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Marko Valenta

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Itinerant labour: conceptualising circular, serial and stepwise migrations to the Arab Gulf and onwards

Marko Valenta

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is among the largest receivers of labour migrants in the world. Labour migrations in the GCC are defined as temporary, but migrants engage in various adjustments that result in long-term residence in the GCC. Included in these adjustments are various circular, serial and stepwise migration strategies. In this article, we conceptualise and explore the patterns of itinerant labour migrations to the Gulf and onwards. A variety of migrant strategies and migration trajectories are identified, together with their underlying drivers. It is argued that these transnational practices have different motivations and are submitted to various coercive forces and opportunity structures. Furthermore, they are propelled by distinctive local rationality, family obligations, individual resources and aspirations, which, in sum, produce specific patterns of itinerant labour migration.

KEYWORDS

Circular migration; labour migration; Middle East; serial migration; stepwise migration

Introduction

Methodological nationalism in data production has contributed to the general perspective that migration is a one-time phenomenon (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003; Kalir, 2013; Toma & Castagnone, 2015; Paul & Yeoh, 2020). Such stagnant paradigms are also maintained by the practical difficulties related to gathering extensive data on complex multinational migration trajectories and transnational practices that span migrants' life cycles (Chan, 2020; Zufferey, 2019). However, in recent years, an increasing number of studies have indicated that a significant proportion of migrants engage in transnational practices and may change several host countries during their life cycles (Chan, 2020; Valenta & Ramet, 2011; Parreñas et al., 2019; Takenaka, 2007; Toma & Castagnone, 2015; Valenta & Strabac, 2013; Zufferey, 2019).

It seems that serial migration occurs in specific migration systems, especially those that accept large numbers of migrants but also impose a variety of restrictions on their integration (Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). One defining feature of the sponsorship-based (kafala) migration system in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)[1] is that it provides migration opportunities to large numbers of labour migrants. Yet, the labour migrants in the region are defined as temporary residents, and it is almost impossible for them to gain

CONTACT Marko Valenta marko.valenta@ntnu.no Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

permanent residence or citizenship. This seems to contribute to various forms of transnational practices (Ali, 2011; Gardner, 2008; Piper & Withers, 2018).

In this article, we explore recurrent migrations to the Gulf and onwards. It seems that patterns of multinational migration in this region may be related to migrants' human capital, in addition to obstacles and selection criteria imposed by industrialised countries in the Global North to migration from the less-developed countries in the Global South (De Haas et al., 2020; Kim, 2019; Parreñas et al., 2019). The large receivers of temporary labour migrants in the Arab Gulf differ from this trend, as they accept millions of temporary foreign workers of all skill levels. Some researchers point out that it is relatively easy to come to the Gulf, but it is hard to stay because the countries in the region only provide temporary residence to migrants (Carlos, 2013; Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). Studies also show that people's life circumstances in the sending countries in the region and the restrictions embedded in the temporary migration regimes in the Gulf shape specific patterns of migration across the Gulf (Parreñas et al., 2019; Percot & Rajan, 2007; Piper & Withers, 2018). We build on these studies and explore the following interrelated research questions: (i) How do migrants deal with their temporary status, and how may these strategies be linked to or translated into various modes of transnational mobility?; (ii) How can we explain variations in migrant strategies and migration trajectories? (iii) What are the drivers, coercive forces and motivations that propel circular, serial and stepwise migrations across the region?

This article is divided into several interrelated sections. In the first section, we propose a typology of migration to the Gulf and onwards. Furthermore, we clarify how we understand the central concepts used in the article, such as the concepts of circular, serial and stepwise migration. In the second section, we clarify our methodological approach, which is followed by several empirical sections. In these sections, we present our results and discuss strategies among different categories of migrants, along with the obstacles they face. Here, we argue that the factors on the micro and macro levels, along with the interactions between these levels, contribute to producing different trajectories of circular, serial and stepwise migrations. It is acknowledged that transnational strategies of migrants in the Gulf are deployed in an unfavourable structural frame (Mehta, 2017; Piper & Withers, 2018). They are curbed by the migration policies, which include, *inter alia*, the restrictions that the sponsorship (Kafala) systems impose on them (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Piper & Withers, 2018). However, in this article, we want to go beyond the general criticism of Kafala systems in the Gulf that dominates the debates on temporary labour migration in the region. Therefore, we focus on how migrants cope with coercive forces that are often overlooked in studies on migration to the region.

Conceptualising the migrations to the Gulf: relevant previous studies

Kafala systems in the GCC countries are often criticised for their exploitative working conditions (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Kamrava & Babar, 2012). Yet, it is evident that despite these problems, millions of migrants from large developing countries are still attracted to the Gulf. Considerably higher wages in the GCC countries than in migrants' home countries, lack of better migration alternatives and a variety of push factors in the sending countries seem to be the major drivers of these migrations (Parreñas et al., 2019; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2016).

Addressing the fact that transnational behaviour and recurrent migrations across the Gulf are often a result of the coercive structures, some researchers use the concepts of 'forced transnationalism' in their descriptions of recurrent mobility across the Arab Gulf (Piper & Withers, 2018). Most studies on circular migration in the Gulf relate circular migrations primarily to temporary labour migration policies, short and unstable job contracts and various push factors, both in the receiving and sending countries (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Buckley, 2012; Parreñas et al., 2019). However, several studies have indicated that circular migrations are not the only form of itinerant mobility of temporary labour migrants in the region. They show that temporary migrants may also engage in multi-country migrations (Paul, 2011, 2017; Carlos, 2013; Babar & Gardner, 2016; Parreñas et al., 2019).

Researchers have tried to conceptualise the notions of multinational migrations using various terms, such as repeated, secondary serial, onward and stepwise migrations. These notions convey complex migrations that may have linear, circular, lateral and hierarchical trajectories (Chan, 2020; Ossman, 2004; Paul, 2011; Paul & Yeoh, 2020; Takenaka, 2007; Toma & Castagnone, 2015; Zufferey, 2019). Paul's (2011) study on Filipino domestic workers shows that such migrations may have a stepwise character, where the migrants attempt to climb a hierarchy of potential destinations (Paul, 2011, 2015). According to her distinction of most- and least-desired host countries, receiving countries in the Middle East are at the bottom of the hierarchy and are often the first step in the process of stepwise migrations. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia are medium-tier destinations, while Western countries, such as Canada and Italy, are top-tier destinations (Paul, 2011). According to the argument, migrants start their trajectories in less-preferred, but easier-to-enter, low-tier countries which offer temporary residence and the lowest wages. Later, they 'step up' to countries that offer better wages, more satisfactory working conditions and permanent settlement (Paul, 2011, 2015).

The notion of stepwise migration also suggests that migrants have preconceived multistage trajectories where each migratory step is meant to result in better working conditions, but entering higher-tier countries also requires larger resources. Therefore, stepwise migrations are long-lasting projects of developing individual resources in different host countries (Zufferey, 2019). Migrants who are successful in upward stepwise migrations are able to acquire the required resources and skills or migration capital during their intermediary migratory steps. They will thus move from country to country before they manage to migrate to one of the most desirable countries (Paul, 2011, 2015).

The above-mentioned arguments are in line with other research which shows that a significant proportion of migrants in Western countries lived in other host countries before they migrated to their final destinations. Takenaka (2007) indicates that most of these people are born in poorer countries and so they migrate to richer intermediate countries before they move onwards to top-tier destinations. For example, such trajectories were observed among more than 12 percent of immigrants to the US (Takenaka, 2007).

Stepwise migrations to the West have been observed among several categories of Asian temporary workers in the Gulf and elsewhere (Carlos, 2013; Chan, 2020; Paul, 2011). Yet, it is argued by several researchers that relatively few low-skilled temporary migrants from Asia manage to climb to top-tier countries in the West (Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2015). According to Parreñas et al. (2019), these migrants are instead often coerced into

multiple lateral movements within the region. They engage in serial migrations, but their itinerant multi-country migrations are primarily limited to lower-tier-countries (Parreñas et al., 2019).[2]

Building on the above-mentioned contributions, in this article we will use the concept of circular migrations primarily to label practices that involve a voluntary and coerced recurrent movement between one sending and one receiving country. Unplanned recurrent multi-state migrations that involve several receiving countries within the same tier will, first and foremost, be associated with the concept of serial migration. The preconceived migratory steps from lower to higher country tiers will be categorised as stepwise migration.

At this point, we want to stress that migrants may also engage in complex trajectories alternating between the above-mentioned types of itinerant migrations. As we will see, serial and stepwise migrations may include both direct relocations and indirect relocations, where migrants return to their home country before they emigrate to a third country (Takenaka, 2007). Circular, serial and stepwise migrations may also run in parallel as migrants' short-term shuttle between the home country and given intermediary host countries is built into their longer-term stepwise migration trajectories (Paul, 2015; Paul & Yeoh, 2020).

In Figure 1, we illustrate circular, serial and stepwise migrations and possible alterations between various forms of multinational mobility. The presented ideal types capture a variety of multinational migrations, from the simplest circular migrations to complex combinations of circular, indirect and direct serial, and stepwise migration. Type I in the figure represents recurrent circular migrations between the same sending and receiving country. Type II illustrates direct serial migration. In this case, people change receiving countries without returns and stays in their home country. Case III-a in the figure represents indirect serial migration which involves returns and stays in the home country prior to the change to a new receiving country. Case III-b illustrates alterations between direct serial migrations, returns to home country and emigrations to new receiving countries. Stepwise migrations illustrated in case IV remind us that multistage migrations may be an attempt to climb a hierarchy of potential destinations. Case V illustrates that such paths may involve direct and indirect changes in the receiving country, both within and between the tiers.

In this article, we outline these experiences using migrants' narratives and migration biographies. As we will see, these trajectories may have various motivations. They may also have several additional dimensions related to their intensity and frequency, which are represented by the number of recurrent circles, the number of steps/changes of the destination countries and the lengths of stay in home countries and destination countries. It should also be stressed that there are some grey zones in distinctions between serial and stepwise migration, especially regarding 'the smaller steps' of multinational migrations within the same tier. As we will soon see, these migrations are not always experienced as lateral movements.

In what follows, we analyse in more detail the trajectories illustrated in the figure; *inter alia*, we explore how these trajectories are enabled, influenced and coerced by different drivers, motivations and *strategies* of temporary migrants in the Gulf. According to several studies on circular migration in the Gulf, migrants are pushed back and forth due to job instability, exploitation and restrictions posed by the temporary, sponsorship-based

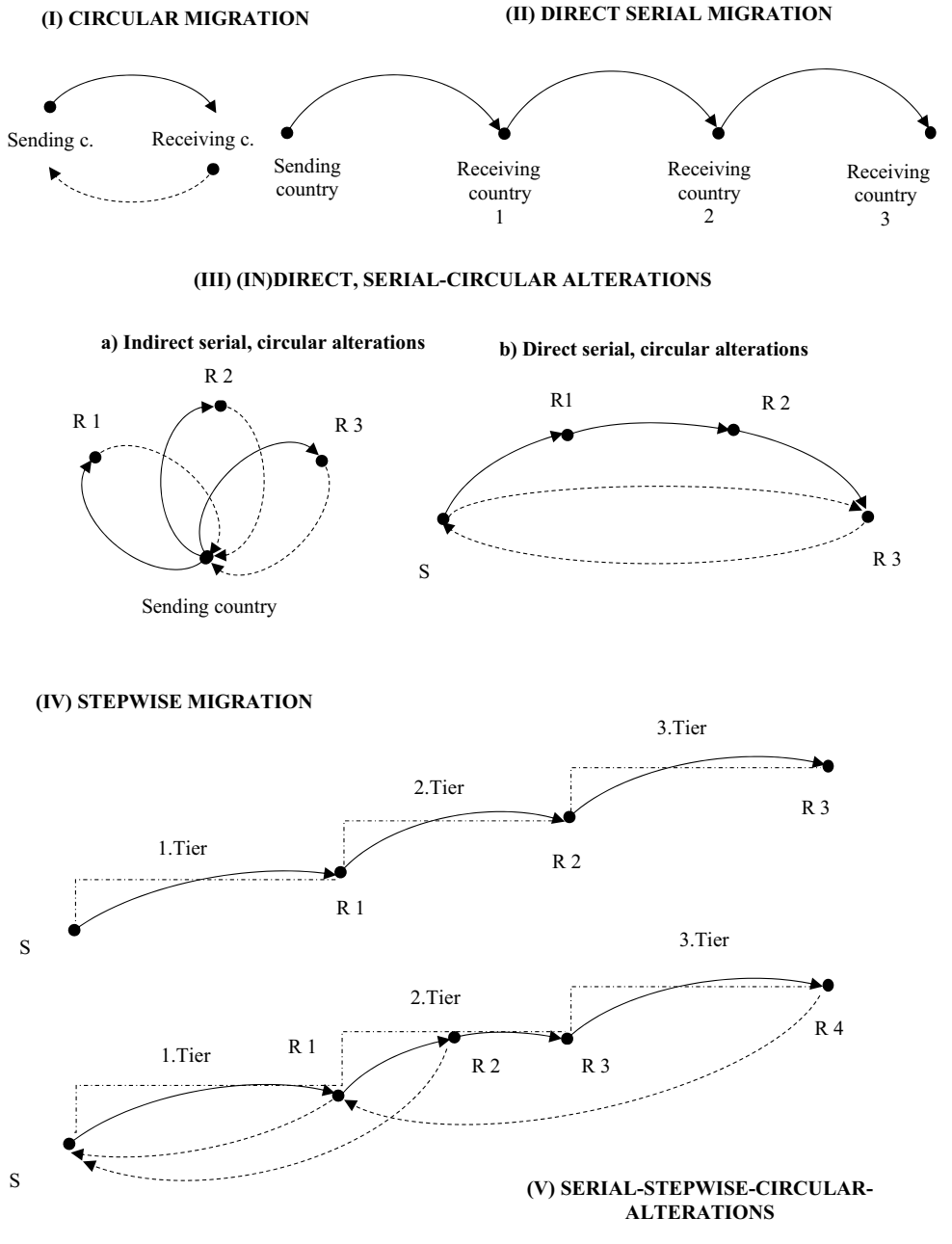

Figure 1. Circular, serial and stepwise migrations.

migration system. Researchers also point out that circular migration may maintain precarity, where costs of (re)migrations and migration debt surpass the gains (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Buckley, 2012; Moniruzzaman & Walton-Roberts, 2018; Naufal & Malit, 2018). However, some researchers remind us that migrants try to *cope* with these coercive forces, even amidst seemingly impossible contexts which is often overlooked in studies

on migration to the region. For example, Mehta, who studied Indian female domestic workers in Oman, points out:

> *Homogeneous narratives of victimhood and exploitation, while relevant to the study of migration must include wider discussions of agency, choice and empowerment, necessitating scholarship which represents the complex nuances of real lives (*Mehta, 2017*: 407).*

Indeed, many studies on economic and forced migrations, both in the Middle East and elsewhere, show that migrants' trajectories are not entirely determined by structural forces, even in highly coerced cases, such as forced migrations. They show instead that migrants' trajectories are shaped within the nexus of opportunities and constraints (Ali, 2011; Kelly & Hedman, 2016; Mehta, 2017; Valenta, 2010; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2017; Valenta et al., 2020). Migrant agency is conveyed in studies on secondary migrations of asylum seekers, refugees and labour migrants who navigate social networks, family institutions, social control, gender roles and various restrictive and deterring migration policies (Mehta, 2017; Paul, 2011; Percot & Rajan, 2007; Valenta & Strabac, 2013; Valenta et al., 2015). Studies among various categories of migrants in a different context and geographical regions indicate that step-by-step migration may also be seen as a common mobility strategy that happens partly in response to coercive or enabling structures and restrictive migration policies (Kalir, 2013; Kim, 2019; Nekby, 2006; Schapendonk, 2012; Valenta et al., 2020; Valenta & Strabac, 2013).

It this article, we argue that migrations from one receiving country to another country in the Gulf are not uncommon. In line with the above-mentioned studies, we argue that they sometimes represent an 'itinerancy of precarity' or 'involuntary' circular or serial migration, as has been suggested by previous studies (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Parreñas et al., 2019). On the other hand, we assert that onward migrations may be experienced as an opportunity, and that the process of coping with the coercive forces in migrants' home countries and host countries may result in trajectories that bring clear improvements in migrants' life circumstances (Kelly & Hedman, 2016; Mehta, 2017; Paul & Yeoh, 2020).

Methodology

Aiming to provide a more comprehensive overview and a typology of the migrant experiences and strategies in the Gulf, we interviewed various categories of migrants in the Gulf. In the period 2018–2020, we conducted qualitative interviews with 64 individuals who are or were temporary labour migrants in the Gulf countries. We collected data among migrants of different nationalities, social backgrounds and skill levels, and we focused primarily on migrations from the Global South. It has been acknowledged that the Gulf countries attract specialists and professionals from Western countries (Babar et al., 2019; Harrison & Michailova, 2012; Walsh, 2014). However, the realities of this group of migrants are beyond the scope of this article. Their citizenship, passports, education and 'ethnic capital' result in life circumstances, mobility opportunities and migrant trajectories that are very different from those we may find among the migrants from Global South (Kim, 2019).

More than half (39) of our interviewees were male and 25 were female. Most migrants (36) we met were in their thirties and forties. These people were temporary labour migrants who work or have worked in various countries in the Gulf. They occupied

different blue- and white-collar jobs in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Most of the informants were residing in the Gulf at the time of the interviews. However, some had returned to their home countries or were in third countries such as Singapore, Norway, UK, Canada and the US. High skilled migrants worked in a variety of professions, such as doctors, managers, engineers, nurses and academics. Most of the low-skilled female migrants were employed as domestic workers. Low-skilled male interviewees worked in the hospitality sector, and as construction workers, cleaners and taxi drivers. Most of the youngest migrants we met, those in their twenties, were university students. We also met several middle-aged migrants. In this category, we met both highly skilled professionals and academics, but also domestic workers and taxi drivers who spent large parts of their lives in the region.

Most of the migrants we interviewed were fromPakistan, Sri Lanka, India and Nepal. Other migrants were from a wide range of countries, including, among others, Egypt, Lebanon, Ghana, China, Sudan, Yemen, the Philippines and Bangladesh. We recruited these migrants through different sampling methods. During the initial sampling, we combined conveyance sampling and snowball sampling. In this early stage, the informants were encouraged to discuss with us their life trajectories and their general migration experiences. Thereafter, we used strategic sampling, primarily targeting various categories of long-term migrants. These people were encouraged to share with us their migration biographies and their reasons and motivations for their circular, serial and stepwise migrations.

We complied with strict ethical principles and codes of conduct expected from researchers interacting with interviewees, *inter alia*, regarding informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality. We have also shown respect to the interviewees and avoided to cause them any harm during the process of data gathering.[3] Almost half of the migrants were interviewed face-to-face, while the others were interviewed via phone, Skype, WhatsApp and other communication channels. Most of the face-to-face interviews were conducted in the UAE. Among informants in the UAE were people who had resided in other Gulf countries before they migrated to the UAE or to countries outside the region. Interviews were conducted either by the author or by research assistants who shared the same nationality and mother tongue with the migrants. Nevertheless, we were outsiders to the phenomena we researched. The author has visited the region frequently and his research assistants share the same nationality with the interviewees. However, none of us had personal experience of being a labour migrant in the region. Therefore, we were sensitive and cautious and questioning whether we understood all incoming data which was a time-consuming process. Being the outsiders we found it necessary to conduct a large number of interviews with the migrants and to supplement the interview data with various secondary data sources, such as interviews with local experts, relevant reports, migrant testimonies shared on YouTube and various newspaper articles on migrations to the Gulf.

Discussing findings: factors and motivations on the micro level

The stories of migrants in our study reveal the complexity of migration to the Gulf and the variety of migrant experiences. Based on these stories, we were able to distinguish between several categories of migrants in the Gulf. The first category includes would-be

stepwise migrants who, at the time of the interview, had clear intentions about further migration to countries in the West and who took concrete actions to achieve that aim. An opposite category includes people who did not seem to have plans to migrate to the West or to other countries outside the GCC. Their primary task was simply to acquire a long-term income in the GCC in order to send remittances back home and to prolong their residence in the Gulf. Among these people we find one-time migrants and former serial migrantswho did not plan to move to another country or to return to their home country in the foreseeable future. The third category includes migrants engaged in recurrent circular and serial migrations across the Gulf region. In this and the next section, we focus primarily on factors on the micro level that propel migrations of serial migrants. How can we explain the itinerant movements of these people? Which migration drivers, motivations and outcomes can we identify? Which trajectories proliferate within this group?

Czaika and Varela (2015) point out that 'among other factors on the micro-level the intersection of the life cycle, migratory cycle and family cycle plays an important role in the decision to return home' (Czaika & Varela, 2015, p. 319). We may add that both return and remigration occur within the nexus of the above-mentioned dimensions. The accounts of migrants in our study indicate that shorter visits to their home country may transform into unintended longer stays, which are then followed by remigration.

Obligations as income providers, on the one hand, and as care providers for close family members in the home country, on the other, may also result in recurrent migrations across the Gulf. In particular, female migrants were stretched between these two obligations at different stages of life and family cycle, which often resulted in longer stays in the home country and subsequent remigration. For example, Amanda, a 56-year-old woman from Sri Lanka, has been a serial migrant in the GCC for two decades. She explained that economic reasons were her motivation for recurrent migration to the Gulf. Her husband did not have a proper income, and the jobs for domestic workers in the Gulf appeared as the only solution to their economic problems. Amanda got her first job in Kuwait via a recruitment agency and worked there for seven months. However, she was not satisfied with the employer and decided to return to Sri Lanka, but she wanted to move as soon as possible to another job. After a short stay in her home country, she got another job, again as a domestic worker in Kuwait. Amanda worked in Kuwait for four years. Thereafter, she had to return to Sri Lanka due to family obligations: Amanda's husband passed away, and there was nobody to take care of her child. However, Amanda did not manage to find stable income in Sri Lanka, and, after two years in her home country, she moved back to the GCC, this time to Saudi Arabia, leaving her child with her brother. Amanda said that she did not have any preference for choosing the countries. Her concerns were her income, the cost of migration and that the family she was working for would be right and fair. The fees required by the agency were paid gradually back after her arrival to the destination country, which was fine with her. Amanda finished her contract in Saudi Arabia after two years. She did not want to continue in the same place, as the job was too demanding. Amanda then spent a year in the home country supervising construction work taking place in her house, along with other obligations in her family home in Sri Lanka, before she consulted again the recruitment agency. She got a job in Kuwait, where she has now been working for the same employer for ten years.

Amanda's migrant life cycle shows the complexity of circular and serial migration to the Gulf. Her biography also shares several common features with other cases we will present

in this article, including *inter alia*, that her migration trajectory was shaped within the nexus of migrant agency, family obligations and the push and pull forces in the sending and receiving countries. Stories of migrants we met also indicate that recurrent migrations across the Gulf have been related to job instability and precarity, both in the home country and in the Gulf. For example, in the Gulf countries, a job contract may expire or immigrants might lose their jobs, and if they do not manage to find other employment that might give them the right to renew the residence permit, they have to return to their home country. Furthermore, migrants were absconding from their employers due to ill-treatment and exploitation and ended up working as irregular migrants. Absconding migrants risk fines, deportations and remigration bans. Our findings and findings from other studies show that migrants in the above-mentioned categories often have a high desire to migrate again to the Gulf (Ali, 2011; Babar & Gardner, 2016; Naufal & Malit, 2018; Parreñas et al., 2019).

Unsustainable returns and remigrations

Our data material represents a large diversity of experiences. We met migrants whose circular migrations were the result of exploitation, false promises, abuse and other external coercive forces that did not give much space for migrant agency. Yet, we also met people who perceived mobility across the Gulf as the best available option. Some migrants even saw it as a unique opportunity that they claimed improved their life circumstances. Among them, we met people who were not pushed to leave the Gulf, but who left the region because they wanted to resettle permanently in their home country.

Several scholars have indicated that people's individual experiences and the developments and opportunities available to them in their host country and home country seem to influence return decisions. Return migration usually happens once the migrant has accumulated enough capital or due to the failure of the migration project (Borjas & Bratsberg, 1996; Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). Being laid off in the host country, illness, sociocultural and life-cycle factors, along with the desire and plans to invest savings, are often identified as major drivers of return-migration movements (Czaika & Varela, 2015; King, 1986; Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). The narratives of our interviewees convey several of these drivers and motivations. They also show that returns to a home country may be planned, and in some periods perceived as permanent, but the realities of life in the home country may push the migrants to re-emigrate, as illustrated in Mahinda's case. Mahinda is a 57-year-old labour migrant from Sri Lanka who has worked on and off for almost three decades in Saudi Arabia as a truck driver. He has tried to return twice to Sri Lanka, and both times he attempted to start a restaurant in Sri Lanka and live with his family. He returned with the necessary savings and opened a restaurant in Sri Lanka, but the restaurant did not work well. Therefore, he returned to Saudi Arabia.

For all these years, Mahinda has been renewing his working agreement annually, altering between work in Saudi Arabia and stays in Sri Lanka. Mahinda explained that at the end of his one-year renewable contract, he returns to Sri Lanka and stays there for several months before he returns to Saudi Arabia. Mahinda regretted that he did not manage to return and live with his family, but he was also cognizant that recurrent migrations across the Gulf provided him and his family with an income and lifestyle

that he claimed he would never manage to achieve in his home country. Mahinda's case is representative of several other long-term migrants in the Gulf. When asked to elaborate on the drivers and motivations for repetitive migration to the Gulf, migrants often mentioned financial troubles, unemployment and difficulties with adjustments to a much lower income than they had in the Gulf. Multiple renewals of temporary visas, unsustainable returns and circular migrations that generate remittances for family back home were a common feature of the life cycles of these migrants.

In Mahinda's case, mobility across the Gulf took the form of circular migration. In other cases, recurrent movements take the form of serial migrations. Here, we may distinguish between serial migrants who changed their host country in the Gulf a few times and those who did so frequently. This first group of migrants usually had friends or relatives in another host country who informed them about the possible gains of migration. They also encouraged and facilitated such secondary migration, which contributed to reducing its costs. In the second category were serial migrants whose secondary migrations were not network driven. Recurrent migrations and changes in country were instead profession-driven, facilitated by recruitment agencies and employers. These people experienced the itinerant multinational migrations as an inherent aspect of their profession. Such a stance was common among many domestic workers and construction workers who migrated frequently across the Gulf.

In both categories of the above-mentioned serial migrants, migration trajectories did not resemble the clear hierarchies of the destination countries as they were described in Paul's descriptions of Filipino migrations to Singapore, Hong Kong and onwards to the West (Paul, 2011). In both categories, the country changes were not part of long-term plans. For example, we met construction workers who changed several countries in the Gulf and South Asia. They were primarily concerned with the type and length of the contract, fees and cost of migration. Another major concern was the wages and tasks they would get at the construction sites or from families they worked for. Furthermore, these people did not have any plans for onward migrations to the West. In their view, Western countries were out of their reach. They also pointed out that they were not very concerned about where in the Gulf region they would be sent. As one interviewee said: 'We do not see much of the country anyway. Most of the time, we spend either on the construction site or in the labour camp, and they are similar wherever we go'.

Macro dimensions of multinational migrations and migrant agency

Parreñas et al. point out that serial migrations emerge in a specific context. They happen: 'when migrants (1) have access to a wide range of low-cost destinations, (2) face exclusionary contexts of reception including ineligible residency and vulnerability to deportation and (3) confront financial insecurity upon return' (Parreñas et al., 2019, pp. 1241–1244). Parreñas et al. contend that in such a context, secondary migrations may produce precarity, which has also been illustrated in several other studies (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Naufal & Malit, 2018).[4]

Requirements for family reunion in the GCC have also contributed to recurrent migrations. According to the regulations, only migrants with a certain income and who are employed in white-collar professions may bring family dependents to the Gulf. For example, in Saudi Arabia, authorities issue visas to family dependents only for labour

migrants in a white-collar profession with a minimum salary of 5,000 SR (around 1,300 USD). In the UAE, only migrants who earn a minimum of 4,000 AUD (around 1,000 USD) may sponsor their wives and children. In Kuwait, the monthly salary of the family sponsor should not be less than 600 KD (around 2,000 USD).[5] As a result, families of low-income temporary migrants in the Gulf usually stay in their home countries. Consequently, remigration to the Gulf typically occurs after stays in the home country that were a result of various family obligations or unsuccessful attempts to live together with family.

Migration bans, both in the host and sending countries, have also triggered serial migrations among migrants. For example, Saudi Arabia issued several bans on domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia. Furthermore, sending countries, such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Nepal, have alternated between issuing and lifting bans on the deployment of domestic workers to several countries in the region. These policies have influenced migration pathways of female migrants as most of the domestic workers from the mentioned countries are women. These bans have contributed to secondary migrations of domestic workers, as some domestic workers who were in one receiving country and returned to home country had to change their destination the next time they decided to migrate.[6]

Deployment bans have deflected returned migrants to other receiving countries creating a new wave of serial migrations. Migration bans imposedon domestic workers from one specific country have also resulted in an increased demand for female domestic workers from other countriesperpetuating the serial migrations to the GCC. For example, after the Philippine authorities have imposed the deployment ban on domestic workers in the region, several countries in the Gulf started to recruit the Ethiopian, Indonesian and Indian female domestic workers.[7]

Developments at the macro level, such as political turmoil, wars, economic downturns and other large-scale emergencies, have also resulted in dislocations of temporary migrants and subsequent serial and stepwise migrations. We collected our data before the outbreak of the coronavirus; however, it is expected that the outbreak will also affect migrations across the Gulf. Many migrants have left the Gulf and many more will likely leave the region due to the pandemic or because of the economic consequences of the virus outbreak. However, we may expect that many will gradually return as has happened in other post-crisis periods.[8] Due to the Gulf War, Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and mass deportations that followed, hundreds of thousands of temporary migrants were dislocated. The financial crisis also disrupted migration to the Gulf. However, when these crises receded, migrants typically returned to the Gulf (Buckley, 2012; Rajan & Narayana, 2010; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2017).

Developments at the macro level may also deflect migrants from the region or trigger migration out of the region into third countries. For example, the protracted crisis and related conflicts may result in secondary migrations as displaced people in the region give up residency in the Gulf and their plans to return to their home country. Such trends have been observed in several contexts, both in the Gulf and outside the region, including Syrians in Jordan, Turkey and other neighbouring countries who have left the region (Valenta et al., 2020). Some of our Syrian interviewees also conveyed that they decided to leave the Gulf and move onwards to the West due to political turmoil and wars in their home country. Before the war in their home country, they combined temporary residence in the Gulf with frequent visits to their home country, where some also invested in

properties. In their case, life in the Gulf was a temporary project aimed at an accumulation of resources that would be invested in permanent return to their home country. However, these plans were changed due to the deteriorating situation in their home country. These people were no longer in the Gulf purely due to pure economic reasons; they were 'mixed migrants' trying to find a permanent solution to their dire situation. Such changes in perspectives triggered onward migration to third countries that provide permanent resident status.

Several of the above-mentioned drivers were conveyed by Hussein, a 45-year Syrian man who migrated from Syria to the UAE in the late 1990s. He worked first as a staff manager in a hotel. During this time, he studied business management in the UAE. When he graduated in 2001, he got a job as a director of a media company in Dubai and worked there until 2009. Then he returned to Syria in 2009, planning to resettle permanently in his home country. When the Arab Spring started, Hussain anticipated that it would not be safe to stay in Syria and he and his family left Syria and went back to Dubai, where he got the same job in the media company. However, he started to worry about the stability of their temporary residence in the UAE and, therefore, he applied for a temporary visa in the US, with the hopes of staying there permanently. He and his family migrated to the US in 2015. However, they realised that they had slim chances of achieving permanent status in the US. Therefore, they migrated from the US to Canada, where they applied for asylum. Since 2016, Hussein and his family have lived in Canada and, at the time of the interview in 2020, he had received Canadian citizenship.

Hussein's story illustrates how macro forces and the migrant agency in interaction may shape migrants' multinational migration trajectories. His story also reminds us that multiple migrations may take different forms. In some cases, people move onwards directly, while in others, they first return to their home country before they move to a third country (recall types II and III in Figure 1). Direct migrations are observed among several categories of distant migrants, such as Chinese migrants in South America and various categories of African and Asian migrants in Europe (Chan, 2020; Kalir, 2013; Toma & Castagnone, 2015). Secondary migrations of mixed migrants and refugees may also take the form of direct serial migrations or fragmented migrations (Collyer, 2010; Valenta et al., 2020). In our study, we may make a distinction between former Gulf migrants like Hussein who migrated onwards to the West and the serial migrants who migrated recurrently across the Gulf. In the former category, secondary migrations took the form of direct serial migrations, like in the case of Hussein, where after his return to Syria, he moved directly to the UAE and thereafter to the US and Canada. In the latter category, secondary migrations follow a pattern of indirect serial migrations via their home country. Most temporary migrants in the Gulf fostered strong obligations and connections to their home countries. It was also much easier for them to visit their homes and families outside the region. Therefore, their transnational lives and changes in the receiving country were usually combined with recurrent returns to their home country.

Features of serial migrations in the Gulf: between opportunity and constraint

The stories of most migrants we met indicate that their serial migrations and the changes of the destination country should also be related to evaluations of the costs and benefits

of the country change. Such motives were stressed by Hansani, a 46-year-old domestic worker from Sri Lanka who migrated three times to the Gulf. She was first in Saudi Arabia for two years. She wanted to stay longer in the Gulf to earn more money, but she returned to her home country and stayed there for seven years, as she had to take care of her children. When her children became older, Hansani migrated to Kuwait and worked there as a domestic worker for three years. Thereafter, she migrated to the UAE, working there for two years. When the interview took place, she was in Sri Lanka, but was preparing to migrate again to Kuwait. Hansani explained that it was easy to migrate to the Gulf, as the recruitment agencies did not require her to pay their fees in advance.Hansani stressed that she worked for fine families in most of the countries. Nevertheless, she was always cognizant of opportunities in other countries, and she was always looking for a better wage, which was also why she wanted to return to Kuwait. She said that she liked Dubai and that she had a good relationship with her employer there, but the salary was lower in the UAE than it was in Kuwait.

Many studies describe various restrictions the sponsorship-based labour migration systems impose on temporary labour migrants, such as short work contracts, lack of ability to get permanent residence, restrictions on family reunion and inflexibility regarding changing employers. It is argued that several of these restrictions may perpetuate itinerant movements of labour migrants across the Gulf (Ali, 2011; Parreñas et al., 2019; Piper & Withers, 2018). Narratives of migrants in our study suggest that remigrations to the Gulf are the result of migrants *coping* with these constraining structures. Coping with enabling and constraining structures in the host countries, resulting in frequent recurrent migrations, was also conveyed by Manish, a 32-year-old Nepalese migrant in the UAE. Manish first worked in India in a hotel. His brother went to Dubai before him and encouraged Manish to follow him. Manish came to work in Dubai as a waiter and was promoted to cashier after ten months. He was earning a better salary than he had at the hotel in India, but he still looked for new job opportunities. He worked at the same restaurant for two years, then changed employers and got a job at a hotel in Dubai. Manish had a better salary while working in the restaurant than in the hotel, yet he believed that working in a big hotel would provide better opportunities for him to improve his skills. While working in the hotel, Manish got a driving licence, which opened new opportunities for him. When he got an offer from another company, he left his job at the hotel without having fulfilled the contract period. Consequently, he was banned for half a year from Dubai. Manish returned to Nepal, and after the ban period ended, he returned to Dubai on a visitor visa. After a short period, he got a new contract and started working as a delivery driver. Manish has now been working as a delivery driver for six years. He said that he was content with the job, as he earned more than he had in his previous jobs.

We met several migrants like Hansani and Manish, who engaged in multiple migrations to the region, and whose stories show a similar desire to improve their situation, as well as their continuous adjustments and approaches to coping with the coercive structures. Yet, there are some differences. Migrants like Hansani combined circular and serial migrations with long stays in the home country, while migrants like Manish changed employers and destination countries after relatively short stays in their home country. The general impression is that remigrations after long-term stays in the home country were the result of coping with push factors, changing life circumstances and obligations in the home

country, whereas frequent recurrent migrations were the result of migrants' coping with push forces, migration policies and other difficulties in host countries (see also Naufal & Malit, 2018; Parreñas et al., 2019).

Serial migrations within the Gulf: Ad hoc responses to coercive and enabling structures

Many migrants, including Hansani, Manish and others in our study, did not move to different receiving countries in the Gulf with the idea of using them as a stepping-stone for migration to countries placed higher up in the international hierarchy of receiving countries. Furthermore, their secondary migration did not necessarily require larger migration capital, as would be the case with stepwise migrations (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2011).

We met several migrants like Manish who used networks to migrate to third countries and who navigated various policy restrictions. They changed countries and jobs, seeking to improve their life circumstances. Some migrated on their own initiative, while others were coerced to change their host country. In the former categories, secondary migration was based on migrants' evaluations of perceived opportunities for advancement in their current host country compared to the situation in other available countries. In the latter, such changes occurred when it was not possible to renew their contract or to find other jobs in the first receiving country. In this situation, migrants who are in a hurry to provide income for their families are then forced to look for employment in third countries. There are also cases where migrants would prefer to emigrate to the 'old' receiving country, but they have been banned from entering it; thus, they choose to migrate to a third country (Parreñas et al., 2019).

Prolonging temporary residence in the same country has been the most popular strategy among many temporary migrants in the Gulf (Valenta, Knowlton, Al Awad, & Strabac, 2019; Lori, 2019). Staying put has some obvious advantages for temporary labour migrants compared with frequently changing host countries. For example, circular migrants who know the country and who have contacts and local knowledge of the country will be more able to find employment without the assistance of recruitment companies. According to our interviewees, networks of friends and acquaintances established during previous stays in the receiving country were helpful to them in several ways. Some shared their apartments with the newcomers, informed them about job vacancies or loaned them money, which significantly reduced the costs of such mobility.

The importance of pre-migration networks as facilitators of migration has been extensively explored among first-time migrants (Massey et al., 1993; Collyer, 2010; De Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020). More recent research, both in the Gulf and elsewhere, indicates that contacts with friends and relatives in different countries may also play an important role in serial and stepwise migration (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2015; Paul & Yeoh, 2020; Toma & Castagnone, 2015). These contacts may provide information, encouragement and practical help. Indeed, for migrants who have contacts in other host countries, the relative advantages of the recurrent migration to the same host country may be less relevant in decisions to change the destination country. In such cases, the costs of the country change may be lower, and the migrant may decide to change countries, even if the

benefits of the serial migration in terms of income and working conditions are not significantly higher.

Migrants like Manish and Hansani changed the countries in different ways. While Manish relied on networks, Hansani used recruitment agencies. Yet, both stressed that migrations to the Gulf and the country changes were motivated by economic reasons and precarity in their home country. Recurrent migrations to the Gulf provided them with an opportunity to earn money and improve the life circumstances of their families. However, the recurrent multinational migrations of migrants like Manish and Hansani do not fit with the definitions of stepwise migrations (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2011). As already noted, the concept of stepwise migration is associated with an intentional strategy of multistage movements from less desirable, easy-to-enter countries, to more desirable, but harder-to-enter countries. If the migrants manage to accumulate the required migration capital in intermediate countries, their successive migratory steps will gradually enable them to climb to the more preferable receiving countries (Kelly & Hedman, 2016; Paul, 2011; Zufferey, 2019). Manish's and Hansani's recurrent migrations across the Gulf were part of their continuous efforts to improve their life circumstances. However, their multiple migratory steps were not carefully planned or calculated in advance in the way in which it was conveyed by Paul in her studies on stepwise migrations (Paul, 2011). Their migration was instead a result of ad hoc responses to external factors and a constant re-evaluation of opportunities, costs, risks and constraints, as several studies on serial migrations have expounded (Parreñas et al., 2019; Toma & Castagnone, 2015).

Hierarchy of receiving countries in the Gulf

According to the notion of 'hierarchy of receiving countries' discussed in several studies on stepwise migrations, the developed countries in the Global North are defined as the most preferred countries, and the countries in the Middle East are the least preferred (Carlos, 2013; Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). This notion is useful and corresponds partly with the perceptions of our informants. However, accounts of our interviewees nuance this notion in several ways. Among other things, they indicate that the hierarchy of destination countries that place the Gulf countries at the bottom and the West at the top is not absolute.

For example, we met migrants from low-income countries in Asia and Africa in the Gulf who stressed that the countries in the Gulf were not the least desirable destinations. The GCC countries were much more desirable destinations for them than were countries that received large numbers of labour migrants in their immediate neighbourhoods.

There are also migrants who returned from the West to the Gulf, as they missed lifestyle, social networks, wages and culture in the region (Ali, 2011). Hussein, the Syrian man we discussed earlier who migrated from the UAE to Canada, compared his life in the two countries. He complained that he and his family faced several problems in Canada. His children were bullied at school and felt isolated, and it was difficult for him to find a job because most companies required Canadian work experience. He had to work as a taxi driver and construction worker even though he had a university education and extensive management experience from the UAE. Hussein maintained that it was necessary to get a permanent residence permit and citizenship in Canada for the sake of his family and children. However, he stressed that he would try to return to the UAE. He

conveyed that he missed Dubai, where he had held a prestigious position in the workplace, received a high salary and maintained a wealthy lifestyle that he did not manage to achieve in Canada.

Building on Gardner's concept of 'strategic transnationalism', Ali (2011) argued that citizenship in a Western country may give migrants from the Gulf peace of mind and a retreat option in case they lose their temporary residence in the Gulf (Ali, 2011; Gardner, 2008). Gardner conveyed various transnational strategies of Asian migrants in Bahrain who shuttled across the Gulf and engaged in various projects in several countries as a part of their dealing with protracted temporality in the Gulf (Gardner, 2008). Ali explored such practices among second-generation, middle-class Iranian migrants in Dubai. According to him, the permanent status and citizenship in Western countries served as a safety net, or 'contingency plan, a strategic back-up in the case they had to leave Dubai' (Ali, 2011, p. 564). These perspectives were also traced in the narratives of several other migrants we met who returned, or who, like Hussein, planned to return, to the Gulf with Western passports.

According to the notion of hierarchies of destination countries, countries are roughly categorised into tiers, where the Gulf represents one of the tiers. However, within such a rough classification, we may find an internal hierarchy of countries, including within the Gulf tier (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). For example, several migrants we met perceived Saudi Arabia and Oman as the least desirable destinations in the GCC. The UAE, followed by Qatar and Kuwait, was perceived as the most popular receiving country. The migration policies, local regulations, income levels, costs of living and level of urbanisation and development were considered to be important factors in migrants' evaluations of different countries (see also Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). Consequently, some migrants who first arrived in the less desirable host countries in the Gulf later moved to other more desired countries in the region.

For example, Rajib, a 39-year-old man from Nepal, migrated first to Saudi Arabia, where he worked for two years as a salesman. During that time, he could not change employer and after his initial contract expired, he was not allowed to apply for another job. However, he stayed illegally in Saudi Arabia, working as a waiter. Thereafter, he returned to Nepal and stayed for two years in his home country. Rajib could not get a proper job in Nepal, and therefore he decided to migrate to the Gulf once again. At the time of the interview, he had been in Kuwait for five years. Initially, he came to Kuwait to work as a security officer, but after three years, he changed companies, taking release from his sponsor. Then he started working in a restaurant, where he has been employed for almost three years.

At the time of the interview, Rajib did not have plans to move somewhere else, as he was satisfied with his current job in Kuwait. Rajib compared his experiences in Saudi Arabia with those in Kuwait, claiming that Kuwait is a more open country that provides more opportunities and higher salaries for temporary labour migrants with his background. Several other migrants we met gauged the countries in the region according to similar criteria. Here, the most often mentioned motivations for country change were higher wages and more flexible sponsorship regulations. Saudi Arabia was experienced and perceived by our interviewees as being a closed and rigid country, while the UAE was perceived as the most flexible receiving country, especially regarding the possibility of changing employers. Local society, religion and culture were also taken into consideration

when migrants compared the countries in the Gulf. In particular, female migrants experienced the UAE as a more open and liberal society than Saudi Arabia, which imposed many restrictions, especially for women. These restrictions have motivated some female migrants to move from Saudi Arabia to other, more liberal countries in the GCC or outside the region.[9] The UAE, especially Dubai, was also seen as being a more liberal and open destination regarding religious and cultural norms, and as such, offered a larger variety of leisure-time activities. As one Pakistani migrant in the UAE who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia pointed out: 'The salary in Saudi Arabia was fine, but there was nothing there to do after work. You can just work, sleep, eat and work. I could not stand it any longer'.

Stepwise migrations via the Gulf countries to the West

According to Paul (2011), stepwise migration is a strategy that includes 'multiple stops in various intermediate locations as part of an intentional, hierarchical progression towards a migrant's preferred destination' (Paul, 2011, p. 1844). Paul asserts that stepwise migrations are most likely to happen among the 'middle category of migrant' – migrants who do not have resources to move directly to the most desired countries, but who are able to accumulate them gradually, climbing, step-by-step in the hierarchy of the receiving countries. Intermediate destinations may be relatively easy to gain access to, but they often do not provide sufficient incentives for these 'middle categories of migrants' to stay, as the working conditions may be tough and wages low, and there may be no chance to gain permanent residency (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2011).

Our findings are in line with studies that argue that stepwise trajectories towards top-tier destinations in the West are more common among high-skilled than low-skilled migrants (Kelly & Hedman, 2016; Paul, 2011; Takenaka, 2007; Zufferey, 2019). Our general impression is that the typical 'middle category of migrants' in the Gulf are aspiring professionals from the Global South. In our study, people who were planning to or who had already moved onwards to the West were primarily educated migrants, such as health workers, engineers, IT specialists, migrant students and academics. A combination of individual factors, migrants' human capital and migration policies that enable and restrict international migrations of different categories of migrants may explain this trend. The above-mentioned professions are in demand in the West, and many Western countries have established immigration programmes that have specific requirements and certifications for these categories of migrants (Carlos, 2013; Kim, 2019; Paul & Yeoh, 2020).

We met engineers, students, academics and other professionals from India, Syria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and other countries who enhanced their skills and migration capital in the Gulf, and many of them planned to migrate to Europe and North America. Most of them also had compatriots, friends, relatives and colleagues who had already left the Gulf for Western countries and who might help them to migrate. We interviewed some of these people who had lived in the Gulf before they resettled in North America and Europe. These migrants engaged in various forms of stepwise migrations. Here, we may again distinguish between migrants whose stepwise migration included only a few steps, for example, from their home country to one country in the Gulf and then to the West, and those whose trajectory was more complex. In the first category, we may find students and aspiring young professionals who, during their stay in the Gulf, got professional experience, skills and education, which they then used to get jobs and residence in the West. In this category are

also students who migrated with their families to the Gulf, but who later studied, and later resettled in other countries in Europe, Australia and North America.[10]

In the second category are migrants who lived in several countries in the Gulf and South Asia before they got a job and permanent residence in Europe, North America or Australia. Among them, we met people who had complex migration trajectories, which included alterations between circular, serial and stepwise migrations (recall type V in Figure 1). For example, some moved first to the Gulf, then they returned to their home country to undertake university education.[11] As students, they shuttled between their home country and the Gulf for several years. Thereafter, they returned to the Gulf, where they lived and worked for some time before they moved onwards to the West. These people maintained transnational practices connecting the countries in the West, the Gulf and their home countries, as they had friends, relatives and close family members there. Some even returned to the Gulf without plans to leave the region in the immediate future.

Desire to acquire permanent residence and citizenship of the Western countries was most often mentioned by our migrant informants as a major motivation for migration to the West, which concurs with the findings from several previous studies (Ali, 2011; Carlos, 2013; Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020; Paul, 2011; Percot & Rajan, 2007). Some migrants prized Western countries as the best place for permanent resettlement. Others provided more ambivalent evaluations. Here, the safety of permanent status and employees' rights in the West were prized, while the stigmatisation, cultural differences and social isolation they experienced in the West made some yearn for their time in the Gulf.

Conclusion

The GCC countries define all migrant workers as temporary residents and transient workers. However, large numbers of labour migrants stay or return to the region, spending years or even decades in the region. In this article, we aimed to understand and conceptualise recurrent migrations across the Gulf. At the individual level, we conveyed migrants' aspirations, coping strategies and ability to develop their migration capital. At the macro level, migration policies were identified as one of the central forces that framed migrants' multinational migration trajectories. In line with previous studies, we made a distinction between migration policies in sending countries, the policies in the Gulf region and the migration policies of the Western countries, which restrict and enable the influx of low- and high-skilled migrants from the Global South.[12]

It was maintained that migrants' trajectories happen within the nexus of coercive structures and human agency. Migrants' attempts to prolong their work contracts and temporary residence in the Gulf seem to be the most common strategy. However, this protracted temporariness is combined with various transnational practices.[13] Here, recurrent visits to the home country, sending remittances and maintaining contact with family and relatives prevail. Yet, it is also evident that migrants combine these practices and obligations with various types of circular, serial and stepwise migrations.

Recurrent temporary labour migrations across the Gulf may lead to 'itinerancy of precarity', especially among low-skilled migrants.[14] However, we have also seen that recurrent migrations to the Gulf may be the product of adjustments and strategies that have resulted in improved working conditions and better life circumstances for migrants. Discussions on migrant flows to the Gulf often overlook the variety and complexity of

experiences, including those that may contribute to explaining the popularity of such migrations. Indeed, the narratives of the migrants in this study convey large variations in experiences. They also show variations in migrants' opportunities and resources. Within the various coercive frames and opportunity structures, migrants continually evaluate their options, resources and pros and cons of different strategies.

Resources before their migration and the ability to accumulate human capital in the Gulf influence the patterns and trajectories of itinerant migration. We have distinguished between several categories of migrants and migrant trajectories, including *inter alia*, between high- and low-skilled migrants, and between serial migrations in the Gulf region and onward stepwise migrations. High-skilled migrants in the Gulf engage in various multiple migrations in the region, but also take part in stepwise migrations to the top-tier countries in the West. Low-skilled migrants have different adjustments. Circular and indirect serial migrations within the Gulf region are more common among this group than stepwise migrations towards the West. Due to various selection mechanisms and policies, the developed countries in the West are out of reach for most low-skilled migrants in the Gulf.

We have also indicated gender differences in patterns of migrations to the Gulf. These gender differences may be related to the macro and micro forces which influence the pathways of multiple male and female migrations in the region. Gender differences may be related to the restrictions embedded in the temporary labour migration system in the Gulf. They are also a response to the life circumstances and obligations in the home countries. In particular, female domestic workers are often subjected to various changing migration policies that restrict the deployment of the female labour force in the Gulf. Deployment bans influence the temporal and geographical complexity of female serial migration in the region. Furthermore, female migrants we met were more often stretched between obligations as income providers, on the one hand, and as care providers for close family members. Women returned to the home country due to such expectations providing care to family members which resulted in protracted stays. They migrated again to the Gulf when the children became older, or if there was no need any longer to take care for the sick or elderly family members in the home country.

This article focused on itinerant migrations across the Gulf, yet it is important to stress that many temporary labour migrants stay in the GCC, in the same host countries. Several forces may be the cause of such immobility. On the one hand, we met migrants who do not plan to return to their countries or to migrate to third countries since they are content with their jobs and lives. On the other hand, some migrants are trapped in states of immobility. Among them are people who have ended up with irregular status and who have been stranded for years while waiting for amnesty. Furthermore, the situation in their home country, such as war or persecution, may make people anxious to return or visit their home country. Possibilities for serial or stepwise migrations out of the region were also limited for these groups, as they were denied legal migration channels to most countries. Prolonging their residence and job in the Gulf appeared as the best or only available adjustment for these people.[15]

Notes

1. The GCC countries are the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain.
2. Parreñas et al. studied serial migration of domestic workers. They maintain that the higher-tier countries impose higher educational requirements on domestic workers than the Gulf

countries. The costs of migration are composed of the fees required by recruitment agencies, as well as visa fees, health checks, deposits and other costs imposed by the authorities of the top-tier countries (Parreñas et al., 2019). Domestic workers in the Gulf are not required to pay upfront agency fees for migration to the Gulf – the costs of migration are primarily financed through salary deductions (Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). Therefore, temporary migration to the GCC countries is affordable for large numbers of domestic workers from low-income countries who would otherwise not be able to migrate overseas (Parreñas et al., 2019).

3. We have also protected their anonymity while presenting the data. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms. We have protected anonymity of our interviewees slightly changing demographic and other information irrelevant for our discussions.
4. Naufal and Malit (2018) studied the role of abuse and unfavourable working conditions in Filipina domestic workers' desire to return abroad again. Their study shows that abused absconded migrants were often highly itinerant, and prone to migrate again.
5. Such requirements are also stipulated by authorities in other Gulf countries.
   See https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/oman/oman-reduces-salary-limit-for-family-visas-1.2101861;
   See https://government.ae/en/information-and-services/visa-and-emirates-id/residence-visa/sponsoring-family-residency-visa-by-expatriates;
   See also http://www.visaprocess.ae/details.php?page=family-visa-saudi-arabia; see https://kuwaitvisa.com/visa-types/
6. See https://asiatimes.com/2018/09/ban-on-hiring-filipino-domestic-workers-in-uae-to-be-lifted/; see also https://www.dw.com/en/philippines-ban-on-sending-workers-to-kuwait-creates-tension-confusion/a-42563708; see also http://apmigration.ilo.org/news/saudi-arabia-bans-domestics-after-the-philippines-imposed-conditions-for-employing-their-nationals;https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/six-gulf-countries-informed-of-indonesia-domestic-workers-ban-1.1661460
7. See for example: https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/legal/story/Kuwait_looking_for_solutions_due_to_Filipino_domestic_workers_ban-SNG_164103534/
8. See https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-is-the-future-of-migration-from-kerala-coronavirus-6380548/
9. See also Collins (2020)
10. Many Western Universities have their branches in the Gulf. A large share of their students has a migrant background. It is not uncommon for these students to migrate out of the region for studies or work.
11. Many sons and daughters of the middle-class migrants in the Gulf use to take University education in the home countries due to the lower cost of university education in the home countries and perceptions that the universities in the home country are better than in the Gulf.
12. See also: Paul (2011), Carlos (2013), Parreñas et al. (2019), and Kim (2019).
13. See also: Gardner (2008); Ali (2011).
14. See also: Babar and Gardner (2016); Parreñas et al. (2019).
15. Sizeable numbers of labour migrants in the GCC are from countries affected by war and political instability, such as Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yemen. For more on immobility of these people see Babar et al. (2019). For more on migrations from refugee-producing countries to the GCC see Valenta and Jakobsen (2017); Valenta et al. (2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Marko Valenta is a fulltime professor at Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Social Work, in Trondheim. He is sociologist and has conducted research in the UAE, Jordan, Norway, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and several other countries in Europe and Middle East. His research interests are international migrations, ethnic relations, public policy, and work with reception and integration of immigrants and refugees.

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