The group took pictures, and everyone thought it was hilarious. The next day, when I arrived at *marangi*, some people immediately recognised me and asked if I had gotten married. Eddy and the other guys had posted the picture on their WhatsApp statuses. I immediately regretted the whole incident as I was unsure how others would perceive the situation. Sometime later I met up with Eddy intending to interview him, and we decided to smoke shisha. He navigated me to one of the Ethiopian shisha shops and we sat upstairs. Eddy barely spoke English and very little French; our main source of communication was Swahili and google translate. He asked me to be his girlfriend, which I politely declined. He got really upset and said he does not want to be only my friend. After a brief discussion, he left abruptly. This whole incident was very irritating as I couldn't tell if he was just joking or being serious. The story highlights the cultural differences and challenges faced as a foreign researcher in Dubai, while also raising the issue of navigating romantic advances in the setting of ethnographic research. From my perspective, since Eddy was not the first person to express interest in going to Europe, I handled the situation with a joke. Nevertheless, it's likely that his request was made with genuine intent, and my rejection disappointed him. Despite the incident, I maintained communication with him via WhatsApp, and he has since relocated to Belgium as a refugee.

To illustrate this further, I am going to examine the WhatsApp conversation with Brandon, the Kenyan guy who picked me up from the airport when I arrived. Right after we had left Lydia's place that very first day, I went to my hotel to sleep, and Brandon went to his apartment in Sharjah. I had told him that I wanted to go to Abu Dhabi after sleeping a bit, so he insisted on helping me even though I had told him that I didn't want help, he showed up in front of my hotel. He repeatedly called me nicknames like "Queen", and "Boo" and told me he was missing me and wished to be where I was. At some point, I felt the need to clarify that I felt uncomfortable with those nicknames, and he apologised.

08.03.22, 05:36 - Brandon: I'm safely home baby girl
08.03.22, 06:35 - Brandon: which area in Abu Dhabi are u going?
08.03.22, 08:01 - Brandon: hey, change of mind; let's take a bus...cheaper n convenient: I'll accompany u then come back coz I'M FREE AS A BIRD 2DAY N I WANNA SPEND MORE TIME WITH YOU!....woch u think?
08.03.22, 09:39 - Brandon: don't leave without me; I'm on my way
08.03.22, 10:22 - Lena: Heyyyyy good morning ! u don't have to accompany me !!! I'm fine
08.03.22, 10:26 - Brandon: PTT-20220308-WA0005.opus (Datei angehängt)
08.03.22, 10:26 - Brandon: text me the hotel name, please
08.03.22, 10:26 - Lena: Grand Square Hotel
08.03.22, 10:28 - Brandon: thnx boo; relax, I'm coming 4 u Queen
08.03.22, 10:44 - Brandon: I'm here @ the reception Queen
08.03.22, 10:47 - Lena: I am packing
08.03.22, 10:48 - Brandon: take your time pretty
08.03.22, 13:20 - Brandon: I'm home safely dear; safe trip Queen
08.03.22, 13:34 - Lena: Thanks
08.03.22, 13:57 - Brandon: text me once u arrive @ yo' UAE place
08.03.22, 14:04 - Lena: Sure :)
08.03.22, 14:23 - Brandon: sounds like yo' on the way to AUH
08.03.22, 14:26 - Lena: I am
08.03.22, 14:30 - Brandon: that's wassup pretty; enjoy the tour....wish I was there wich u ☺ ☺
08.03.22, 16:16 - Lena: I arrived
08.03.22, 20:38 - Brandon: great news Queen; I'm glad....missing u tho'
08.03.22, 22:06 - Lena: Hey Byron, I really appreciate your company and please don't take this the wrong way but I don't like if you call me Queen, pretty, boo or whatsoever and it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable.
09.03.22, 02:19 - Brandon: okay, I'm sincerely sorry for that

After this, we met coincidentally at Lydia's place a few times and then scheduled an interview where I went to his place. He invited me a few times to stay in his room, as he knew I was looking for a place, but there was only one bed, and I wasn't comfortable sharing it with him nor did I feel comfortable hanging out with him much. I always felt like I had to keep a certain distance from him, so he wouldn't get the wrong impression or ideas, which was very exhausting.

21.03.22, 19:47 - Brandon: 'bout u renting a bed space, Lena I won't advise u to do that...I beseech u as a true friend; let's talk more on Thursday
21.03.22, 19:50 - Brandon: t'woz nice seeing u again after such a long time; u look great!
21.03.22, 20:33 - Lena: Not bed space but partition
21.03.22, 20:35 - Brandon: Lena, please don't pursue that path....let's chit chat more on Thursday
21.03.22, 20:46 - Lena: What do you mean ?

21.03.22, 20:46 - Lena: What path ?
21.03.22, 20:52 - Brandon: bed space or partition
21.03.22, 21:01 - Lena: Ok but what do you mean ?
21.03.22, 21:11 - Brandon: come stay @ my place and save that cash for your own expenditure
21.03.22, 21:11 - Lena: Ok I will think about it
21.03.22, 21:11 - Lena: Thanks
21.03.22, 21:12 - Brandon: please do

14.04.22, 18:24 - Brandon: great, 2 bad u can't spend a nyt @ my place
14.04.22, 18:34 - Lena: I prefer my own place
14.04.22, 18:34 - Lena: It's expensive so I need to use it
14.04.22, 18:34 - Brandon: acknowledged

After I had returned to Germany, I got my wisdom teeth removed and he told me about his surgery and how he weirdly touched his dentist's breast. Then he confessed his love for me, which made me tell him that I have only platonic feelings towards him, which was a lie because at this point, I was quite annoyed by him, but I felt obliged to be grateful because he had helped me a lot and introduced me to Lydia's beer parlour.

03.08.22, 21:31 - Lena: Lol I got my wisdom teeth removed
03.08.22, 21:33 - Brandon: now you're a grown ass lady; welcome to the world baby girl
03.08.22, 21:46 - Brandon: I lost mine in 2019.... through surgery then extraction; shit was fucked!
03.08.22, 21:47 - Lena: Yeah
03.08.22, 21:48 - Brandon: I recall during the extraction pressing n firmly holding the dentists' left breast (coz of pain) n pleading with her...
03.08.22, 21:52 - Lena: Omg
03.08.22, 21:53 - Brandon: that shit sucked! pain!
03.08.22, 23:00 - Brandon: I'd like to get straight with you, if you allow...
03.08.22, 23:04 - Lena: ?
03.08.22, 23:06 - Brandon: you know I love n like you...
03.08.22, 23:08 - Lena: I didn't
03.08.22, 23:09 - Brandon: yes I do... and as a man, lemmie shoot my shot.
03.08.22, 23:13 - Lena: Well I appreciate your honesty but I have no Feelings other than friendship
03.08.22, 23:14 - Brandon: n I respect that; so is life.

Then two months later, when I had left Dubai for five months already, he confessed his love for me again, which made me question his intentions, because for me it does not make sense to tell someone you don't have any intimate relationship with that you love them twice, without getting any reciprocity. When I asked him what he expects to achieve, he never replied to me again.

11.10.22, 17:35 - Brandon: hello
11.10.22, 17:44 - Lena: Hello
11.10.22, 17:50 - Brandon: I've missed u; hi u doin'?
11.10.22, 17:56 - Lena: All good and you ?
11.10.22, 17:59 - Brandon: all well with me...just thought a lot about u 2day
11.10.22, 18:11 - Lena: □
11.10.22, 18:11 - Brandon: meaning?
11.10.22, 18:14 - Lena: That's sweet
11.10.22, 19:38 - Brandon: I fell in love with you @ first sight
11.10.22, 22:37 - Lena: I really feel flattered, but I wonder what do you expect to achieve by telling me this ?
12.10.22, 02:53 - Brandon: u know I liked u from the very beginning we met
12.10.22, 10:03 - Lena: U didn't answer my question

This WhatsApp conversation alongside the overall interactions provide a compelling example of the gender dynamics and challenges women often face in various social and professional contexts, including research settings. Brandon's repeated use of affectionate nicknames, and unsolicited expressions of romantic interest clearly demonstrate inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, as a male individual, he seemed to perceive an entitlement to express affection and romantic interest, disregarding my boundaries and comfort levels. This imbalance in power dynamics and agency is a recurring issue woman often face when navigating professional or personal relationships. The exchange further sheds light on societal gender-based expectations and stereotypes, where women are expected to be passive recipients of affection and attention. These expectations clearly undermine women's professionalism and create uncomfortable situations. Finally, my personal experience highlights, that women, regardless of their profession or role can encounter these types of situations where they are made to feel uncomfortable or objectified. This is a structural problem and thus stresses the need for ongoing efforts to address gender-based discrimination and harassment.

7.2 Relationship with female migrants

The dynamic between me and female migrants differed from that of male migrants, with a greater emphasis on materialistic pursuits. For instance, Lydia would occasionally post pictures of us on her WhatsApp status, leading people to inquire about me. She would then invite them to visit her beer parlour, where they would drink and spend money both for themselves and for us. However, similarly to the men, the

women I interacted with were also interested in a connection to Europe, though they expressed it differently. Unlike the men, who pretended to have romantic feelings for me, the women were more direct and straightforward in their intentions. Often asking me if I knew any German men who would be willing to marry them. For example, Julia repeatedly asked me, during my time in Dubai and after I left, to introduce her to a German man.

During my interactions with Julia and Zoey, I noticed they did not have their own financial means. As a result, they relied entirely on me to fund our outings. Although I was okay with this arrangement since they offered valuable insights and we had enjoyable experiences together, there was a setback. One of the women asked to borrow 300 dirhams (equivalent to 77€) to help her ill parents, promising to repay the money in a few days, however, I never received the repayment. Even though for me it was not a huge amount, I was a bit disappointed because the woman gave me her word. This raises the issue of whether researchers should pay their participants or not. There has been an ongoing debate in qualitative research regarding the consequences of providing monetary compensation to participants, including ethical concerns (Head 2009; Surmiak 2020). On the one hand, as the focus is on building relationships with participants based on mutual trust and understanding, research is qualitative and is conducted through observation, interviews, and other methods to gather rich, detailed information about people's experiences and perspectives. Therefore, the use of financial incentives may compromise the validity and ethics of the research by influencing participants' behaviour and altering their perceptions of the researcher. On the other hand, some voices say that participants should be reimbursed for their time, expertise and effort. Further, providing financial payment, especially to vulnerable participants can be seen as a way of acknowledging and addressing the power imbalances, which often exist between researcher and participant (Head 2009; Surmiak 2020). On occasion, I felt that some of the girls spent time with me because of my greater financial resources, indicating that their behaviour might have been influenced regardless. Nevertheless, it is important for ethnographers to maintain a respectful, non-exploitative relationship with participants.

However, Julia and Zoey and I met up a lot during my research stay and they were very helpful for my research, as they also introduced me to a few other beer parlours which provided valuable insights for this research. Recognising and appreciating the contributions made by participants to the research is essential for its outcome.

On a personal note, although I encountered challenges when working with female participants in this research, I found myself being less critical in my judgments of them. Our shared gender identity results in a greater ability to empathise, something I also experienced from the women I worked with, notably Lydia's eagerness to shield me from her male customers who constantly made advances on me in her beer parlour, and thus shapes my perspective.

In summary, this chapter not only illustrates the gender disparities in interaction dynamics but also asks for a critical examination of ethical dilemmas, and the intricate balance in the researcher–participant relationship. Furthermore, it demonstrates the multifaceted complexities of conducting research in real-life settings, where personal, financial, and academic factors often intersect, while at the same time adding more depth and nuance to the research experience.

7.3 Featuring in a commercial

One day, I picked up Zoey and Julia from their bed space. I had agreed to interview Zoey beforehand, and when I arrived, they were about to get ready. I met Robert and two other people who lived there. It knocked on the door, some guy came to buy beer, as the bed space owner, a Ugandan, also sells beer. Zoey removed my nail polish, as it started to look bad. After Zoey and Tina were showered and dressed, they said they were hungry, so we decided to go have some lunch. We went to a Ugandan restaurant close to their bed space, where one must cross an Indian restaurant on the first floor and then go upstairs to be in the Ugandan restaurant. The place had about six tables, we were the only customers, so we sat down on one of them and ordered chapati and beans for me, and a mixed plate for Julia and Zoey. Just when we had finished our food, two guys entered the restaurant and started building up some photo equipment. I asked them if they are doing a photo shoot, and they said they were doing an advertisement for the restaurant. I didn't want to be in any advertisement, but Tina and

Zoey knew him and said he was famous on TikTok and Facebook. They insisted on taking pictures of us three with their photo equipment and their iPhones and then pushed me to film a short clip. I was not confident to do it, but I also didn't want to say no, so I did. For the video, I was sitting next to the guy in the restaurant, and we were pretending to have a conversation together. In the end, I was saying something in Luganda.

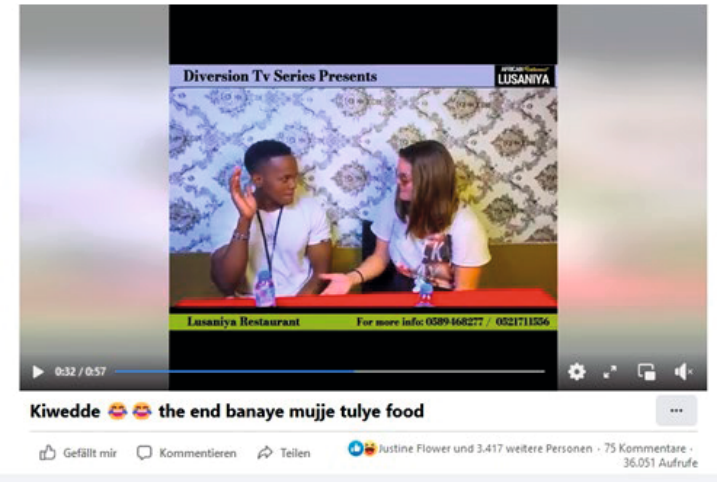

Figure 7: Screenshot of video posted on Devid's Facebook page.
Photo credit: Lena Sgorsaly (02.01.2023).

The caption of the video (see figure 7) is made in Luganda and translates to "It's done (two laughing in tears emojis) the end friends come and eat food" and the description states further "Ewaffe olusuku mulimu abazungu bebalima 😂😂 #devidinternationalfit #lusaniyania restaurant", which translates to "Our garden is cultivated by whites (two laughing in tears emojis)". The description is taken from a Ugandan popular song by Seen Don Ronald Alimpa, called "Olusuku Lwa Cement"[15] which was trending during the time I was in Dubai and is also played in the Facebook video as background music. The lyrics can be interpreted as a kind of bragging since

[15] https://youtu.be/JNg5u-_MJvw.

during colonial times, white people were the masters, and he is saying that it is over now because white people are working in the garden. The song itself is a love song to Uganda, promoting the country and the video shows a white woman and the artist who wants to show her his beautiful country Uganda. The whole situation was occurring completely coincidentally, with us eating in the restaurant, and Devid shooting his clip and the trending song. Devid saw the opportunity to use an already trending song, to make his video more popular on social media and it worked well, as the video has more likes and views than most of his other videos.

Research or anthropological studies often are carried out by Western researchers about People of Colour, who can be involved in videos or interviews without a clear understanding of the purpose. My experience demonstrates that the roles can be reversed as well, which emphasises the need to address this topic more in research.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the interplay between irregular migration and the *kafala* system while applying an intersectional approach. Intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of how various factors intersect and impact African migrants in the UAE and shows that affected individuals experience disadvantages and limitations, but also actively negotiate and make use of their diverse and intersecting identities (Ngeh and Pelican 2018). The purpose of this thesis was to explore the reasons why African migrants choose to participate in the informal economy, and how they navigate the risks and uncertainties that come with working outside of the formal system. For this, the master thesis examined how African migrants participate in Dubai's informal economy, by thoroughly investigating informal places of consumption, as well as other livelihood strategies. Using an autoethnographic approach, this thesis also gave insights into conducting research in a predominantly black space as a female white researcher. However, given the empirical and qualitative nature of this study, the findings do not intend to generalise, as the experiences of every individual in the UAE are unique.

This study revealed that the *kafala* system in the UAE plays a significant role in the irregular migration of African migrants to Dubai as it ties a migrant worker's legal residency to their employer, who acts as their sponsor or "kafeel". This system gives the sponsor significant control over the migrant worker, including their ability to renew their residency permit or not and make them leave the country. Due to its restrictive nature, many African migrants enter Dubai on tourist visas, to avoid being tied to a sponsor. This often leaves them no other choice than working in the informal economy, vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and subject to lack of legal protections. The *kafala* system also contributes to a situation of irregular migration by creating a demand for low-wage, informal labour in the country, which attracts migrants who are willing to take on the associated risks (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019).

The research has shown that the interplay between the kafala system and the informal economy in Dubai profoundly influences the experiences and opportunities of African migrants. Moreover, it underscores the importance of intersectionality, a concept coined by Crenshaw, in comprehending the nuanced layers of their experiences. Firstly, the *kafala* system's restrictions on migrant worker mobility and its tie to a specific sponsor create an environment in which they are highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by their employers. This can include long working hours, receiving inadequate pay, and living in poor conditions. Secondly, due to these restrictions, many African migrants find themselves working in the informal economy, which is characterised by low wages, poor working conditions, and a lack of legal protections. This often leads to a situation in which they are forced to accept low-paying jobs and work long hours just to make ends meet. Finally, the informal nature of their work and status as irregular migrants often leave African migrants in Dubai with limited opportunities for advancement and improvement. They are unable to access education or training programs and are unable to formalise their status or obtain legal protection, which can lead to a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Also, due to their status, many have not been able to obtain a vaccination against Covid-19, which excluded them from normal life or even made them lose their jobs.

The formal economy in Dubai contributes to the development of an informal economy for African migrants by creating a demand for low-wage, unskilled labour. As I have shown in this paper, migrant workers often find themselves working in the informal

economy because they are unable to access formal jobs. The restrictions imposed by the *kafala* system also prevent them from easily changing jobs or seeking better working conditions. The informal economy thrives alongside the formal economy in Dubai because it provides a source of cheap labour for employers and fills a gap created by the *kafala* system's restrictions on the mobility of migrant workers. The informal economy also benefits from a lack of government regulation and enforcement, which allows employers to pay low wages and avoid providing benefits or protecting workers' rights. In summary, the formal economy in Dubai contributes to the development of an informal economy for African migrants by creating a demand for low-wage labour and limiting their access to formal jobs. The informal economy thrives because it provides a source of cheap labour and benefits from a lack of regulation and enforcement, which allows employers to exploit workers.

This study unveiled the diverse ways in which African migrants navigate the informal economy in Dubai, emphasizing the crucial role of intersectionality. Their strategies and choices within the informal economy are intricately influenced by a confluence of individual circumstances, such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other intersecting factors that shape their unique priorities and experiences. This intersectional lens highlights the complexity and diversity within the migrant community, emphasizing the need to consider the multiplicity of factors that contribute to their distinct paths within the informal economy. Some may be forced to accept informal, low-wage jobs due to the restrictions imposed by the *kafala* system and their inability to access formal employment. Others may choose to work in the informal economy due to the greater flexibility it offers or because it provides them with the opportunity to earn more money. Furthermore, factors such as cost, atmosphere, and accessibility play a role in their choice of social establishments, with beer parlours being a preferred option for many African migrants. While drinking is considered taboo in Islamic values and also requires a special licence, these establishments can be found all over Deira. These beer parlours thus can be seen as a form of resistance and protest against the abusive and exploitative system.

This study investigated the livelihood strategies used by African migrants in the UAE, including street vending, second-hand businesses, sex work and freelance shipping services and adds valuable insights to the current body of literature concerning the

experiences of African migrants. Nour's case illustrates how individuals in the informal economy can navigate the regulations and find opportunities to sustain themselves. Although street vending is prohibited in the UAE, Nour managed to continue her business by negotiating with the police. In addition, the study shed light on Dubai's commercial sex industry, showing that while it may be a lucrative business for some, it is not for all. The stories of Julia and Zoey showed how difficult it can be to navigate the commercial sex industry and the challenges one faces in finding financial stability. They challenge the assertions made by Mahdavi (2011: 59), who proposed a clear dichotomy wherein women from sub-Saharan and Eastern Africa predominantly engage in street-based sex work, while those from Iran, Morocco, and Eastern Europe operate in more affluent areas. Contrary to this perspective, Julia's experiences suggest that such distinctions are not universally straightforward. Various factors, including physical appearance, language proficiency, and personal connections, contribute to shaping the work locations and earnings of sex workers. Additionally, in contrast to Ngeh's (2022) observations, the study highlights that beer parlours can serve a dual purpose, providing housing and services. Moreover, the study contributes to the understanding of gender dynamics in the informal economy, revealing that a higher proportion of women than men engage in informal work. Particularly during the pandemic, the informal sector posed additional challenges, disproportionally affecting African women with limited access to vaccines, higher COVID-19 testing costs and significant restrictions in their movements. Another finding shows how linguistic barriers can hinder access to formal employment opportunities particularly impacting women who, due to financial or cultural reasons, may have been deprived of school education. This intersection of linguistic barriers and gender adds a layer of complexity to the challenges faced by certain groups within the migrant community, underscoring the importance of considering intersecting factors in understanding their experiences in Dubai's economic landscape.

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Druck und Bindung: Hundt Druck GmbH, Köln
Tel: +49 (0) 221 940 68-0 · www.hundt-druck.de

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ISSN 1611 - 4531