



The Production and Reproduction of
SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Conference Report

“SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN THE GULF AND BEYOND”
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, ABU DHABI

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Conference Report

“Social Inequalities in the Gulf and Beyond”

Organized by

Prof. Dr. Laure Assaf, New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD)

and

the Research unit “The production and reproduction of social inequalities”, University of Cologne (UoC)

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Participants of the conference „ Social Inequalities in the Gulf and Beyond”

The conference “Social Inequalities in the Gulf and Beyond” took place on 6th and 7th February 2023 at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). It was the focal point of the yearly meeting and excursion of the members of the research unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities” from the Universities of Cologne and Addis Ababa. The conference, which addressed a wide range of topics related to the societies in the Gulf region and global migration phenomena, was co-organized by Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican and Prof. Dr. Laure Assaf as a cooperation between the research unit and NYUAD. In

this sense, the purpose of the conference was to initiate a dialogue between the members of the research unit and the faculty members and students of NYUAD working on the topic of inequality. During the two-day conference, the participants enjoyed a lively exchange concerning approaches, concepts, methods, and results of research on global and social inequalities. The interdisciplinary conference included 17 papers bundled into six panels that dealt with the topic through sociological, anthropological, and historical lenses. Unlike classical approaches to inequality research that

address mostly economic and social relations, this conference focused on intersectional factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and geographical location. It aimed to analyze how these factors contribute to shaping an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. From this starting point, the conference addressed the overarching question of why attempts to decrease inequality have often contributed to generating more durable inequalities. The conference was divided into two main themes. The first day was dedicated to conceptual frameworks and methodologies for researching inequalities. The second day addressed research on inequality through two focal points: the global COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon and the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula as a regional area.

After an introduction by Laure Assaf, the first panel began with a discussion on theoretical frameworks and methodologies for inequality studies. Sabino Kornrich (NYUAD) presented his quantitative approach to implicit gender and social inequalities in the Gulf region and highlighted the challenges of assessing and gaining access to official data in the UAE. He emphasized the importance of social context and social norms in inequality studies and showed creative methods of measuring these factors within his work.

In the second talk, Habib Khondker (Zayed University) took the audience on a journey through the social sciences by contextualizing the predecessors of inequality studies and analyzing their relevance to contemporary studies. He expounded the problems of national paradigms in the field of migration studies and proposed a new framework for studies on inequality and migration that he is currently working on. Drawing on Thomas Faist's ideas on location and space

mobility, Anja Weiss' concepts of intersectional migration backgrounds, and the politics of the home country, Habib Khondker emphasized the key components of his framework: class and justice.

The third paper of this panel was presented by Michaela Pelican (UoC). She outlined the theoretical framework of the research unit on (social) inequalities. She drew on the ideas of Therborn and the actor-centered approaches of Sen/Nussbaum and Appadurai, which represent the base of the unit's work. Further, she elaborated on the research unit's collaborative approach and internal structure based on the "Code of Conduct", which critically addresses the internal structures of inequality within academia. In the following fruitful discussion, contributors stressed the importance of developing a theoretical framework for inequality studies that is critical, practical, and inclusive of voices from the Global South.

The second panel on the (re)production of social inequalities included two historical presentations and one anthropological contribution. Fabiana Kutsche (UoC) presented her historical findings on the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the "Committee of Experts on Native Labor", a specialized working group that was initiated in 1926. In her analysis, she discussed colonial labor practices and mechanisms of discrimination, instancing the role of W.E.B. Du Bois in the organization.

In the second paper, Tu Huynh (UoC) elaborated on her historical research on inequality in 19th-century Chinese society, drawing on Rebecca Karl's ideas of Chinese intellectual circles both inside the country and in the diaspora. She highlighted the differences between the concepts of slavery used in the newspapers and archives of that period and the importance

of transcultural processes in regards to the Chinese terms.

Laure Assaf (NYUAD) completed the panel with her presentation on the middle-class in Gulf societies from an anthropological perspective. She outlined the three main measurements of the middle-class within the sociological tradition—economic, social, and political— and linked these with her own project. She elicited the positions of citizens and non-citizens in Gulf societies, emphasizing the themes of urban access, accommodation, and social mobility as key issues to define the non-citizen middle-class in the region. The subsequent discussion centred on the intersectional constellations of the investigation and the focus on nationality in the Gulf region.

In panel three, which merged the research on labour, development, and social inequalities, Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican (UoC) elaborated on their co-research on the discourse of “human trafficking” in Cameroon. They stressed the key role of intermediaries in the context of migration, the political use of migration brokers, and the use of the term “human trafficking” in public discourse.

Subsequently, Meron Zeleke discussed her project on development policy in Ethiopia, presenting her research on “industrial parks”, a political program planned as a job creation scheme. She showed that even though the program targeted mainly young women, it generated labour exploitation and contributed to an increase in social inequality.

The first workshop day was rounded out with a presentation by Melina Platas (NYUAD) in which she elaborated on her research on the “Muslim-Christian schooling gap in sub-Saharan Africa”. The political scientist highlighted the

importance of social beliefs about education in shaping communities’ attitudes towards schooling. She ascribed the gap’s origin to colonial roots and the significance of missions’ activities as a cornerstone for educational systems.

Panel four focused on social inequalities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Saba Karim Khan and Katharina Klaunig (NYUAD) introduced their research on “family expectations, status, and return migration decisions among South-Asian migrants in the Gulf” in which they trace the decision-making processes described by workers back to the family networks. They emphasized the signaling aspect of migration as a public event, the importance of the “izzat” as a concept of honor for the families in the home country, and the potential of autonomy for the migrants. The discussion on this panel dealt with the question of migrants’ agency and the generalizability of the findings in other contexts.

In a second presentation, Tu Huynh, Jonathan Ngeh, and Michaela Pelican (UoC) presented their project “Communication during and after Covid-19: (Re)producing social inequalities”, which was based on qualitative research within migrant communities in both the United Arab Emirates and China. As a process of co-production of knowledge, the research team developed a collaborative research approach based on intermediaries and grounded in subaltern voices. One of the collaborators, who attended the conference and supported the research team, highlighted the cross-communitarian solidarity based on shared vulnerability he noticed during the pandemic period. The findings of the project underlined the importance of residential patterns and occupation for migrants during the Covid pandemic.

The fifth panel brought together three different perspectives from within Gulf societies and their view on social inequalities. The presentation of John O'Brien (NYUAD) analyzed the differing treatment of domestic workers by white-defined expats in the UAE. By distinguishing the expressed relationship from the actual proximity between employers and employees, the results of his study show four different types of consumption styles shaped by gender, age, and nationality.

The second presentation by Saleh Seid Adem (UoC) dealt with the so-called "Ijaza houses", a complex housing arrangement for Ethiopian domestic workers in the UAE. His ongoing project is based on transnational labor migration, intersectionality, and institutional interaction approaches. In his findings, he outlined the dual significance of this housing for the migrants: a place of solace and co-coping as well as an exploitative context.

The fifth panel was completed with a presentation by Froilan Malit (University of Glasgow) and Kristian Alexander (TRENDS Research) on low-income migrants in the UAE. Their projects, which focus on coping strategies of migrants in the UAE, cover three different fields of investigation. Delineating their first project, Froilan elaborated on the strategy of debt employed by Filipinos in the UAE and the significance of the concept of "bahalana" as a justification for it. The second project focused on African migrants in the UAE, especially highly-educated Cameroonians, and their use of spaces and activities to cope with living and working conditions. Finally, the researchers described their third and ongoing project on "sacrificial migration" to conflict zones. They outlined the motivation and causes for migrants to expose themselves to unsafe environments

such as regions of Lebanon and Syria. The following discussion accentuated the risks and motivations for migration decisions, the positionality of the researchers, and the experience of contested spaces by migrants.

The sixth and final panel offered participants the opportunity to broaden the horizons of inequality studies to special subareas of interest. This panel addressed "community-based approaches to research in the Gulf" and focused on the interaction between communities and environments in the UAE. Anke Reichenbach (Zayed University) elaborated on her ongoing project concerning spatial transformations in the historical district of Dubai. In her research on "sensory landscape", she analyzed public programs in the area that create privately owned public places and have several impacts for the local neighborhoods. While suggesting that the new concept of exclusivity of the public space contributes to an increase in social inequalities, she underlines the significance of informal gathering and improvised activities by local communities as elements of contestation and re-appropriation of the public space.

Linked to that idea, Cadence Cheah (NYUAD) shared her findings on the "role of public spaces in shaping lived experiences of the Sub-Saharan African migrant community in Abu Dhabi" in a second presentation. She discussed how migrants shaped a public park in the area as a place of exchange, using it as a productive space related to job seeking. While the access to public spaces for migrant workers is limited by their work schedules, there are strategies of negotiation to re-define the public space for informal gathering.

The final presentation of the workshop was held by Laila Soliman (NYUAD), who elaborated on her theatre play as an

adaption of the book *Temporary People* by Deepak Unnikrishnan. The work, which involved students as well as support staff of NYUAD, integrated a multiplicity of voices and narratives and was based on the everyday experiences of the participants. The idea of temporality expressed in this play illustrates the lived experiences of workers in the UAE, as one of the attending participants of the project stated. The experiences of the rehearsals and performance of the play represented a different way of practicing collective agency. This play and the presented book, described as a “book about life” by one of the workers, constituted a remarkable conclusion to the two-day conference on social inequalities and migration in the Gulf region.

The fruitful discussions on the production and reproduction of knowledge in terms of social and global inequalities during this conference brought new perspectives to research between the Global North and South. The conference laid out the many facets that can be illuminated in studies on social inequalities and that can diversify the academic field in the future. For the research unit, the conference and the subsequent field trips were the first meeting in physical presence of the whole international team. Thanks are due to Laure Assaf and the New York University Abu Dhabi for providing the context and space for this extraordinary gathering. Furthermore, thanks to all participants, guest speakers, and members of the research unit for the presentations and fruitful discussions that invite further exchange.