

# Domestic Workers as Instruments of Accumulation: Unpacking Objectifying Discourses within Uganda's Extra-territorialisation of Gendered and Racialised Labour

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the instrumentalisation of gendered and racialised labour by considering the linguistic-discursive dimensions of discourses produced in newspapers about Ugandan domestic workers seeking work in the Gulf States. It explores the concept of objectification and how it creates grounds for the commodification not just of women's labour power, but also of domestic workers themselves through state-facilitated migration programmes. I argue that this commodification is possible because of the historical devaluing of social reproductive labour structured by gender, race, class, and migratory status which intersect to produce a domestic worker identity. This identity marks racialised women as most suitable for domestic labour, while also eroding their agency and freedom to control their own labour power, and in the process, enabling capital accumulation for vested interests in the migration industry. The paper situates racialised social practice and gendered discourses related to social reproduction as undergirding women's subordination, underscoring language as a terrain of struggle for women's liberation.

**Keywords:** domestic work, migration, racialisation, objectification, critical discourse analysis, media, Uganda

## Introduction

The only solution to unemployment in Uganda is not Saudi Arabia and if the girls know that there is danger why do they go there?... My advice to anyone who wants to go to the Middle East is not to go, stay home because the expectations are too high as to what the Ugandan government can do and it doesn't have the capacity. Your expectations are that if you get into problems we will jump into action, a SWAT team will come and pick you up and buy you a business class ticket to bring you home; it will not happen. (Umoja Standard 2023, para. 7-10)

These words, uttered by Hon. Okello Oryem, Uganda's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, regarding the plight of Uganda's domestic workers that have increasingly been migrating to the Gulf States in the last two decades, provide a snapshot of the complexities and contradictions inherent within labour migration. The state actively encourages labour migration, which is now the second highest foreign exchange earner in Uganda through remittances, and yet also disavows it on account of the blatant abuse of workers. This candid, if patronising and flippant, admission by a government official suggests the disposability of domestic workers, and crucially demonstrates the limited citizenship rights accorded to women whose labour power mills remittances on which the state relies. Their expectations as citizens to be rescued by their government when in distress are considered an excessive luxury.

There has been an explosion in the number of Ugandan women seeking work across borders as domestic workers in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC).<sup>1</sup> In 2022, 84,966 Ugandans emigrated to the GCC, with Saudi Arabia taking the lion's share of 77,914, of which 71,42% were women domestic workers (Nakaweesi 2023). Uganda has a bilateral agreement with Saudi Arabia for the recruitment of domestic workers and such recruitment is conducted under the auspices of the Labour Externalisation Programme overseen by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. This arrangement was established in 2005 to "create a safe, orderly, regular and formal channel for employment abroad; and to establish a short-term window for addressing the unemployment challenge" (Uganda Media Centre 2022). Since then, the programme has developed a policy and regulatory framework to manage the activities of labour recruitment agencies and to protect the rights of migrant workers. Remittances

from Ugandans in the GCC alone are estimated to be as high as 1,3 billion US dollars in 2018, compared to 51,4 million in 2010 (Nattabi et al. 2020). Combined, these processes have contributed to positioning labour migration as an attractive proposition for unemployed youth, and triggered the growth of a migration industry.

The neoliberal turn of states, characterised by cuts in social spending, means that families increasingly bear the burden of socially reproducing themselves but, at the same time, find it ever more difficult to accomplish this as the reduction in the value of real wages necessitates working longer hours to meet the costs of subsistence (Fraser 2017). This has challenged the male breadwinner model and driven the employment of women to supplement earnings, typically in the informal sector with depressed wages and fewer protections (Nampewo et al. 2022). In the GCC, the oil-boom of the 1970s triggered a demand for migrant workers, specifically for domestic workers in line with growing wealth and a new culture of conspicuous consumption (Malhotra et al. 2016).

Migration is mediated by a bargain struck between the Gulf States and citizens wherein the state guarantees a leisured lifestyle for its citizens (Sabban 2002) by facilitating controlled migrant flows that provide cheaper privatised forms of reproductive labour instead of public provisioned labour (Fernandez 2021). Wealthy women in the GCC, through the benefits of their class position, can “hire a wife” (Parreñas 2000, 562 citing Romero 1992), transferring their roles as housewives and its social scripts of social reproduction to other poorer racialised women, however without the “commensurate privileges and status” (Glenn 1992, 16). There is thus an “extension of commodified reproductive labour to an international terrain” (Parreñas 2000, 563) through the extra-territorialisation of Black women’s labour from the global periphery to meet the needs of the more privileged women in the semi-periphery. South East and South Asian countries have been major exporters of reproductive labour to the Gulf for this purpose, with African migrants increasing significantly between 1990 and 2017 (Namaganda and Laiboni 2019).

This paper looks at the discursive practices that emerge and shape the transnational labour migration of Ugandan women as domestic workers to the GCC. It applies Nussbaum’s (1995) concept of objectification in the context of social reproduction and labour migration to investigate the instrumentalisation

of gendered and racialised labour. Specifically, the research analyses newspaper discourses in Uganda, locating demonstrations of power and ideology within language, and how this combines with contextual realities to shape the manifestation of labour migration in the real world. I look at the media as a creator, conduit, and reproducer of discourse. The aim is to demonstrate the ways in which language subliminally constructs regimes of truth about women as suitable for domestic work and legitimates their subordinate status.

The research makes an interdisciplinary contribution to the vast literature on social reproduction within the Marxist feminist tradition. More uniquely, it analyses the instrumentalisation of racialised and gendered labour by considering the linguistic-discursive dimensions of social practice and how they manufacture public consent for commodification and capital accumulation. Secondly, while a lot of migration literature has focused on the experiences of domestic workers in labour-receiving countries and less on how migration is shaped within labour-sending countries (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), this paper fills this gap by bounding its analysis to Uganda. Lastly, the research provides some analytical insights into the role of the state in institutionalised migration, adding a new dimension to what this looks like in a neopatrimonial state.

Following this introduction, I elaborate the methodology and research design used for the assessment of the discursive practices. Next, the paper develops a conceptual framework for gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of migrant domestic labour. This is followed by a discussion of the findings of the research, located in three main discursive themes: domestic workers as labour export commodities; migration as development; and the role of the state in migration. The final section constitutes the conclusion.

## Methodology

### *Approach*

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the methodological framework for analysis to answer the research question: How do discourses about the transnational labour migration of Ugandan women domestic workers reflect the instrumentalisation of racialised and gendered labour? Discourse analysis

looks at language as a repository of meaning and cultural values, becoming both a way of communicating ideology and constructing it (Hall 1997).

Commonsense assumptions underlie the way we interact with each other through language, which end up naturalising certain ways of doing and being; in effect, this legitimates and reproduces dominance (Fairclough 2013a). A focus on discursive strategies that legitimate or naturalise is therefore crucial (van Dijk 1993). The term “critical” within CDA is viewed as “denaturalising” the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts (Machin and Mayr 2012, 5).

Discourse analysis also examines how discourse “regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities” (Hall 1997, 6). In unpacking objectification through instrumentalisation of labour, an interrogation of power embedded within discursive social practice is indispensable. The research query is underwritten by theories of social reproduction which are preoccupied with questioning power and the naturalisation of women’s subordinate status. CDA, much like social reproduction theory (SRT), takes “a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, and a scepticism towards the view that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its true nature to us” (Gill 2011, 3). In this instance, CDA complements SRT’s problematisation of the social acceptance of reproductive labour as women-only work and its cleavage from productive work (Bhattacharya 2017).

### *Sampling*

To build the corpus for this analysis, I consider media articles from Uganda’s two leading national dailies. In choosing the articles, I was guided by Mautner’s (2008) argument that print media reflects the social mainstream and that an investigation of dominant discourses is more likely to be found in the major dailies and weeklies. The leading dailies are, the *New Vision*, which is state-owned, and the *Daily Monitor*, a private outfit. Since CDA is concerned with questions of power, newspapers are an apt site for analysis. My objective is to problematise the discourses produced by the major actors in the labour migration industry in Uganda, chiefly the labour recruitment agencies, and the government. A search on Nexis returned media articles for *Daily Monitor* but none for *New*

*Vision* which required a paid subscription to access its archives available only up to April 2020. For compatibility, I limited the scope of my corpus to this period. I used the terms “labour externalisation,” “labour export,” and “migrant domestic workers” in combination with “Uganda” in my searches. Ultimately, the thirteen pieces chosen are those where substantive arguments in favour of or against labour migration are made as they clearly demonstrate discursive practices at play.

## Conceptual Framework

To make sense of the plight of women migrant domestic workers, I engage a Marxist feminist framework that invigorates gender and intersectional factors related to the industry. The discussion that follows provides a conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of transnational domestic labour migration.

### *Instrumentalisation as a tool of objectification*

The research question sets up an interrogation into whether the appropriation of migrant domestic workers’ labour amounts to instrumentalisation, and, by the same token, whether the racialisation and gendering of domestic work is itself a process of instrumentalisation. The concept of instrumentalisation falls within Nussbaum’s (1995, 257) broad theory of objectification which she defines as “treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being.” She provides seven parameters under which the condition of objectification can be met, citing instrumentalisation – denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Nussbaum (1995, 257) regards instrumentalisation – “where the objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes” (257) – as the most morally exigent because it denies what is fundamental to a human being; “the status of beings [sic] ends in themselves” (265). She argues that instrumentalisation is a status that sanctions other abuses as the person is, in effect, rendered unhuman. Once something that is not a thing is made a thing or treated as one, moral questions about their subjectivity or agency, or bodily integrity, etc. start to matter less. Spillers (1987) demonstrates

this rendering into tools through the experiences of loss of identity of Black women in the US – reduced to blank slates followed by a categorisation and renaming, they are re-invented as mother, cleaner, cook, sex worker, pious wife. These identities are illustrative of instrumentalisation – women being shorn of their own sense of self and repurposed for someone else’s goals.

Another parameter of objectification that invites scrutiny here is the element of “ownership” – “where the objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another [or] can be bought or sold” (Nussbaum 1995, 257). Ownership can include an objectifier acting as if they own the fruits of another’s labour, their skills, or natural resources (LaCroix and Pratto 2015). Marxist analyses of labour provide a vast theoretical template to engage with the concept of objectification, particularly the distinction between labour power as a commodity and human beings as non-commodities. In *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx argues that labour power – the physical and mental capacity to produce something for use value – is what, by being sold on the market, becomes a commodity (Marx 1976). The owner of labour power regards it as their possession, their property without which they become the commodity. The possessor of labour power freely puts it up for sale and meets on equal terms with the buyer. This labour power is not provided in perpetuity and is mediated by terms in a contract which delimit the price of the labour power and the time available for work. Absent a temporal limit, a worker “would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity” (Marx 1976, 271). The contract is a guardrail against total control and ownership of the worker’s physical and mental faculties as would happen under slavery.

Yet, while this moral distinction is made, I see a complication in this differentiation because the peculiarity of labour power as a commodity is that it is embodied in human flesh. After all, the impact of how labour power is used and remunerated would still be felt by its bearer. I therefore agree with Polanyi in his understanding of labour as a “fictitious commodity”:

For the alleged commodity “labor power” cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without also affecting the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of a man’s labor power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity “man” attached to that tag. (Polanyi 2001, 76).

The distinction between labour power as a commodity and human beings as non-commodities becomes even more fraught in the context of transnational domestic work, particularly for transnational live-in domestic workers – their work spatially and socially isolates them from family and support networks making them available without any limitations as they become part of the employer’s family, “twenty four hours a day if necessary” (Anderson 2001, 4). In other words, the fact that domestic workers live where they work, means that their employers have control over their professional and personal lives (Hopkins 2017; Nampewo et al. 2022). Being that objectification can also be seen as controlling one’s freedoms (LaCroix and Pratto 2015), an argument could be advanced that a domestic worker could not be the bona fide owner of their labour power under these circumstances.

### *The feminisation of labour migration*

The feminisation of the migrant workforce (Sassen 1998) locates women within migrant flows and explicates how gender shapes labour force segmentation within labour migration. This in turn interacts with globalisation’s demand for low wage labour in advanced capitalist economies, particularly in the services sector. The work of social reproduction, the daily and intergenerational reproduction of people (Ossome 2022), having been constructed as women’s work, by the same token, manufactures women as available and best suited for this work. Maria Mies’s (1986) theory of “housewifisation” posits that the sexual division of labour constructs the identity of the housewife and mobilises it to devalue women’s labour. As housewives, women’s domestic labour is regarded as non-work, even when monetised. Housewifery presumes the presence of a male breadwinner and women’s income as secondary or absent. Capitalism thus relies on the ideology of the housewife to exploit women’s labour, integrating them into the labour force on unfair terms, and corralling them into gendered occupations such as domestic work, which in turn confirm this housewife identity.

Some scholars (e.g. Oyewumi 1987; Davis 1981; Spillers 1987), however, have challenged this universal identity of housewife as race and class have always marked non-white women as workers. Mies’ (1986) European housewife has a racialised counterpart in the global South, without whose labour housewifery



in Europe would not be possible. The products European housewives consume are their fellow housewives in the global periphery, many of whom cannot afford to be just housewives and therefore, must work outside their own homes. By maintaining households, the reproductive labour of domestic workers produces a consumer class of housewives and reproduces their status by maintaining their lifestyles (Anderson 2001). In this status-making, it can be presumed that the domestic worker would also, as a product and therefore object, be consumed, as the purchase of her labour is itself a mark of status.

### *Racialisation within migration*

Migration triggers contestations in citizenship as it tends to disrupt the racial or class order, compelling the dominant group to put up barriers that preserve their privileges (Taylor Phillips 2013). Taylor Phillips' (2013) archival research on the migration of Irish women to the US and African American women within the US shows the ways in which race is used as an instrument to thwart the upward social mobility of both Black and Irish domestic workers. Cultural differences are mobilised to "other" and then racially categorise both groups. The fact of their labour as domestic workers demarks a working-class identity which in turn communicates dirt, lack of civilisation, etc. By sharing this class position, both Black and Irish women are discursively constructed as racially inferior, specifically as Black. Irish women are thus "tainted" with blackness by association with domestic work. In the context of the GCC, although Ugandan domestic workers *do* embody the markers of race through their skin colour, because of the work they perform, they confirm their blackness and therefore their suitability for domestic work and no other work. Furthermore, Walia (2021) demonstrates how constructed borders of nation states and immigration policy entangle with labour migration to become sites of subordination, determining who is racially desirable. She argues that immigration policy, through the enactment of bordering, discursively produces the undesirable migrant through processes of racial categorisation. Classifying migrants by law as 'temporary' or 'foreign' "conceptually places them outside the nation-state and outside the bounds of belonging" (Walia 2021, 17). Ferguson and McNally (2015) employ the concept of "transient servitude" to describe similar practices in Canada's temporary

labour programme, contending that this practice manages the contradiction of the desire for foreign labour and the rejection of the person who embodies it. In the context of the GCC, *kafala* – the migrant worker sponsorship system – is the medium of this taxonomisation.

Fernandez (2021, 4344) regards *kafala* as a form of “racialised institutionalised humiliation” undergirded by a dominant ideology that rationalises the inferiority of migrants and their systematic degradation and mistreatment. All migrant workers to the GCC have their contracts tied to one employer (*Kafeel*) who serves as their sponsor. *Kafeels* are positioned as the active surveillants, controllers, and discipliners of migrant workers as workers cannot leave their employers or exit the country without their permission (Nampewo et al. 2022). *Kafala*, stratified by race, class, and nationality, produces differential treatment for workers (Fernandez 2021). Migrants employed in high-paying jobs who are citizens of global North countries and tend to be white are considered expats, not migrants – “hired for the symbolic superiority denoted by their ‘whiteness’” (Fernandez 2021, 4348) – and are not expected to adhere to the strictures of *kafala*. In a demonstration of the social construction of race as tied to class position, even people of African and Asian descent with citizenship in global North countries are catapulted near the top of the *kafala* hierarchy.

The coercive and disciplinary practices of *Kafala* are reserved for African and Asian migrants who migrate to perform 4D – “dirty, demeaning, dangerous and difficult” (Fernandez 2021, 4347) – jobs. So, *Kafala* does not just create a citizen/non-citizen boundary but constructs a racial “Other” through its asymmetrical treatment of migrants depending on class and nationality. The “racial coding” of migrants is intrinsic to their othering and the legitimisation of the commodification and exploitation of their labour (Fernandez 2021, 4345). For example, racial hierarchies within *kafala* rationalise paying Filipina domestic workers higher wages than Ugandans, even if they perform the same work (Nampewo et al. 2022). Ugandan migrant domestic workers’ precarity and suitability for instrumentalisation is therefore heightened by this “race-making regime” (Walia 2021, 18).

*Kafala*, combined with cultural understandings of the home as sacrosanct and beyond state control, excludes domestic workers from protections accorded by labour laws. Nampewo et al. (2022) exhibit the limits of international labour

laws and standards, as well as the shortcomings of bilateral agreements in the context of domestic work. They demonstrate that male migrants who predominate more public jobs and live in dormitories instead of private homes enjoy freedoms and protections that domestic workers do not. *Kafala* can thus be seen as limiting the degree of a domestic worker's proprietorship over her labour power and creating a gendered differential treatment of migrant workers. Arguments advanced that contracts for domestic workers employed by households reinforce a master-servant relationship reminiscent of slavery gain credence here (Hopkins 2017; Anderson 2001). Adhering to the strict *kafala* rules, with the hope of work permit renewal, would thus require such an acquiescence to being controlled as to erode any notion of autonomy for migrant domestic workers. While *kafala* is specific to the Middle East, the instrumentalisation of social categories to exploit is not unique to it, but a key feature of capitalist accumulation (Fernandez 2021).

### *Migration as a development strategy*

Despite the evidence provided by the literature that migratory regimes only serve to exploit the devalued identities of women, there is a concerted effort by vested interests from labour-sending countries to recast migration, even with its lack of protections, as a veritable source of development financing. The so-called "migration-development nexus" conveys the criticality of migration in stimulating economic and social development, particularly through remittances. Migration is increasingly being "reified as a tool that can bring about development itself" (Skeldon 2008, 5) and remittances are the "lodestar around which migration-development industry is congregating" (Raghuram 2009, 105). Within this sphere, remittances occupy a vital source of external development financing for social insurance and consumption (Kapur 2004) and migrants are being instrumentalised as responsible for securing this development through the proceeds of their labour power. The volume of remittances globally is so large that, increasingly, immigrants are displacing governments as the biggest providers of "foreign aid" (Kapur 2004, 7). Ferguson and McNally (2015) show that remittances globally follow gendered patterns with women sending back most of their earnings for consumption compared to men. So, the state can always count on women to subsidise public expenditure. The migrant is thus instrumentalised

as “the heroic figure who finds a route out of these troubled times” (Raghuram 2009, 106). Moreover, in a context where other sources of external financing, such as official development aid, are dwindling or comes with ever more stringent conditions, reliance on remittances becomes ever more strident (Kapur 2004). Kapur warns that the risk of relying on remittances is that labour can become a country’s chief export rather than actual products from labour power. For example, Uganda’s 1,3 billion US dollars from remittances from the Gulf alone dwarfed the 554,9 million US dollars from coffee in the 2020/21 financial year (Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development 2021).

With so much at stake, it is no wonder, then, that the state not only takes an interest in transnational labour mobility, but actively seeks to control it through formalisation. de Haas et al. (2019) describe the migration industry as an eco-system of labour migration players that consists of several intermediaries who are involved in different stages of the migration process: “employers, travel agents, recruiters, brokers, smugglers, humanitarian organizations, housing agents, immigration lawyers” (de Haas et al. 2019, 66). Xiang and Lindquist’s (2014) concept of migration infrastructure specifically implicates the state as a bona fide player with vested interests in migration. Migration infrastructure – “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 124) – calls attention to the bureaucracy of migration, the ways in which it facilitates movement, and who has the power to cause others to move. It shows, for example, that agents and brokers play an important role without which migration may not happen. Through this intense mediation and control, migration is “turned into an object of intensive regulation, commodification and intervention” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 124).

Parreñas (2021) also sees the state’s intense mediation of migration as an exercise of bio-power, through the deployment of disciplinary mechanisms via its empowerment programmes, and pastoral power, manifested through the appropriation of labour rights discourses. The formal labour migration channels allow the state to surveil domestic workers and shape their behaviour as compliant and docile workers, while at the same time providing some skills and information on labour rights through trainings. Simultaneously, an exercise of necropower can be seen here with the state having the power to decide who lives and who gets exposed to a slow death (Mbembe 2003) through the

immiserating conditions of migrant domestic work. Necropolitics explains the paradox of the state as securing work opportunities and then preparing workers for the risk of employer abuse. In exercising this necropower, which relies on the dehumanisation and objectification of groups, the state instrumentalises women's labour for accumulation.

## Research Findings

The newspaper samples under analysis reveal some interesting results, most notably: that the racialised and gendered discourses produced about domestic workers objectify them and render them into commodities; that domestic workers are instrumentalised for “development” as their remittances are seen as a critical source of financing; and that a migration infrastructure has arisen to mediate and benefit from migration of domestic workers, with the state implicated as the chief labour broker and objectifier within this system.

### *Domestic workers as labour export commodities*

Narratives within the newspaper samples reveal the objectification of migrant domestic workers, meeting Nussbaum's (1995) conception to varying degrees. The term “labour export”, used liberally throughout the reportage, provides a rich site for excavation of claims around instrumentalisation. While the term used in official state documents to describe the institutionalised migration of domestic workers is “labour externalisation”, newspapers constantly use it interchangeably with “labour export.” I argue that these two terms, as used within institutionalised labour migration discourse, objectify and commodify domestic workers, and crucially abstract and sanitise institutionalised labour migration, making it palatable to the public.

The key question I explore to make my point is, “Could labour power truly be a commodity without its bearer also becoming one?” Drawing on Polanyi's (2001) conception of labour as a fictitious commodity, I contend that labour power as a commodity cannot be exported without similarly exporting the human being within whom it is embedded, and in turn, rendering that person a commodity. My argument is that live-in migrant domestic workers rarely

meet the conditions Marx sets out as prerequisites for *only* labour power to be a commodity because their working conditions intersect with their social status blurring the distinction between labourer and labour power. This position is buttressed by Walia's (2021) depiction of the working conditions in the Gulf as akin to a carceral regime, subverting the notion that domestic workers own their labour over which they can exercise rights. While we could agree that indeed women "freely" sell their labour, it is quite clear that the domestic worker, as the proprietor of their labour power, does not meet their employer on equal terms, nor does the evidence show that they sell their labour power for a limited period as stipulated in their contracts. By Marx's own standards that equate unfree labour under slavery to commodities, domestic workers can thus be seen as commodities. Nussbaum (1995, 263) cites Marx in her contention that a worker-employer relationship is still a relation of ownership in the sense that "what is most the worker's own, namely the product of his labour, is what is most taken away from him", even if the worker's body may not be owned outright. Notably, the physical transportation of domestic workers to their sites of work symbolically, but perhaps also materially, elides the distinction between labourer and their labour power, as it is their physical selves that are carted off in service of others. In other words, while some women from the global South have been integrated into global production chains and corralled into Export Processing Zones (Sassen 1998), only their objectified labour, represented by the goods they make, is exported. Domestic workers, on the other hand, must be "exported" along with their labour power. This reality shows that separating labour power and the human being that embodies it as distinct entities may be fallacious.

Secondly, by being "exported" as domestic workers, women transcend their identity as women and *become* domestic workers – the commodity and the tool for social reproduction and accumulation – the very identity that allows their exploitation. I draw on Fairclough's (2013b) argument that social practice and social structures mutually constitute each other and that social structures at once determine discourse and are also products of discourse. Similarly, in critiquing the ways in which African women are usually written about in Western scholarship, Oyewumi (1987, 27) argues that the inferiorising image that this work evokes "not only makes the woman; the image becomes the woman." Ugandan women migrants therefore coalesce into a singular identity of the

domestic worker through institutional discursive practices that undergird how migration to the Gulf happens.

Bilateral agreements on recruitment of domestic workers between Uganda and labour-receiving countries make domestic work the only opportunity available for most women to seek work in the Gulf and their work contracts prohibit seeking any other work. These discursive practices socially construct women as best suited for social reproductive labour by recruiting them for paid domestic work, which, by the same token, reifies and reproduces their identity as domestic workers. In other words, they become what they do and then get stuck in a cycle that reproduces their subordination ad nauseam. Likewise, within their places of work, racialised degradation such as eating on separate plates, being called names, and being forced to sleep out in the open (Fernandez 2021) demarks the low status of domestic workers marking them as objectifiable, violable, and disposable hence enabling their instrumentalisation for accumulation.

Finally, the terms “export” and “externalisation” are so abstract that they obscure the moral questions that would emerge from the export of humans. In the context of Africa, burdened with the history of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism whose legacies are living history, stories about the export of women and girls would perhaps raise moral objections in the way that the terms “labour export” and “externalisation” have not. The deployment of this language can thus be seen as legitimating the instrumentalisation of women as workers, and the media can be seen as complicit in this because of their uncritical use of the terms. However, as demonstrated by the literature, an argument could also be made that it is the fact of their blackness, class, and gender that rationalises their abstraction into instruments of accumulation. That poor Black women migrate to serve other women who are higher in the racial and class hierarchy becomes common sense and unquestionable.

Moreover, the way women domestic workers are talked about in the press outside of these two terms is also illustrative of their status, not only as domestic workers but, crucially, as objects. Nussbaum’s (1995) matrix for understanding objectification places the denial of subjectivity as intrinsic to dehumanisation. Op-eds, some of which are written by people with relationships to labour recruitment companies such as Catherine Banura and Stuart Oramire,<sup>2</sup> show many instances of the experiences of domestic workers being diminished or dismissed.

The cases of mistreatment are sometimes seen as “regrettable” and other times dismissed as “false” and “sensational” claims intended to tarnish the reputation of labour externalisation (Oramire 2023b). The authors start off by stating their aversion to domestic worker abuse but then go ahead and argue that this is not a deal breaker (Oramire 2023a; Musoke 2023; Banura 2022a). Gill (1996, 14) considers this a rhetorical device to “protect or ‘inoculate’ an argument from criticism and to offer a “preferred reading,” indicating the way the argument should be interpreted.” So, sentiments of empathy such as, “I agree that there are some recorded shortcomings, some of which have been life threatening,” (Musoke 2023, para. 13), or “We can all agree that some working conditions for our domestic workers are not decent” (Mirama Nuwagaba 2023a, para. 1, 2023b, para. 1) can be viewed suspiciously as they are negated by the arguments that follow in support of continued migration despite those challenges.

In other instances, the pretence for empathy for domestic workers is dropped completely. For example, a columnist compares deaths of domestic workers to fatalities from road accidents: “We can’t ban labour externalization because of a few deaths, injuries and cases of violence and yet more people die from road accidents every year” (Mirama Nuwagaba 2023a, para.10). His point is that every industry has some collateral damage, so some fatalities should be expected with labour migration. Nussbaum’s (1995) assertion that instrumentalisation is a slippery slope to dehumanisation is visible here. It would be difficult to imagine a case of deaths/abuse of lawyers or doctors being described this contemptuously; their productive labour and social class purchases their humanity while gendered reproductive labour which is considered non-work (Mies 1986) does not. Necropolitics is at work here to the extent that the violations and deaths of domestic workers are rationalised and naturalised as a fact of (capitalist) life. Judith Butler’s existential questions about whose life merits grief when lost also comes to bear. Butler (2004) argues that the differential allocations of grievability of a lost life are entangled with who is considered valuable and thereby human. Domestic workers’ objectification renders them mere instruments of accumulation and therefore not worth grieving.



### *Remittances as a source of financing*

The importance of remittances underlines policy decisions and is replete in media coverage about labour externalisation. All the sampled op-eds written in favour of labour externalisation frame their arguments around the economic benefits of labour migration, focusing specifically on the volume of remittances (Musoke 2023; Oramire 2023a, 2023b). Remittances make labour externalisation a “cash cow,” – as described in an op-ed making a business case for labour externalisation (Musoke 2023). In this instance, the author uses “cash cow” in its metaphoric sense to compare labour externalisation to a “dairy cow that produces milk over the course of its life and requires little to no maintenance” (Twin and Scott 2020). Labour externalisation of domestic workers is seen as a low-risk, high-return investment that subsidises other parts of the economy.

Additionally, the entire labour externalisation eco-system is presented as having a multiplier effect on the economy, through the burgeoning migration industry consisting of different departments that all benefit economically from it – the Department of Citizenship and Immigration for processing passports, Interpol for Certificates of Good Conduct, the airline industry, etc. The spirited op-eds in defence of labour externalisation cite these income streams and depict critiques about labour externalisation as a threat to these livelihoods (Oramire 2023b; Banura 2022a). The dependence of these jobs on funnelling poorly remunerated domestic workers to the GCC is a clear instance of instrumentalisation.

Furthermore, domestic worker wages are made very attractive and a key selling point in support of labour externalisation. In one op-ed their wages are contrasted against the pay of respected professions in Uganda. A domestic worker makes more than a primary school Head Teacher and a captain in Uganda’s army, the op-ed claims (Mirama Nuwagaba 2023a, 2023b). That a domestic worker who is “unskilled” and has limited education should make as much as educated professionals renders migrant domestic work very attractive, and certainly an opportunity too good to turn down, even with incidences of mistreatment. A counter to this narrative is that although domestic workers make an objectively higher wage than they would at home, they are severely underpaid considering the number of hours they work and the kind of work they undertake. A standard contract shows that a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia makes about \$240 a

month for 15 hours of work per day, six days a week. This would put their average hourly wage at only 66 cents, even before domestic workers exceed the hours stipulated in their contracts, as they often do (Nampewo et al. 2022).

### *There is no alternative to migration*

Labour migration is depicted as a massive opportunity for Uganda's economy and the tone with which this is discussed constructs a regime of truth that there is no alternative economic policy but labour externalisation. Uganda is not able to accommodate its constantly increasing labour force and as a "struggling economy it's impossible to do away with labour externalization" (Mirama Nuwagaba 2023, para. 8) ... so, it is "the most feasible alternative way out" (Musoke 2023, para. 3). Because labour externalisation is presented as the panacea for unemployment, stories of mistreatment of domestic workers are downplayed as few and isolated, not warranting the banning of labour externalisation. By offering up poor African women as sacrificial lambs to boost the economy, the authors of the op-eds, perhaps unwittingly, draw on race, class, and gender pathologies to make domestic workers' mistreatment palatable. Crucially, they make the argument that poor people do not have the luxury of good working conditions. For example, one op-ed castigates elites for virtue signalling about human rights within labour externalisation but providing no other alternative: "What have these elites done to create jobs for this less privileged class?" (Mirama Nuwagaba 2023a, para. 12). The elite are presented as hypocrites; they do not pay their own domestic workers well and yet pretend to be morally outraged by the mistreatment of migrant domestic workers elsewhere. Moreover, they complain but provide no real solutions. Labelling those demanding for a ban on labour externalisation as elite is not without import. The suggestion is that working class Ugandans are too worried about feeding their families to concern themselves with human rights. Human rights demands are cast as an imposition of the elite whose class position enables them to worry about such abstract concepts since their immediate material needs have been met. The author thus draws a dichotomy of who has the right to claim rights and who does not, marking domestic workers as available for exploitation.

Relatedly, by justifying labour externalisation in Uganda by using Asian countries that also export labour, the authors subliminally and unwittingly naturalise the export and commodification of non-white bodies. The Philippines, India, and Sri Lanka are mentioned as examples, with one op-ed citing India as earning 100 billion dollars from labour externalisation annually (Banura 2022a, 2022b). These comparisons are a clear attempt at legitimisation – if other countries are doing it, it must be good for Uganda too. However, these are not just any countries, but specifically those that have historically been part of a world system of unequal exchange (Wallerstein 1974). Now, in a new regime of extraction that demands for labour in the form of Black and Brown bodies, labourers from these countries are to be paid slave wages. The authors do not make any overt references to race and gender, and it is unlikely that they actively think about these categories as they make their arguments, but it is precisely this that illustrates how discourse becomes “common sense” such that it needs no qualifications and justifications. As Fernandez (2021) argues, the racialised institutionalised humiliation of *kafala* is undergirded by a hegemonic ideology that is widely accepted and naturalised. We can thus see that, by justifying the externalisation of labour embodied by poor African women, the authors racialise and gender reproductive labour and engender acceptance of its exploitation.

### *The paradox of the state as both duty-bearer and beneficiary of labour externalisation*

A critical discursive practice observed from the data is the depiction of labour externalisation as safe because of the existence of a regulatory framework, and the exaltation of the state as a competent overseer. Government is portrayed as not only repelled by the mistreatment and abuse of domestic workers, but also actively working to find solutions to the problem. Headlines, such as, “Gov’t issues tight labour export rules” (Masaba 2022a) from the state-owned paper, represent a state that is capable and is using its power to protect its citizens. In a *Daily Monitor* news report, information about the bilateral agreement between Uganda and Saudi Arabia is relayed without any accompanying critical observations (Nakirigya and Wamala 2023). By simply relaying this information without interrogation, the state gets a pass to present the legal and policy framework

accompanying labour migration as a solution to the abuse of workers. The existence of a bilateral agreement signals that migration is now safe. The news report closes off by highlighting the historical warm relations between both countries and further reports on plans by the Ministry to explore opportunities to expand labour externalisation to other countries. There is no historical context given to the reader to remind them that the government has always maintained the position that labour-externalisation is temporary. Crucially, the foregrounding of profit at the expense of domestic workers is clear in the government's decision to look for new markets for domestic workers' reproductive labour, underscoring their instrumentalisation for accumulation. Hence, the intimate involvement of the state in labour externalisation, not only as an overseer, but as a beneficiary, makes it a labour broker, with vested interests in the continuation of labour externalisation. This puts it at odds with its role as the primary duty bearer.

The state is highly involved in the minutiae of labour externalisation from accrediting labour recruitment companies to approving advertisements for migrant jobs and placement fees for domestic workers, in addition to conducting site visits to the premises of labour recruitment companies, etc. (Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers) Regulations 2021). So, while women may choose to migrate as domestic workers, this intense mediation undermines suggestions of agency within their decisions. Within institutionalised migration, migrants do not spontaneously move but "are moved" by intermediaries (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). The state's involvement in labour externalisation, to the extent that it seeks to control every stage of the migration process, can be read as a function of biopower (Parreñas 2021); and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) to the extent that it assigns differential value to citizens' lives, deeming some as disposable by carting them off to deathworlds – "forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003, 40).

Moreover, Marx's reserve army of labour, I would argue, is not necessarily created through dispossession alone but also through the nation state actively playing the role of labour brokerage. While the state does not directly recruit workers as agents do, it creates a pipeline for migration, making it critical to the supply chain – an indispensable cog in the machine of the labour migration industry. The migration infrastructure has only seen the number of recruitment

companies rise and the number of migrant workers skyrocket with the establishment of the labour externalisation programme. In effect, the much-extolled regulatory framework has just become a more efficient instrument for churning out labour for export. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) argue that without brokers or agents, migration may not happen. I would add that without the state as a broker, migration from Uganda could not happen at the scale it does because brokers do not simply respond to demand for migrant labour but actively cultivate it. Furthermore, by funnelling domestic workers through *kafala*, with the understanding that they are not protected as the literature illustrates, the state also colludes in the racialised institutionalised humiliation of its own citizens. Concretely, the state exercises its necropower, arbitrating over who lives and who dies.

### *Migration infrastructure within a neopatrimonial state*

Uganda has been described as a neopatrimonial state – “an authoritarian state under the personal rule of a president who maintains his authority through distribution of patronage and prebends, intimidation, and force” (Golooba-Mutebi 2008, 137 citing Barkan et al. 2004). This research reveals that the shadow of the president looms large within the migration infrastructure and that discourses are mobilised to maintain the president’s stranglehold on power.

The state-owned paper, *New Vision*, actively attributes successes related to labour externalisation to the person of the president. The reportage depicts him as personally disturbed by labour externalisation and concerned about the welfare of migrant workers, on several occasions coming in to save the day. The president “rescues over 30 stranded migrant workers” (Vision Reporter 2023); he donates \$150,000 to migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates in response to the plight of trafficked workers (Kashaka 2021),<sup>3</sup> and in another story he is reported as “facilitating” the return of a migrant worker whose story of abuse had gone viral on social media (Masaba 2022b). Here, the president is portrayed as so concerned about this domestic worker that his political advisor on diaspora affairs is quoted as saying, “the President will continue to keep tabs on Kyotalimye (the victim) until she is fully recovered” (Masaba 2022b). This exaggerated concern for one domestic worker is illustrative of rhetorical devices deployed by officials

working within a system of patronage that rewards loyalty. In another news report, the presidential advisor for diaspora affairs proposes patriotism lessons to be integrated into domestic workers' training before departure. His reasoning is that workers complain about mistreatment because they are not patriotic. In essence, they oppose a government programme and muddle its reputation by complaining. "There would be no need to ban labour externalisation in case all Ugandans are patriotic enough and work for the good of fellow Ugandans and the country at large," he says (Vision Reporter 2022, para. 4). Here we can read patriotism as allegiance to the president in his personal capacity and worker complaints as reflecting badly on the president himself. Further, stoicism is demanded of domestic workers as their work is deemed to be for the greater good for all Ugandans. Domestic workers are thus co-opted into the grand project of nation-building which also translates to ensuring regime longevity. Crucially, regime longevity in turn ensures the continuation of wanton accumulation by the president and his network of patronage.

Relatedly, a parallel process of engagement in the migration bureaucracy for the president's benefit is observed. The presidential advisor urges migrants in distress to report their experiences because "the President has put in place a mechanism to support everyone" (Masaba 2022b). While the Ministry of Labour should oversee all matters related to labour externalisation, including the rescue of migrants, here we see the department of diaspora affairs housed in the office of the president coming in to fulfil the same mandate and attributing it to the benevolence of the president. Khisa (2013) argues that this is not an aberration but a key feature of the "informal state" where structures of power parallel to the legal and constitutional ones are constructed. While Khisa (2013) discusses these parallel structures in the context of judicial and military power – wherein the president, to ensure regime survival, creates informal processes and imbues them with power as a counter to formal structures that are vulnerable to overthrow – we can see that informal processes pervade other state bureaucracies as well. Khisa (2013) identifies presidential advisors as part of the network of patronage that facilitates this informal power structure. In the context of labour externalisation, the office of the president constantly upstages the ministry and thus the formal system is rendered dysfunctional. This redirects praise to the president, burnishing his image and ensuring his continued grip on power.

Crucially, women domestic workers in distress are instrumentalised in service of the government's legitimacy, ensuring regime longevity, at their own expense.

## Concluding thoughts

The paper argues that migrant domestic workers from Uganda in the Gulf are retooled as instruments of accumulation because of their subordinated position in racial, class, and gender hierarchies. It adopts Critical Discourse Analysis and Nussbaum's (1995) concept of objectification as the media of inquiry to unearth the ways in which migration discourse in Uganda's two leading dailies, as well as social practice within the migration industry, naturalise the commodification and exploitation of migrant domestic workers' labour.

The paper further argues that migrant domestic workers are discursively constructed into commodities, challenging the Marxian semantic separation between labour power and the human who embodies it. It contends that given the limited control and ownership over their labour power, in combination with their socio-spatial isolation within households, migrant domestic workers lose their agency and humanity and become commodities for exchange and consumption. Furthermore, the racialised and gendered discursive practices within the migration industry construct a domestic worker identity which is used to entrench Ugandan women's subordination as only domestic work is made available to them as employment, naturalising the idea that it is only (Black) women who can do domestic work. Additionally, Ugandan migrant domestic workers are instrumentalised as sources of development financing through remittances whose profitability is advanced at the expense of their welfare. By formalising labour migration for domestic work, legitimated by a legal and policy framework, the Ugandan state becomes a labour broker. The state's facilitative function, in tandem with the racial logics of *kafala*, is emblematic of necropolitics as a system of biopower, marking migrant domestic workers as less valuable and therefore best suited for precarious work that could expose them to violence and death. Lastly, the paper shows the ways in which the plight of domestic workers is co-opted in nation building and entrenching power within a neopatrimonial state.

This paper advances key interventions on racialisation, illuminating the configuration of race based on the intersection of class and gender, and the ways in which capitalism latches onto power differences for purposes of accumulation. Critically, it has shown that this struggle for gender and racial justice is located within the realm of discourse – how we use and interpret language shapes our sense-making of Black women’s place in the world and vice versa. The complicated task of reversing such thinking is the enduring political struggle of our time.



## Notes

1. The political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.
2. Banura and Oramire are designated as the Secretary General and the Executive Director of the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies, respectively.
3. The news reports leave unmentioned that the donations come from state coffers, suggesting that the president uses his personal resources to intervene. This showcases the personalisation of the state and state resources within migration infrastructure.

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