

## The Burj Khalifa & Bondage

By Luisa Milton

The United Arab Emirates is well known for its rapid urbanization, luxurious cities, and oil-based economy. The perception of the UAE – specifically Dubai – as a playground for the rich is quite prevalent and well supported by monumental projects and targeted marketing; the Palm Jumeirah and the Burj Khalifa are only two of hundreds of extravagant developments unique to this region and to the world. However, there is very little consideration for how these properties are curated, and who is responsible for building them. When asking locals these questions the typical response is to reference the foreign development firms that handle a majority of the construction in the UAE. Most architects, planners, and engineers are expatriates who specialized in building the Arabian Gulf, although the UAE is attempting to reintegrate Emirati youth into their expanding knowledge-based economy, major projects are still reliant on the expertise of outsiders.

However, this response does not accurately address the question: who is building these iconic developments? The contracted workers involved in these projects are migrants, temporarily hired and sourced from neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Temporary migrant workers in the UAE are housed in thousands of labor camps throughout Dubai and Abu Dhabi and are shuttled daily to and from project sites. However, as identified by the Human Rights Watch, the solicitation and abuse of migrant workers in the UAE amounts to modern-day slavery. Companies are hired to recruit people in lesser economically developed countries with the promise of consistent work, monthly wages, housing, and food. Many jump at the opportunity to come to the UAE, desperate to provide for their families who remain in their home countries. However, the process is often exploitative and can lead to prolonged debt bondage and forced labor conditions as people take out loans to fly to the UAE or pay additional hidden costs. On arrival, people are not given agreed-upon wages and have limited access to health care, passports are collected and workers are forced to live in squalor conditions. This is not merely a male issue either. Women as well suffer in similar deprived and slave-like conditions as domestic workers. All major projects from the Burj Khalifa to NYUAD to the Louvre Abu Dhabi have utilized similar exploitative tactics to rapidly urbanize in the desert.

Yet, unlike other instances of human-trafficking or modern-day-slavery, the abuse of migrant workers in the UAE is a unique form of state-sanctioned violence and dehumanization of others. But there has been very little media coverage on a global scale highlighting the blatant and grotesque violation of human rights in the UAE. As Calloway describes to attain Global Empathy, there needs to be an awareness and understanding of the problem at hand, yet media coverage is limited and controversial opinions are systematically suppressed. Migrant workers in the UAE are in desperate need of global empathy but socio-political conditions in the UAE make it impossible to accurately expose the hardships of forced laborers.