

# NO DEBT IS AN ISLAND

## HOMELAND

Workers from indebted families who want a piece of the Gulf Dream can only get there by borrowing money for recruitment, visa, and transit fees. Those without assets to sell (homes, farmland, livestock, jewelry) are forced to take out high-interest loans. With an average debt of several thousand dollars, they are all but bonded, and, despite what they are told by recruiting agents, who routinely mislead them about pay and terms of employment, these bonds will not be easy to pay off. The majority of males are from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Kerala in India, while females employed as domestic workers are mostly Filipina or Sri Lankans. These countries depend on the remittances they send back, but the human impact of the debt bondage, forced labor, near-slavery, and human trafficking that underpins the system is catastrophic.

## WORKERS

Captured by the Gulf countries' kafala (sponsorship) system, which ties them to employers, restricts their movements, and renders them powerless to bargain over contract terms, the UAE's swollen migrant workforce (up to 90% of residents), face multiple forms of exploitation—long work shifts under inhumane conditions, inadequate and unhygienic accommodation, scant healthcare, chronic wage theft, and widespread physical and sexual abuse. Plied with credit cards, many end up in debtors' prison, and few escape their Catch-22 predicament with dignity or clean credit. Labor regulations are routinely ignored. While they are in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, their bonded labor is what sustains the affluent lifestyle of white-collar expats and Emirati families.

## ABU DHABI

Abu Dhabi's debt-financed boom is a bonanza for international finance and real estate. To attract international investors, luxury tourists, and high-end residents, the showpiece Saadiyat Island is being stocked with top-brand cultural amenities—the Louvre, Guggenheim, British Museum, NYU, Cranleigh school, and select galleries. This playground for the global creditor class rests on a foundation of wealth from hydrocarbon reserves. The UAE has the largest ecological footprint of any country. Its overall carbon debt is a significant contributor to climate change impacts in Bangladesh, Philippines, and India. As a result, more and more of the workers from these sending countries are environmental migrants.

## STUDENTS

Students at NYU often feel they have been recruited to their dream school. Yet the sky-high cost of attendance (more than \$62,000 in 2013-14) fuels the growth binge of a university that is expanding rapidly at home and through its network of overseas branches. NYU aspires to be the global market leader in higher education, and its offshore growth sets the pace for other universities. The debt burden of its students, already among the highest in the nation, will balloon over the next two decades as a result of a planned \$5b expansion in Lower Manhattan, the largest downtown development in several decades. For the time being, students at NYU Abu Dhabi have a free ride, but they and their teachers enjoy freedoms and rights denied to those who are building the classrooms.

## ARTISTS

Young artists are aspiring contestants in the jackpot economy of the contemporary artworld. To compete, they load up on debt to finance BFAs, MFAs, unpaid internships, and other sacrificial stints that are the price of entry. The Guggenheim -- with its starchitects, blockbuster shows, and urban renewal cachet -- sits atop the artists' debt-driven sector of precarious livelihoods. More than other institution, the global franchising of its name has hastened the internationalization of the artworld and its markets. Has the museum sold its social responsibilities along with its name, or can the power of the Guggenheim brand be extended to ensure fair labor standards on Saadiyat Island?

### Some Bigger Questions

- The creditor class sucks revenue at every point in this global chain of debt. How to visualize this? Flying saucers hovering overhead?
- Colonial patterns of extraction continue. Resource mining and autocracy are still serving local and global elites.
- How to incorporate the trade in military hardware? The UAE buys arms from the U.K., U.S., France and Israel.
- Education & ART - How can they help to build solidarity or break the chain of debt?

