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'Ways to stick around'

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‘Ways to stick around’: Im/mobility strategies of ageing, temporary migrants in Dubai

Abstract

In spite of the strict migration regimes that prevent permanent settlement and naturalisation, migrants have, for decades, made the UAE their unofficial home, something that has led to the existence of second- and third-generation migrants who are born there. However, reaching the age of 65 marks retirement for migrants, who can no longer receive work visas in the UAE. Prolonging residency is possible, yet without social security and pensions, maintaining a decent life requires significant financial investment and reliance on family and social networks.

Based on interviews with the adult children of first-generation migrants from the ‘Global South’, this paper provides insights into a number of strategies their parents develop in order to navigate restrictive immigration regimes upon retirement in the UAE. Most migrants prefer to stay put in the UAE upon retirement, where their children continue to live. Drawing on ‘immobility’ debates, this paper argues that immobility is an active -and relatively privileged- response to restrictive immigration policies in the UAE that enforce mobility upon retirement. Whilst a preference for ‘ageing in the UAE’ is often costly and precarious, older migrants’ social and emotional attachments often outweigh economic reasons to leave, as this paper shows.

Keywords: retirement migration; temporary migration regimes; ageing migrants; the United Arab Emirates; Dubai

Introduction

My dad was not ready to go back home (Jordan). When he retired, it was not his decision. We weren’t prepared as a family. He had been working with the same company for like 30 years and he was in a senior position and had a very strong relationship. He never expected that they would not renew his contract. It came out of the blue. (Nadeen, Palestinian-Jordanian, 36, lives in Dubai)

A significant number of migrants spend most of their adult lives working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on renewable temporary work contracts. Migrants who are eligible for family unification, such as Nadeen’s father, establish multigenerational existences there, where they

are surrounded by their children and grandchildren. Yet curtailment of work visas after the age of 65 engenders ambivalent feelings about the future. That ambivalence is integrally related to a lack of citizenship and social security for migrants in the UAE. These structural constraints bring forth questions about residential arrangements and economic subsistence for retired migrants. From an emotional point of view, retirement also reveals concerns about family unity in the UAE. While retired migrants can prolong residencies in the UAE, for families who do not have substantial resources or networks to remain in the UAE, such as Nadeen's, returning to their countries of origin appears the only viable option.

The experiences of older migrants in the UAE, and other Gulf States, are virtually absent from the literature on the ageing-migration nexus. This lacuna in research is significant considering the fact that the Gulf States employ the highest proportion of migrant workers in the world, and migrants over the age of 65 constitute a significant percentage of these rapidly ageing populations (Fargues, 2011: 297). Their experiences require close attention because the Gulf States, with their restrictive immigration policies, are key sites for understanding global inequalities premised on citizenship, which have direct implications on the well-being of ageing migrant populations. Although in recent years the UAE has introduced longer-term visas, including for retired people, these schemes typically target high net worth individuals. Thus, despite being celebrated as signs of a more inclusive migration regime, these visas will likely reinforce inequalities, by excluding the majority of migrants, who remain ineligible for these schemes.

Based on thirty interviews with the adult children of first-generation migrants from the Global South, and engaging with 'immobility' debates, this paper provides insights into a number of strategies their parents developed in order to navigate restrictive immigration regimes upon retirement in the UAE. The paper pays particular attention to the role of migrants' socio-economic resources and nationality, as well as family and social networks in the UAE, in their ability and desire for (im)mobility. This paper demonstrates that even though remaining in the UAE upon retirement is a costly, and often a precarious 'venture', most migrants prefer it in order to keep their families united, as adult children typically remain in the UAE. In this paper, immobility is thus understood as a valuable asset, which is unequally distributed, since the ability to stay put without a pension requires both socio-economic resources and reliance on family and social networks. What is unique in the case of the UAE is the disproportionate importance of family and social networks, which can often circumvent the need for economic capital for migrants to prolong their residency upon retirement. Therefore, in this context immobility is also a relatively privileged response to restrictive immigration policies in the UAE that enforce mobility upon retirement for migrants.

This paper makes the following contributions to retirement-related migrant (im)mobilities. First, it offers a different lens through which to examine the normative understandings of retired labour migrants, which tends to look at the experiences of these groups in the Global North (Sampaio and Amrith, 2022). In these studies, there is an implicit assumption that retired migrants, albeit with legal restrictions, have options to remain in the host countries or move

back and forth in order to maintain ties with their children in the host societies (Amrith, forthcoming). By illustrating the financial and emotional frictions arising from a ‘permanently temporary’ status among migrants in the UAE, this paper brings temporal dimensions of the ageing-migration nexus to the fore and adds to a body of work that investigates the role of border/residency regimes in enabling, imposing or restricting the mobilities of migrants (Nguyen et al, 2022; Gehring, 2007; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Cresswell, 2010; Hunter and Ciobanu, 2017).

Second, this paper contributes to a very limited body of work that studies the qualitative experiences of ageing labour migrants in temporary immigration regimes (see Amrith, 2021; Amrith, forthcoming; Walsh, 2018). These studies are outside the Gulf States and focus on low-waged migrants who typically have no right to family unification in their host countries (except Walsh, 2018). This paper demonstrates how the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which encourages mobility upon retirement, also allows a degree of flexibility for some migrants to remain in the UAE after this point. Furthermore, by offering a life course perspective into the (im)mobilities of older migrants in the UAE, this paper expands knowledge on Gulf migrant mobilities (see Babar, 2019; Piper and Withers, 2018; Kanna, 2011; Gardner, 2010)

The paper starts with providing the context of migration governance in the UAE, followed by a discussion on im/mobilities across the life course and in restrictive immigration regimes. It then explains the reasons behind conducting interviews with adult children, and not their parents, as well as for considering the experiences of ‘middling’ migrants. This is followed by the discussion section, featuring the main strategies older migrants use in planning their futures: returning to their country of origin; remaining in the UAE through business ventures, and finally remaining in the UAE through visas issued by family and social networks.

Governance of migration in the UAE: ‘permanently temporary’ until retirement?

The Gulf has witnessed an influx of migration since the oil boom in the 1970s, to such an extent that today migrants make up 90 per cent of the country’s population in countries such as the UAE (Ahmad, 2012:1). Migrant workers also constitute 99% of the private workforce in the UAE. Regardless of their years of residence, they are restricted from accessing permanent residency, citizenship, or social security. They are regulated through a temporary, sponsored visa programme, known as *kafala*, and are granted two- to three-year renewable residency permits linked to employment. The age of 65 marks the start of the retirement period for migrants, when work visas are curtailed (Tabrez, 2020). Healthcare benefits, provided to migrants by their employers, are also discontinued at this stage (Hirose, 2011, et al).

Even though the granting of residence is explicitly linked to temporary work contracts, migration to the Gulf is often described as de facto permanent (Fargues, 2011). While low-waged migrants are typically more transient in the UAE, those eligible for family unification have made the UAE their unofficial home, residing ‘permanently temporarily’ across decades and generations. Regardless of their job titles, migrants are allowed to sponsor their families

(spouse and children), as long as they earn a minimum salary of AED 4,000 (US \$1,000) or AED 3,000 (US \$800) plus accommodation. Furthermore, migrants constitute 27 percent of people aged over 65 in the Gulf (Fargues, 2011: 297). This shows that even after retirement, many migrants continue to reside in the UAE (see Valenta 2020).

If retired migrants wish remain in the UAE, one option is to be sponsored by their children with valid residency visas in the UAE. For this, children should have at least a two-bedroomed flat, and a minimum salary of AED 20,000 (approximately \$5,000) a month, along with proof that they are the sole provider for their parents and there is no one to take care of them in their home country (Kumar, 2019; Cherian, 2018). They also need to obtain a yearly medical insurance policy for parents with the minimum coverage required for each (Tabrez, 2020). Purchasing real estate or setting up businesses in the UAE, with a national partner, also provides renewable visas for migrants. Yet the financial investment required for these visas renders this option inaccessible for many (see Bobker, 2014).

Although in recent years the UAE has also introduced longer-term visas, and even pathways to citizenship, these typically target highly talented individuals, or high net worth individuals, and on ad-hoc basis. For example, retirement visas introduced in 2020 offer five-year renewable visas for people with a monthly income of 20,000 dirhams (approximately \$5,000) who own property in Dubai worth at least 2 million dirhams (approximately \$550,000) (Gibbon, 2020). Since the majority of migrants remain ineligible for these new visas, experiences of ageing in this context are likely to become even more unequal, not only between citizens and migrants, but also between migrants with different socio-economic resources.

The tax-free salaries offered to migrants are often seen as a trade-off for a lack of citizenship and social security in the UAE (Ruhs, 2013). Yet the shortcoming of this proposition is illustrated by the fact that nearly half of migrants in the UAE state to have ‘no plans to ensure an adequate standard of living after retirement or they plan to work beyond the retirement age’ (see Mercer, 2020:15). Some corporates may provide pension plans, yet most migrants in the UAE do not have public pensions, and instead are offered ‘end of service benefits’¹ (Castelier, 2020). Migrants may contribute to the pension systems in their home countries, so long as there are provisions for overseas workers (Hirose et al, 2011).

Migrant workers’ ability to accumulate savings in the UAE in preparation for retirement is also very much related to workplace hierarchies based on race and nationality. For instance, despite holding similar qualifications, ‘white expats’ tend to receive better salaries and employment packages, including incentives such as transportation, housing and education allowances for children. The employment packages of most middle-class South Asians and Middle Eastern workers do not include such privileges, regarding them as ‘better off’ in Dubai than they would be back home in terms of salaries and lifestyle (Nagy, 2006, p.123; Vora, 2013, p.76-77). Even

¹ Under UAE law, an end-of-service gratuity is calculated on basic salary for 21 days per annum for the first five years of service and then 30 days' basic salary per annum for each year of service beyond five years. (Sahoo, 2012)

though family and social networks can provide retired migrants with temporary visas in the UAE, those with little or no savings are less likely to maintain a decent lifestyle if they remain in the UAE, or more likely to depend on their families for financial support, as this paper will show.

(Im)mobilities throughout life: Ageing migrants in temporary migration contexts

The impact of the temporal restrictions of migration regimes on the experiences of older, temporary migrants remains scarcely studied (Amrith, 2021). This gap in knowledge is significant considering that an increasing number of migrants live under temporary visas in host countries (Cook-Martin, 2019; Akinici, 2019; Tazretier, 2019). Even though the Gulf States today constitute epicentres of international migration, a large body of knowledge on ageing labour migrants emerge from studies in the Global North (Sampaio and Amrith, 2022), where migration is typically regarded as permanent in nature (Baas, 2015). For instance ‘guest workers’ who moved to Western European countries from the 1950s to the 1970s were initially envisioned as temporary in host countries. Yet provided they had ‘adequate years of residency and work’, these groups were typically granted access to permanency, as well as to social security in host countries (Bolzman and Bridji, 2019). Thus, their transition to more permanent statuses across their life course makes their retirement experiences significantly different from those of the UAE migrants discussed in this paper.

This is not to suggest that retired labour migrants in, or from, the Global North are immune to migration and citizenship regimes that can restrict their mobility, and access to social security and welfare provisions as well as exclude them from larger society (see Ackers and Dwyer, 2004; Bolzman and Bridji, 2019; Gehring, 2017; Palmberger, 2017; Hunter and Ciobanu, 2017). Yet, generally, there is an assumption that older migrants have options for their residential statuses and mobility upon retirement, whether that is to ‘age in place’ in host countries where their children and grandchildren still live, or to move back and forth and maintain a transnational family life (Gehring, 2017; Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial, 2006; Hunter, 2011). In fact, mobility upon retirement is often conceived as a preferred option because it allows this group to “exploit, maintain and continue to develop residential opportunities, social networks and welfare entitlements in more than one country” (Warnes and Williams 2006: 1265). Studies of international retirement (lifestyle) migrants support these claims, where retirees from the Global North, as well as the South, move to other countries for the better climate, amenities or lifestyle they offer (see Toyota and Thang 2017; Warnes 2009; Sunil, Rojas, and Bradley 2007).

Nonetheless, in most restrictive immigration regimes, such as in Asia and the Gulf States, mobility upon retirement is enforced, as work visas are not issued after this, and returns to origin countries are typically compulsory, especially for lower-waged migrants (see Amrith, 2021; Kaur, 2017; Yeoh et al., 2020). Yet, as the new mobilities paradigm illustrates, (im)mobilities are significantly influenced by disparities in power (Cresswell, 2011:552). Depending on gender, skills, age, class, and race as well as citizenship status, some migrants have greater flexibility to negotiate ‘regimes of mobility’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar,

2013:118), determining also their location within the temporary-permanent continuum (see Rajkumar et al, 2012). In this respect, scholarship on Gulf migration illustrates how middle-class and wealthy migrants from the Global South mitigate the effects of being temporary by maintaining a set of global connections (see Vora, 2013; Kanna, 2011; Gardner, 2010; Surak, 2021). For some of these groups, lack of citizenship rights is irrelevant due to their privileged socio-economic statuses or passports, which shield them against the vulnerabilities of having liminal legal statuses in these host countries (see *flexible citizenship*, Kanna, 2011; *substantive citizenship*, Vora, 2013; *strategical transnationalism*, Gardner, 2010). In contrast, the mobilities of lower-waged migrants in the Gulf are firmly policed (see Madhavi, 2018; Piper and Withers, 2018: 562), whereas migrants from politically volatile countries often feel constrained in their mobility, with few or no options to move elsewhere (see Babar, 2019).

The literature on Gulf migrants' lives provides significant insights into differential access to mobility in restrictive immigration contexts. Yet a life course perspective into (im)mobilities is missing from these accounts (for exception see Walsh, 2018). Ability – and desire – to be (im)mobile are not fixed, but vary during the life course (Schewel, 2019; Mata-Codesal 2015; Carling, 2002). The notion of “embeddedness” is essential to understanding why tendencies regarding mobility vary across the life course (Schewel, 2019: 339). For instance, long years of residence in the host country inevitably result in migrants having stronger attachments and emotional bonds to these places, resulting in a preference to remain (see Bolzman and Bridji, 2019: 17; see Ali, 2011, Akinci, 2019 and Jamal, 2017 on second-generation residents in the Gulf). While the ability to remain depends on migrants' residency rights, access to health care and pensions (see Bolzman and Bridji 2019), their emotional ties may outweigh the economic reasons to leave (see Schewel, 2019). Walsh's study (2018) with returnee British migrants from Dubai shows that in spite of their privilege, approaching retirement as a temporary migrant raises questions about home, ageing and citizenship. Moreover, for some migrants, going “home” may not be viable due to the political circumstances there, and immobility may be their only option they have, as this paper illustrates.

Drawing on Schewel (2019), in this paper ‘retirement immobility’ is understood as ‘continuity in an individual's place of residence over a period of time’. While immobility in the wider literature, and in the Gulf, is often understood as a result of constraints, and attributed to disempowered and poor individuals (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013:4), in this paper immobility is understood as an active strategy to negotiate restrictive immigration regimes that enforce mobility for older migrants, and to keep families together upon retirement. Since remaining in the UAE after retirement without permanent residency and social security requires resources, immobility is a valuable asset that is typically accessible to privileged migrants. Arguably, immobility is also achieved through privatisation of migrant governance, through citizen/migrant sponsors, which allows some flexibility for older migrants to remain in the UAE. Yet even with adequate resources, older migrants still face uncertainty, as keeping up their residency and financial subsistence requires continual renewals and investments respectively. Thus, the (im)mobility continuum is a liminal state, where migrants may remain stuck in a temporal and legal state of in-betweenness (Khan, 2016:97), even in older age. The

lack of citizenship and permanent settlement options for older migrants continues to be the most significant source of uncertainty in retirement, especially for those who lack the necessary resources to keep their families in the host countries, as well as those who originate from politically unstable countries, where the question of ‘return’ is much less feasible. In order to advance research into different forms of immobility, this paper examines not only what constrains mobility of retired migrants in this context, but also why they may want to remain in the UAE, and how they achieve immobility, even if this is not the most economically sensible option.

A multigenerational approach: Adult children of temporary ‘middling’ migrants reflect on their ageing parents’ experiences

Thirty interviews were conducted with the adult children of first-generation migrants between 2015 and 2016 in Dubai. Follow-up interviews with a selected few participants were conducted online during 2020. The data presented in this paper emerged unexpectedly when questions regarding the future plans of UAE-born migrants prompted them to talk about their parents, who were approaching retirement age. Thus, this paper offers an original multi-generational focus to the study of ageing-migration nexus where adult children reflect on retirement as a source of uncertainty for their families in the UAE. In this sense, data analysed in this paper emerged as an interactive process, where participants engaged with my questions in ways that I did not foresee in my initial research design, which focused solely on the experiences of young non-nationals. This co-constructivist experience allowed me to have a much more complex understanding of temporariness across the life course in the UAE. That being said, this paper does not claim that adult children’s narratives represent their parents’ experiences or desires in retirement. Instead, it aims to illustrate how preferences to leave or remain in host countries upon retirement emerge as a result of family and social relations, and how younger family members make sense of this particular stage in their parents’ life.

Participants were recruited through network of friends and colleagues in Dubai, where I worked for several years before conducting this research. The participants were aged between 26 to 36 years old. Their parents arrived in the UAE as early as the 1960s and as late as 1985, from countries including Somalia, India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, and Syria, and spent the majority of their adult and working lives in the UAE. At the time of the interviews the parents of my participants were aged between 60 and 73. None of them owned houses in the UAE. Out of 30 participants, five had families who returned to their country of origin upon retirement. Ten participants continued to work beyond the age of 65, and the rest lived in the UAE on renewable temporary visas. For those originating from countries such as Syria, Somalia and Iraq, return upon retirement, even if migrants had previously envisioned this, had become untenable due to the protracted conflict.

The parents' professions varied, including business owners, accountants, doctors, engineers, teachers, clerks, and technicians, as well as mid- to high-level managers. The majority of them, except one Syrian doctor, one Indian business man, and two with Canadian and Antigua and Barbudan passports respectively, represented a 'middling' experience of migration (see Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). Even though they had access to resources and networks as mid- to high-waged workers living in the UAE for decades, they were to varying degrees constrained in their options as to residency and mobility upon retirement. Their presence in the UAE was not as precarious as low-waged labourers, who are disqualified from family reunification and whose migration to the UAE is circumscribed by stricter conditions of stay. They were also typically not as flexible as Western expats or upper middle-class, elite migrants from the Global South. The former group enjoys a high degree of security and mobility provided by their nationality, and for some by their assets in the UAE, such as ownership of homes, as well as differential treatment in the labour market (see Walsh, 2018). The latter are able to navigate residential insecurity by maintaining a set of global connections and accumulating economic capital in the UAE (Vora, 2013). Identifiable information about participants are anonymised in order to reduce the risk of attributing data to particular individuals.

Returning to country of origin: navigating a transnational family life

Research on ageing migrants shows that the majority prefers to keep their main place of residence in host countries, with the objective of being close to children and grandchildren (Ciobanu and Ramos, 2016; Percival, 2013; Bolzman and Bridji, 2019). Similarly, only a minority in this study effectively planned to return to their origin countries. Yet, even if they managed to renew residency in the UAE after retirement, the cost of living in the UAE made the option to remain untenable for most migrants, and compelled some to return to origin countries.

Nadeen's parents, introduced in the beginning of this paper, illustrate such a case. Nadeen's family has since been living in the UAE since 1990, with Nadeen's four siblings, aged between 28 and 38, and four grandchildren, until her father was asked to retire by his company shortly before turning 65. Nadeen explained the process behind her parents' return to Jordan, why they 'invested' in a temporary visa in the UAE, and the emotional and financial costs of it for the family:

Even if they got residency who can live in this country without a job or an income? They tried staying here after retirement but they spent a lot of money on rent. So after a year they had to go to Jordan because we have a house there. My dad does not have a lot of savings. We are five (siblings). University fee, school, rent... The only investment he had was a piece of land in Jordan and he had to sell that after retirement. He invested in his friend's company, so he can receive a basic income

every month and get residency here. He has spent all his savings just so he can visit us.

She paused for a minute and then continued:

So when you look at it, it is kind of illegal because he is not working in his friend's company. This is the tax for living abroad, and not getting a passport from where you live. No rights whatsoever. Not in Jordan, not here. They are trying to get used to living in Jordan, but here (UAE) is home to them. It is difficult for them as they are no longer near us; they can't spend time with their grandchildren and their friends any more. So they aren't happy about that. Their social life in Jordan is not good.

Even though tax-free salaries are presented as a unique selling point of expat living, the case Nadeen's family, and many others, illustrate that lack of citizenship and pensions are in fact the heaviest tax migrants pay in the UAE. This is to the extent that in order to maintain transnational links to the families they leave behind in the UAE, some of the retired migrants like Nadeen's father, have to invest all their savings to seek a UAE residency through trusted friends, who list them as workers in their company. For UAE migrants with lower income, or with a large family, saving for a life after retirement is an untenable project. While expenses, such as rent, and school fees for children, are compensated for some 'highly-skilled' and/or 'Western' expats, non-Western nationals are doubly disadvantaged as these privileges are not extended to most, and their countries of origins, and passports do not offer similar benefits for ageing populations, as Nadeen's states for the case of Jordan. Moreover, their weak social and family ties in origin countries, as with Nadeen's family, risk social isolation for older migrants who feel more at home in the UAE than their origin countries, and who wish to fulfil their roles as parents and grandparents for subsequent generations. The complexities of home-making for people ageing in transnational families is similarly expressed in Pérez Murcia's study in this special issue.

For Sasha and her ageing parents, maintaining their family unity in the UAE was less costly. This was because Sasha's family, who were from Goa, had been naturalised as Portuguese citizens, a right given to all individuals born there before 1961. As Portuguese passport holders, Sasha's parents would not need a visa to enter the UAE, even if they no longer worked there. In fact, Sasha and her parents applied for their Portuguese passports largely in consideration of their futures in the UAE as a family. Moreover, Sasha's father, unlike Nadeen's, was able to work beyond the official age of retirement, and thus had financial independence to a greater degree. At the time of the interview in 2016 he was approaching 70, and has been working for an Emirati company for the past 38 years. This demonstrates that retirement, and the degree to which migrants can manoeuvre the restrictions related to it, largely depends on the application of the kafala system by each individual sponsor.

Even though Sasha and Nadeen's family had similar socio-economic resources, citizenship status determines the degree of flexibility for residential and mobility options for retired migrants. Sasha's quote illustrates below how immobility as a strategy to remain in the UAE co-exist with mobility possibilities, further blurring the binary between mobility and immobility:

My folks are so grateful for their Portuguese passports, because they wouldn't even need to be sponsored by me after retirement. In the future, they could do three months here, three months with my brother in the UK and then in Goa with my grandmother. If they're needed there they will be in Goa; if I need them here they can come here, like if I were to give birth or something. If they need to be here longer than three months, then we can also sponsor them

When I reconnected with Sasha in 2020, her parents had retired and left for Goa to take care of her seriously ill grandmother. For Sasha, her family's departure created a serious void in her life. In the year before they left, Sasha had become her parents' sponsor, following a health complication her mother had suffered. Her dad was also retired at this point, and her parents had moved in with Sasha and her husband. While this meant a substantial increase in Sasha's expenses, as she had moved into a bigger apartment, she was glad that her mother was in Dubai and under her sponsorship when her health deteriorated, so that she could make use of healthcare services there. Even though keeping her family in the UAE required substantial resources, she was comforted by the fact that their Portuguese passport allowed them visa free travel to the UAE, which meant they could return anytime- an option that is not available for Nadeen's family.

For Zainab's parents, who are from Pakistan and who lived in Dubai for the past 36 years, going back to Pakistan was the only viable option. His dad, who worked as an engineer, turned 64 in 2020. Zainab and her sister left for Canada and Germany respectively in 2018, making the option of sponsoring their family after retirement impractical. The disintegration of the family across multiple countries also meant that Zainab's parents were less motivated to remain in the UAE, in contrast to the families of Sasha and Nadeen. Even though Zainab did not plan to return to Dubai in the near future, her parents' imminent return to Pakistan invoked an emotional response from her. This was mostly because it reconfigured her conception of home, which was rooted in Dubai, where they grew up and return to for visits to ageing parents:

Although my dad's company said that they could renew his contract, the UAE government might say no because of his age. They are ok moving back because they always knew it was going to happen eventually. But they are glad we left because they knew we wouldn't move to Pakistan with them. I really hope they can stay somehow because I'm not yet done with Dubai and definitely don't want to go back to Pakistan to visit them. They might hate Pakistan after this long. If you

have the money you can get a freezone visa like a lot of my friends' parents have done.

Freezone visas Zainab refers to is a visa scheme which provides temporary residence to foreigners wanting to start a business in any free zone across the UAE in exchange of a yearly fee. While it is regarded as one of the quicker visas to process, it was not an option Zainab's retiring parents could afford. Returning to Pakistan was not worry free either. The only asset they had was a house in Pakistan, yet similar to Nadeen and Sasha's families, they did not have pensions from Pakistan. In order not to rely on their savings, Zainab's father planned to start a business. Given his lack of experience and social networks in Pakistan, a country he left as a young adult, Zainab was not convinced that he would succeed. As a result, Zainab and her sister planned to send money on a regular basis. If given the option, Zainab would much rather have had them stay in Dubai, but is aware that her financial support will not be sufficient for them to remain there.

Remaining in the UAE through business ventures

Richer material resources and more extensive social networks enable migrants to have better control of their im/mobility after retirement in the UAE. Not only has prolonging residency visas become easier, but also maintaining a decent life at this stage of their lives. Having established a business also allows people to remain in the UAE who would have wished to return to their origin countries, yet do not have the option to due to ongoing political violence.

Nitin, who, in his words, comes from a privileged but not wealthy family, illustrated this point. Nitin's father moved to the UAE in 1974. Both Nitin and his brother were born in the UAE and lived there until 2016 when they migrated to the USA. His father established a business in tourism with his cousin, who had also been working in the UAE since the 1980s. Nitin had another uncle in Dubai, who had recently been granted a golden visa, a scheme that is introduced in 2019, which offers long term UAE residency in exchange for investment or on basis of highly-prized skills. He acknowledged that being able to remain in the UAE after retirement was something that was reserved for wealthier migrants:

Very wealthy people in Dubai like the 'Emirates Hill crowd'² have enough investments to see them through their lives in Dubai and they don't really think about future. Then there are lower-middle-class migrants, whose kids would go, say, to Indian schools in Dubai, very much aware of their transience. They definitely save up, build houses back in India or wherever. No matter how long they have been here, they know this is temporary. Then there comes this weird demographic that my family and many others would fall into. We've grown up not wealthy but definitely privileged. In our circles, even if someone loses their job

² An upmarket gated residential community in Dubai, known as 'Beverly Hills of Dubai'

they can be hired by someone else, and there are ways to kind of stick around... A lot of people actually go to Canada to figure out their immigration for their kids and once they have wrapped up life in Dubai they move to Canada. Others are not as fortunate.

Nitin clearly demonstrates how temporariness is experienced as a continuum, defined clearly on class lines, and how it unfolds across the life course among UAE migrants. While Nitin's family is relatively privileged in the past few years, their business had not been financially viable, and the pandemic had only made it worse. This had resulted in a situation where social roles within the family changed, where Nitin and his brother started to financially support their parents:

They rejected the idea of us sending money fiercely. I think it would be the same had it been in a Turkish family... But the truth is they need it to be able to pay their rent, which you know is the biggest cost in Dubai. Of course this is a short-term measure, pensions and things are not a thing we have there (Dubai). We don't really have a very detailed plan for them...

After a moment of contemplation, he continued:

The problem is my mum is very much addicted to Dubai. They are both super fans (laughs). My dad is optimistic that he can live in India. My mum can't see herself doing that. She left when she was 23, so we are talking about 40 years here... People think, "OK, I've got a property back home, I can survive, I can leave." For us it is much easier to leave and adapt. For them it's harder after having spent most of their adult life there and I really don't think they reckon with the trauma the way they need to. So more than anything it is the emotional trauma of leaving...

Nitin's use of the word trauma to talk about a potential break away of his parents from Dubai was powerful in expressing the cost of ageing as a temporary migrant. Even though he knew it made sense financially for his parents to return to India, where they have properties and investments, Nitin feared that this would instigate a 'slow death' for his parents who lacked any substantial family and social ties to India. This shows the significance of place attachment in immobility preferences for migrants regardless of their statuses as temporary or permanent (Schewel, 2019). Even though their children no longer lived in Dubai, their overall well-being heavily depend on their extended family members and tight-knit community relations there.

Dina's family, who were from Syria, illustrated a different situation, where return upon retirement was desired, yet became untenable because of the war. Dina's mum was a teacher and her father was a doctor. They had been living in the UAE since 1980. Her parents were getting ready to retire and move to Syria when the war broke out in 2011. As a result, Dina's family had to reorganise their lives in a very short time, and they were able to do so thanks to

her father's medical practice in Dubai. Yet, even so, their future in the UAE still loomed over the family as a source of insecurity:

They prepared everything there (Syria), my father had his clinic almost done, set up. Our house was ready and then that (war) happened... there is no way they are going back to Syria now... They're thinking now about what to do because they've been here for over 27 years, and my father, even though he has his own business (surgery), is not sure if they would renew his residency every two years. You still worry... because at the end of the day they can abruptly stop renewing your visa, especially if you are like 70...

For Dina's family, immobility was a result of constraints in their origin country, which did not offer a viable option for return. While their immobility may be described as 'involuntary' (see Babar, 2019), it was also a privileged response to shifting conditions in their origin country. Nonetheless, the war in Syria, and the sudden disruptions it caused for her family, compelled Dina to move to Canada in 2015 with the objective of securing an alternative passport. While moving to Canada would be difficult, if not impossible, at Dina's parents' age, other first-generation migrants pursued Western passports as an 'insurance policy' at a much earlier stage.

Diana's family, who hold Palestinian travel documents and moved to the UAE from Syria in 1979, illustrates this case. When Diana was seven, her father decided to move to Canada temporarily in order to acquire citizenship for his family. At that time, Diana's father was running a business in Dubai, which allowed him flexibility to move back and forth:

My dad wanted to protect our future. We are four siblings and he knew living in Dubai might not be secure in the long term. So he moved to Canada for four years to get citizenship, and we then moved back to the UAE. He had to go back and forth between UAE and Canada during that time to retain his UAE visa. If he wants to stop working, we can always sponsor him here (UAE), or he can split his time, with my mum, between Canada and here. As long as we have citizenship, we can somehow continue to keep our family here (UAE).

Concerned about their temporary statuses in host countries, many long-term migrants in the UAE and wider Gulf States perceive acquiring citizenship from a 'Western' country as a strategic response to ensure a secure future for themselves (Akinici, 2019). A smaller but growing number of migrants also acquire citizenship through investment. Maziar's family, from Iran, is an example and he was the only participant in this study whose family acquired citizenship through economic investment in Antigua and Barbuda. Citizenship acquisition strategies among Gulf migrants show that retirement is not only a matter of mobility between home and host countries but rather involves multiple countries; migrants perceive a global hierarchy of desirability in terms of citizenship possibilities. Yet acquisition of a Western passport is often motivated by the desire to remain in the UAE, as in the case of Diana and Maziar, whose families did not prefer, or have the option, to return to their origin countries.

Therefore, naturalising in a third country is also a strategy for immobility after retirement in the UAE.

“Other ways to stick around”

This section demonstrates ‘different ways of staying put’ in the UAE after retirement. Migrants with limited resources rely on their friends, acquaintances and family members who have Emirati passports for the continuation of their residencies. Thus, their immobility is enabled thanks to the hands-off approach of the UAE to migration management, where the responsibility to issue visas is distributed between citizens and companies, as well as non-citizen managers and employers (Gardner, 2010). Migrants opting for this route often do so either because their children are financially unable to sponsor them and/or because returning to their countries of origin is not a viable option. Yet adult children continue to be liable for their ageing parents’ economic subsistence in the UAE, which at times constrains their future plans, such as establishing their own families.

Mohammad’s family illustrates a common situation. Mohammad’s father moved from Somalia to the UAE in 1985 to work as a clerk and retired in 2006. Mohammad, aged 34, had six siblings, and three of them were in work. None of the siblings met the minimum salary of 25,000AED (6,800\$) required of Somali nationals to sponsor parents (interview in 2015). For Mohammad, finding another sponsor for his family’s residency was not a concern, but the financial implications of keeping the family in the UAE were. For instance, in order to reduce expenses, Mohammad and his brothers, after years of living in their own flats, had moved in together with their retired parents and younger siblings:

My dad’s visa was sponsored by an Emirati friend, for which he only paid 1,000 AED (270\$) for his medical (insurance) every year, but since last year he has been sponsored by a friend of mine who pretends that my dad is working as an accountant in his restaurant. This is because the Emirati guy’s real estate business got shot down recently. Since my dad does not have any pension, me and my brothers are covering their monthly expenses as well as rent. We now rent a villa and live altogether. We had to do this because of the rising rent prices.

I asked whether this situation was stressing him and his family:

For my family, going back to Somalia is not a matter for discussion. They don’t have anything there, no family, no home and it’s full of corruption... I want them to get citizenship from Argentina or something and we are looking into finding money to do that. I am not worried about renewing their visas. Even if my friend turns around and says I can’t do it anymore, I will find another friend. This is one of the perks of having been living here for 29 years. You get to know the right people.

Unlike Nadeen's family, Mohammad was able to find sponsors that did not require immense financial investments to renew residencies. Yet his father's retirement in the UAE without any pension led the family to reflect on their earlier migration decision. Mohammad's uncle had left Somalia for Sweden as an asylum seeker at the same time as his dad's arrival in the UAE. While Mohammad and his family preferred to move to Dubai, the security his uncle enjoyed in retirement in Sweden, thanks to his Swedish citizenship and pension rights there, compelled Mohammad to pursue a better passport for his parents. Since onward migration at their advanced age was not an option, he was hoping to save money for long-distance naturalisation through an investment programme.

Even though not as optimistic as Mohammad, Amir, an Iranian national, born and raised in the UAE, shared similar sentiments with regard to his family's future in the UAE. Amir's father, aged 67 at the time of the interview (2016), arrived in Dubai in 1985. Amir's uncles arrived in Dubai in 1970s and were naturalised as Emirati. He claimed that his father declined an offer to become an Emirati citizen. His father worked as a technician; however, for the past four years he hadn't been working and his residency was sponsored by an Emirati family friend. The only asset they had was a house in Ajman (UAE), which they acquired through the help of their Emirati family. The family did not have savings, and relied on Amir and his brother for financial support:

My dad tried many businesses, but he spent all his savings. He couldn't support us through university so me and my brother started working as soon as we turned 18 and are now supporting our parents. The house in Ajman is supported by us. They keep asking me to get married but little do they know that I can't support two homes. The moment I say I don't want to get married because I can't support two families, they will maybe think of going back, so I wouldn't do that to them. They are already old. Maybe for the first two months they will be happy to be back after all those years, but I think being away from us will make them age very fast and I don't want that.

As both Amir and Mohammad stated, a lack of social security for migrants in the UAE has direct implications for the adult children, who often become liable for their ageing parents' economic subsistence. For those with limited resources, these responsibilities constrain their future plans, such as building their own families. Both Amir and Mohammad have long-term partners whom they want to marry. Yet they feel this requires them to make a choice between keeping their aging parents in the UAE and starting a family of their own. Choosing the latter is conducive to ambivalence, as questions of financial care and access to health services will emerge for their parents, for whom return to their country of origin is practically not an option. Unlike other participants in the study, this group's parents do not have any assets in their countries of origin, such as property and sources of income, leaving them highly dependent for protracted residency in the UAE. Thus, while family and social networks may be more important for prolonging residency than economic capital, sustaining a decent lifestyle for older migrants in the UAE continues to require financial savings and investments.

Conclusion

Based on interviews with the adult children of first-generation, ‘middling’ migrants in the UAE, this paper provided insights into a number of strategies they developed to navigate restrictive immigration rules restricting residency upon retirement. This paper demonstrated that migrants typically preferred remaining in the UAE where they had spent most of their working lives and were surrounded by children, grandchildren and a wider community. However, the absence of citizenship and social rights in the UAE is a source of uncertainty for retired migrants and their families. Depending on their financial resources, citizenship statuses and family/social networks, some migrants manage to prolong their residency in the UAE. Yet, even with adequate resources, most migrants continued to feel a level of uncertainty about their futures in the UAE, because they did not know how long they could either keep renewing their visas, or afford to live in the UAE. Furthermore, migrants’ lack of permanent status in the UAE was particularly concerning for those who originated from politically unstable countries, where the question of ‘return’ is much less feasible.

By illustrating the experiences of (im)mobility after retirement among UAE migrants, this paper made novel contributions to ageing-migration nexus, which predominantly focuses on the experiences of labour migrants in the Global North (or ‘West’) (Sampaio and Amrith, 2022). The findings of this paper contradicted the assumptions within this body of work, which typically conceives migration as permanent in nature (Baas, 2015). Furthermore, this paper also illustrated the unique aspects of temporariness in the UAE which is a status migrants hold across decades and generations. It differs from other restrictive immigration programmes, for example in Singapore, where there are pathways to permanency for ‘professional and skilled migrants’, even if these may not be linear (see Baas, 2017).

Further research should include older migrants themselves who are directly experiencing ageing and retirement in the context of the UAE, and other Gulf States. The Gulf, having only started their influx of immigration in 1970s, is a region where the ageing of the migrant population is not yet advanced, and where we know very little about the experiences of older migrant workers. These studies should consider the experiences of elite migrants in these contexts, who typically have more flexibility than ‘middling’ migrants in navigating temporariness. With the recent introduction of retirement visas in the UAE, which target high net worth individuals, experiences of ageing in this context is likely to become even more unequal, not only between citizens and migrants, but also among migrants. Furthermore, research should establish main differences among temporary, restrictive migration regimes, as well as how the same regimes apply differently to migrants based on class, and skills, as well as across the life course. This is crucial to have a more nuanced understanding of the global diversity of the ageing-migration nexus without reifying differences between the Global South and North forms of ageing (Sampaio and Amrith, 2022), or ageing in temporary or permanent contexts. This is important because temporary migration regimes are not exclusive to the Gulf States or Asian countries. They are in fact becoming more prevalent globally, including in the ‘West’, and affecting not only those in low-waged work, but also middle- and high-waged

migrant workers (see Castles, 2010, Merla and Smith, 2020). Moreover, ‘southern’ experiences of ageing are further complicated by the fact that the UAE and most of the Gulf States, whilst located in the South of the hemisphere, are some of the richest countries in the world, and rank alongside countries such as Germany and Norway in global development indexes (Abbas, 2018). UAE passports are also one of the strongest nationalities globally (see Global Passport Index). Thus the exclusion of labour migrants in the Gulf, most of whom originate from countries in the Global South, and who spent their live time working in these places, generate new, and even more pronounced inequalities within regions that are categorised as ‘Global South’.

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