

Research Paper

Centering Stakeholder Voices: Young Emirati Nationals and South Asian Migrant Workers on Labor Integration Reform in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

Despite sustained international criticism of UAE labor conditions, the perspectives of those most directly affected remain empirically underexplored. This qualitative study examined how Generation Z Emirati nationals (n=28) and South Asian migrant workers in the hospitality sector (n=25) perceive labor-related reputational challenges and envision reform. Three mixed-participant virtual focus groups were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Both communities independently identified government-funded educational programming as the optimal intervention, capable of simultaneously advancing worker development and restoring national reputation. Young Emiratis framed reform as an expression of genuine cultural values rather than external compliance. Migrant workers articulated aspirations extending well beyond employment security, encompassing professional development, financial literacy, and meaningful societal contribution. Both groups rejected segregationist approaches, calling for integrated cross-cultural programming. These findings challenge assumptions about inherently competing interests between host and migrant populations, and suggest that strategic educational investment offers a stakeholder-grounded pathway to substantive labor integration reform.

Keywords: *UAE, Migrant Workers, Education, Labor Reform, Emirati*

The United Arab Emirates occupies a distinctive position in the global migration landscape. Its rapid economic development has been built on a migrant workforce that now constitutes the overwhelming majority of the total population, with South Asian workers forming the backbone of critical sectors including construction, hospitality, and services (Dar & Janbaz, 2024; Khalaf & AlKobaisi, 2021; Rahman et al., 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2025). The UAE has not been passive in response to growing international scrutiny: Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 the first comprehensive overhaul of employment law since 1980 introduced significant modifications to employment regulations and kafala system provisions. Yet despite these reforms, persistent concerns about wage disputes, enforcement failures, and substandard living conditions continue to shape the

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UAE's global reputation, particularly following high-profile events such as Dubai's hosting of Expo 2020 and the 2023 COP28 climate conference (Dar & Janbaz, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Malit, 2025; Meardi, 2024; Mustaqeem, 2025).

Much of the existing scholarship on UAE labor conditions has been generated from the outside looking in policy analyses, legal assessments, and advocacy reports that treat the UAE's labor system as an object of critique rather than engaging with the perspectives of those who live and work within it (Görg, 2026; Mustaqeem, 2025). This is a significant limitation. Contemporary migration scholarship increasingly holds that reform efforts are most meaningful and most likely to succeed when they are grounded in the lived experiences and expressed priorities of the communities most directly affected (Vora, 2013; Rahman et al., 2023). Young Emirati nationals and South Asian migrant workers are precisely such communities: the former will shape the UAE's future as its next generation of citizens and leaders; the latter sustain its economy today. Yet both remain largely absent from scholarly accounts of how labor integration challenges are understood and how they might be addressed. This study fills that gap. It was guided by a single, focused research question:

How do young Emirati nationals and South Asian migrant workers perceive and make meaning of labor-related reputational challenges facing the UAE, and what visions do they articulate for addressing these challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Labor Reform, Reputational Challenges, and the Empirical Gap

Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 marked a genuine legislative turning point, abolishing unlimited-term contracts, strengthening protections against workplace discrimination and forced labor, introducing parental leave for the first time in the Gulf region, and modifying key aspects of the kafala sponsorship system (Mustaqeem, 2025; Parreñas & Santellano, 2022). On paper, these were substantive changes. In practice, however, the distance between legislative intent and lived reality remains considerable. Human rights organizations have documented ongoing wage theft, passport confiscation, and inadequate housing (Human Rights Watch, 2022), while structural features of the labor system including the prohibition of trade unions and strikes continue to limit workers' capacity to advocate for themselves (Khalaf & AlKobaisi, 2021). These enforcement gaps raise a fundamental question: what does meaningful reform actually require, and who should be defining it? The conspicuous absence of young Emirati and migrant worker voices from that conversation is not merely a methodological oversight it forecloses the very knowledge that is most likely to generate effective and legitimate reform (Malit, 2025; Meardi, 2024).

Generational Value Shifts and Young Emiratis' Evolving Perspectives

Generation Z Emiratis born approximately 1997 to 2012 have grown up in conditions that differ markedly from those of preceding generations. Raised with constant access to global information flows and social media platforms, this cohort has been consistently exposed to international human rights discourse, including intensive coverage of Gulf labor practices during events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the UAE's own COP28 (Dimock, 2019). Research across diverse national contexts documents Generation Z's heightened concern with social justice, equity, and institutional accountability (Parreñas & Santellano, 2022; Poston & Singelmann, 2025). Within the Gulf, emerging scholarship suggests that young people are seeking meaningful opportunities to contribute to their nations' futures, not merely to inherit them. How young Emiratis navigate the tension between national loyalty and international criticism and whether they conceptualize

themselves as agents of labor reform rather than its beneficiaries remains an underexplored but consequential empirical question.

Migrant Worker Agency, Educational Pathways, and Integration Policy

A significant body of Gulf migration scholarship has, however inadvertently, reproduced a deficit framing of migrant workers positioning them as vulnerable subjects requiring external rescue rather than social agents with their own analyses, aspirations, and preferred reform pathways (Dar & Janbaz, 2024; Gardner, 2010; Rahman et al., 2023). Emerging work is beginning to correct this. Scholars have documented the strategic decision-making, adaptive negotiation, and sophisticated navigation of transnational social fields that characterize migrant workers' experiences in Gulf contexts (Crepaz, 2022; Lam & Yeoh, 2016; Mahdavi, 2021). What remains missing, however, is systematic empirical attention to how these workers articulate their own developmental aspirations and envision reform on their own terms.

Educational investment has attracted growing attention in international migration scholarship as a mechanism for integration. Evidence from diverse destination countries demonstrates that access to education and structured skill development can transform migrant experiences across economic, social, and psychological dimensions (Crul et al., 2022; Wickramasekara, 2016). Labour market research similarly points to the importance of educational programming, skills recognition, and vocational training for improving migrants' occupational mobility and social inclusion (Bartoszewicz & Lang, 2024; Raghavan, 2024). Yet within Gulf contexts, lower-wage migrant workers are systematically excluded from the educational opportunities available to citizens and high-skilled expatriates (Crepaz, 2022; Thiollot, 2021) an exclusion that raises pointed questions about whether education could serve as a meaningful integration mechanism in a system explicitly organized around non-integration.

Cross-cultural contact theory offers a further relevant lens. Research consistently demonstrates that structured, meaningful interaction between groups particularly when organized around shared goals and conditions of equality can substantively reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Esses et al., 2021; de Haas et al., 2020). Gulf labor contexts, however, are defined by pronounced social segregation, with migrant workers in lower-wage sectors living in peripheral labor camps, working in sectors with minimal citizen presence, and experiencing systematic exclusion from civic and social spaces (Crepaz, 2022; Kapiszewski, 2021). Whether and how cross-cultural programming might foster genuine integration within these structural conditions is an empirical question this study was designed to address.

METHOD

Participants

A purposive sample of 53 participants comprised 28 Generation Z Emirati nationals (ages 18-26) and 25 South Asian migrant workers employed in the hospitality sector. Emirati participants were recruited through university student organizations and professional networking groups; migrant worker participants through informational flyers distributed in hotel employee breakrooms, supplemented by snowball sampling. Minimum two-year UAE residence was required for migrant workers to ensure contextual familiarity with labor system dynamics. Eligibility for Emirati participants required UAE citizenship and ages 18-26; for migrant workers, South Asian nationality, current hospitality sector employment, and

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conversational English proficiency. All participants provided informed consent, with explicit assurance that participation would not affect employment status or visa standing.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three mixed-participant virtual focus groups conducted via Microsoft Teams between January and July 2025, each bringing together both Emirati nationals and migrant workers (17, 17, and 19 participants respectively). Conducting sessions with both communities in the same space enabled cross-community dialogue and comparative analysis of perspectives (Dewa et al., 2021; Lobe et al., 2020). Sessions ranged from 90 to 120 minutes and were conducted in English, the dominant workplace lingua franca in UAE hospitality contexts. A semi-structured interview guide explored perceptions of current labor practices, experiences with existing support systems, attitudes toward the UAE's international reputation, and perspectives on government intervention. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, professionally transcribed verbatim, and systematically de-identified.

Analytical Strategy and Ethical Considerations

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Kyriakou et al., 2025). All three authors conducted independent multiple readings of the full transcripts before performing systematic line-by-line coding. Codes were then reviewed collaboratively, with disagreements resolved through discussion grounded in participants' original language and context. Themes were refined iteratively to ensure internal coherence and clear boundaries (Byrne, 2022), with analytical decisions documented throughout (Karcher et al., 2024). Member checking presenting preliminary findings to representative participant subsets from both communities confirmed that interpretations authentically reflected what participants had expressed (Caretta & Pérez, 2019; Iivari, 2018).

The study received Institutional Review Board approval prior to recruitment. Given the potential vulnerabilities of migrant worker participants, particular care was taken to ensure meaningful informed consent. Recruitment materials and consent processes stated explicitly that no identifying information would be shared with employers, government entities, or immigration authorities. All transcripts and analytical materials were de-identified, and data were stored on password-protected servers accessible only to the research team.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team brought varied and complementary relationships to the communities under study. The first and second authors Arab nationals and business professors with direct experience in Gulf institutional contexts led data collection and facilitated all focus groups. Their cultural insider status supported rapport with Emirati participants and enabled contextually grounded interpretation; it also required sustained reflexive attention to avoid over-identifying with Emirati framings or reproducing dominant Gulf narratives about migrant labor. The remaining authors of Burmese heritage, with professional backgrounds in social work and maritime affairs brought outsider perspectives and critical attentiveness to how race, structural inequality, and migration intersect across different national settings. Their training in relational practice also shaped how the team attended to the emotional dimensions of focus group discourse, including moments where participants navigated vulnerability or the constraints of speaking openly in a mixed-group setting. Throughout the study, the team maintained structured reflexive practices analytical memos, regular

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debriefing sessions, and active efforts to ensure migrant worker perspectives were not marginalized relative to Emirati voices during analysis.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts generated four overarching themes (see Table 1). Across all four, the most striking finding was not divergence but convergence: young Emiratis and South Asian migrant workers arrived at remarkably aligned positions despite their very different relationships to the UAE's labor system.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Findings

Theme	Description	Young Emirati Voice	Migrant Worker Voice
Theme 1: National Reputation as a Moral Imperative for Change	Both groups showed acute awareness of international labor discourse. Young Emiratis linked national identity to ethical labor practices, framing reform as authentic cultural expression. Migrant workers emphasized positive experiences and a desire to contribute to the UAE's success rather than positioning themselves solely through exploitation narratives.	<i>"We want to make a real impact for the UAE... The stories we hear about worker treatment, it's not who we are... This is on us, our generation, to fix this mess and show the world what Arab hospitality really means."</i>	<i>"When people talk about 'saving' Indian workers, they forget we chose to come here. We saw potential. We want the UAE to succeed we want to be part of that success story."</i>
Theme 2: Beyond Survival - Developmental Aspirations and Underutilized Potential	Migrant workers articulated aspirations well beyond employment security: professional development, financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and meaningful contribution. Young Emiratis recognized this untapped potential, framing worker investment as both ethically necessary and economically strategic.	<i>"We bring these workers here, we benefit from their contributions big time, and we want to invest more in their development. That's how you build a knowledge economy and show real appreciation."</i>	<i>"I didn't come here just to do the same job for ten years. I want to learn stuff, grow, become something more. But there's literally nowhere to go from here."</i>
Theme 3: Government-Funded Education as Strategic Investment	Both communities independently identified comprehensive, government-funded educational programming as the optimal intervention not employer-sponsored training. Young Emiratis saw such investment as proof of cultural authenticity; migrant workers experienced educational access as transformative recognition of their worth.	<i>"If the government seriously invests in worker education real programs, actual funding it shows the world we care. It's not just PR. It's concrete action that changes lives and shows what our culture is really about."</i>	<i>"If they actually teach us, it means they see us as human beings with futures, not just temporary workers on contracts. That completely changes how you feel about your place here."</i>
Theme 4: Integration Through Connection Rather Than Separation	Participants rejected segregationist approaches and called for meaningful cross-cultural interaction. Young Emiratis recognized that physical and social distance breeds ignorance. Migrant workers identified authentic relationships	<i>"Most young Emiratis have zero idea what migrant workers actually go through. We need programs that bring us together for real."</i>	<i>"There's this invisible wall between us and Emiratis. We work in their country but don't really know them as people. Breaking down that</i>

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Theme	Description	Young Emirati Voice	Migrant Worker Voice
	with Emiratis as essential to feeling integrated rather than merely tolerated.		<i>wall would help everyone both sides."</i>

Theme 1: National Reputation as a Moral Imperative for Change

Both communities demonstrated acute awareness of international discourse surrounding UAE labor conditions, but they engaged with it from different emotional positions. For young Emiratis, the most salient frustration was not the criticism itself but the gap between that criticism and what they understood their culture to stand for. International narratives of exploitation felt, to them, like a misrepresentation of Arab values and that misrepresentation became a powerful motivation for reform:

"We want to make a real impact for the UAE... The stories we hear about worker treatment, it's not who we are, you know? It doesn't represent what we want our country to be or our culture's values of caring for guests and welcoming people. This is on us, our generation, to fix this mess and show the world what Arab hospitality really means." (Young Emirati)

Importantly, young Emiratis did not respond defensively. They were willing to acknowledge that criticism could be legitimate and that improvement was necessary: "Look, there's always room for improvement, right? We can't just dismiss all the comments and feedback as unfair. Some of it points to real opportunities for us to do better." This pragmatic orientation accepting accountability without abandoning pride distinguished their responses from the defensive postures more commonly associated with Gulf public discourse on labor issues.

Migrant workers, for their part, resisted positioning themselves as passive subjects of international concern. They expressed genuine investment in the UAE's success and a desire to be seen as contributors rather than victims:

"When people talk about 'saving' Indian workers, they forget we chose to come here. We saw potential. We want the UAE to succeed we want to be part of that success story, not just background workers." (Migrant Worker)

This shared investment in the UAE's reputation and future arriving from such different starting points created an unexpected common ground between the two communities.

Theme 2: Beyond Survival: Developmental Aspirations and Underutilized Potential

The dominant scholarly framing of migrant workers in Gulf contexts tends to center survival: wage protection, safe housing, freedom from exploitation. This study found that migrant workers themselves hold considerably broader aspirations. What they articulated, repeatedly and with evident frustration, was a desire for growth:

"I didn't come here just to do the same job for ten years, right? I want to learn stuff, grow, become something more. But there's literally nowhere to go from here." (Migrant Worker)

This sense of stagnation of capability exceeding opportunity emerged across discussions. Several participants had pursued higher education before financial constraints interrupted their studies, only to find themselves in roles that offered no path forward: "Back home, I

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did two years at university before money problems stopped me. Here, I'm cleaning hotel rooms. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for the work, but I know I could do more if someone gave me a shot." Financial literacy and entrepreneurial development featured prominently among participants' stated aspirations not as abstractions but as concrete goals, connected to long-term economic security and the possibility of building something of their own.

Young Emiratis understood this. Rather than viewing migrant workers as interchangeable labor inputs, they recognized the human capital being underutilized within their economy:

"We bring these workers here, we benefit from their contributions big time, and we want to invest more in their development. That's how you build a knowledge economy and show real appreciation for people helping build your nation."
(Young Emirati)

The alignment here was not just rhetorical. Young Emiratis connected worker development to their own articulated vision for the UAE's economic future suggesting that investment in migrant workers is not charity but strategy.

Theme 3: Government-Funded Education as Strategic Investment

When participants were asked what they believed would most meaningfully address labor integration challenges, both communities arrived independently at the same answer: comprehensive, government-funded educational programming. The emphasis on government funding was deliberate and consistent. Participants from both groups were skeptical that employers would invest in worker development without institutional compulsion "Private companies won't do this on their own, there's no profit in it for them. The government has to step up and fund it properly" and were clear that employer-led models would create inequities based on which company a worker happened to work for: "When the government pays for education, everyone can get it no matter which company you work for. That's fair. That's actual equal opportunity, not just talk."

For young Emiratis, government-funded education carried additional significance: it would constitute visible, concrete evidence of cultural commitment rather than diplomatic deflection:

"If the government seriously invests in worker education real programs, actual funding it shows the world we care. It's not just PR. It's concrete action that actually changes people's lives and shows what our culture is really about."
(Young Emirati)

For migrant workers, the stakes were at once more personal and more symbolic. Educational access would signal not just investment but recognition:

"If they actually teach us, it means they see us as human beings with futures, not just temporary workers on contracts. That completely changes how you feel about your place here." (Migrant Worker)

Participants were also clear about the content of effective programming. Narrow technical training was not what they had in mind. They called for holistic education language acquisition, financial literacy, business knowledge, contract comprehension that would enable fuller participation in Emirati economic and social life: "We don't just need job skills. We need financial literacy, understanding contracts, banking, how to save properly."

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Language education. Business knowledge. Like, complete education, not just technical stuff." Language, in particular, was framed as more than a functional competency: it was a gateway to belonging.

Theme 4: Integration Through Connection Rather Than Separation

The final theme addressed the question of relationship what kind of social world participants wanted to inhabit. Here, too, the convergence was striking. Participants from both communities rejected approaches that maintained or deepened the existing social distance between Emiratis and migrant workers. Young Emiratis were candid about their own ignorance:

"Most young Emiratis have zero idea what migrant workers actually go through. We see them at hotels and restaurants, but we don't know their lives at all. We need programs that actually bring us together for real." (Young Emirati)

Migrant workers articulated the same desire from the other side of the invisible wall:

"There's this invisible wall between us and Emiratis. We work in their country but don't really know them as people. Breaking down that wall would help everyone both sides." (Migrant Worker)

Participants envisioned integrated programming mentorship schemes, mixed-participant training initiatives, cultural exchange as the mechanism for building the genuine relationships that could underpin more equitable social arrangements. Crucially, they understood this as a mutual process: not Emiratis doing something for migrant workers, but both communities learning from and with each other.

DISCUSSION

The central finding of this study is one of convergence where divergence was expected. Young Emirati nationals and South Asian migrant workers groups positioned by the structure of Gulf labor markets as having fundamentally opposed interests arrived at strikingly aligned visions for reform (Kapiszewski, 2021; Rahman et al., 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2025). Both communities prioritized government-funded educational programming as the optimal intervention, connected that intervention to the UAE's international reputation, and rejected approaches that would maintain existing social separation between Emirati and migrant populations. This alignment challenges a foundational assumption in Gulf migration scholarship and opens new theoretical possibilities for understanding how labor integration might be pursued in migration-dependent economies (Dar & Janbaz, 2024; Gardner, 2010; Vora, 2013).

The generational dimension of the Emirati participants' perspectives warrants particular attention. Sociological research has consistently documented that Generation Z cohorts across diverse national contexts hold stronger commitments to social justice and greater willingness to engage critically with institutional failures than preceding generations (Dimock, 2019; Parreñas & Santellano, 2022; Poston & Singelmann, 2025). What this study adds is a Gulf-specific account of how these generational dispositions are expressed in relation to labor reform. Young Emiratis did not frame ethical labor treatment as a concession to international pressure they framed it as a restoration of something authentically their own. The study's primary theoretical contribution lies in this finding: that younger Emirati nationals conceptualize labor reform not as a public relations exercise but as a reclamation of cultural identity (Khalaf & AlKobaisi, 2021). This directly challenges

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scholarship that reads Gulf reputation management primarily through the lens of defensive nationalism or instrumental policy response (Malit, 2025; Meardi, 2024; Mustaqeem, 2025). As these young people move into positions of institutional influence in business, government, and civil society this orientation toward reform as authentic cultural expression could prove to be a significant driver of genuine policy change.

The migrant workers' accounts are equally important as a corrective to prevailing frameworks. Their aspirations for professional development, financial literacy, entrepreneurial capacity, and meaningful societal contribution extend well beyond the survival-oriented concerns that dominate advocacy-led accounts of their situation (Lam & Yeoh, 2016; Mahdavi, 2021). These are not modest requests for incremental improvement; they are expressions of agency and ambition that align directly with the UAE's stated ambitions for knowledge-economy development (Görg, 2026). The current policy architecture ignores this alignment almost entirely, positioning migrant workers as temporary labor inputs rather than as human capital with developmental potential (Thiollet, 2021). The disconnect between what migrant workers want and what the system offers them represents not only an equity failure but a strategic one that becomes visible only when migrant voices are centered in the analysis (Malit, 2025; Vora, 2013; Rahman et al., 2023).

Both communities' convergence on government-funded education as the preferred intervention extends integration theory in important ways (Bartoszewicz & Lang, 2024; Raghavan, 2024). Existing scholarship documents the transformative potential of educational investment for migrant populations across economic, psychological, and social domains (Crul et al., 2022; Wickramasekara, 2016). What this study adds is the insight that educational programming can serve as a mechanism for simultaneously fulfilling two sets of stakeholder priorities that are typically treated as distinct: worker development and reputational rehabilitation. Young Emiratis saw educational investment as evidence of cultural authenticity; migrant workers experienced it as recognition of their humanity. These are not competing framings they are two articulations of the same underlying conviction that government-funded education would constitute meaningful, rather than merely symbolic, reform (de Haas et al., 2020).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The convergence documented in this study has direct practical implications. UAE policymakers often navigate tensions between economic ambition, labor rights obligations, and international reputation management as though these were competing priorities requiring trade-offs. The stakeholders in this study suggest otherwise: for them, genuine investment in worker development and reputational improvement are the same thing. This reframing matters for policy design.

Three specific recommendations follow from participants' expressed priorities. First, educational programming should be holistic rather than narrowly technical, encompassing language acquisition, financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and professional development. Participants were clear that technical training alone would not meet their needs or signal genuine commitment. Second, programming should be integrated rather than segregated, deliberately bringing Emirati nationals and migrant workers together in mentorship and co-learning contexts. Social psychological evidence on intergroup contact supports this approach: meaningful, equality-based interaction can substantively reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Esses et al., 2021). Third and most insistently programs must

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be government-funded to ensure equitable access and signal institutional seriousness. Employer-led voluntary models will not achieve either outcome. For practitioners in migration and integration contexts beyond the Gulf, the methodological lesson is equally important: bringing together communities assumed to have opposed interests, and asking them to articulate their own visions for change, may reveal shared ground that top-down analyses consistently miss.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's qualitative design prioritized depth over breadth; findings reflect the perspectives of a specific participant group rather than the full range of stakeholders in the UAE's labor system (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The sample was limited to South Asian hospitality workers and Generation Z Emiratis, potentially overlooking dynamics among migrant communities from other regions (African, Southeast Asian, Arab), workers in other sectors (construction, domestic work), and older Emirati cohorts (Byrne, 2022). The virtual format facilitated participation across geographic distances but constrained non-verbal communication and may have shaped disclosure in ways that in-person sessions would not (Lobe et al., 2020). The focus group setting itself, while productive for eliciting cross-community dialogue (Dewa et al., 2021), may have suppressed perspectives participants were reluctant to share in the presence of members of the other community (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A cross-sectional design cannot track how attitudes evolve or how they respond to policy change.

Future research should pursue larger and more diverse samples across sectors, nationalities, and generations to test whether the convergence documented here is specific to younger Emiratis and hospitality workers or reflects broader dynamics within the UAE's labor system. Longitudinal designs would illuminate whether these perspectives persist and whether educational interventions, if implemented, produce the outcomes that participants anticipate (Crul et al., 2022; Wickramasekara, 2016). Comparative research across Gulf Cooperation Council states Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait would establish whether similar convergences characterize other Gulf contexts or whether the UAE presents distinctive conditions (Rahman et al., 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2025). Implementation research is also urgently needed: feasibility assessments, cost-benefit analyses, and program evaluations that test what educational models actually work for workers across different schedules, literacy levels, and sectoral contexts (Hannam & Paris, 2018; Hu & Cheung, 2024). Finally, research examining employer perspectives, governmental priorities, and political feasibility would clarify what systemic factors might enable or obstruct the reforms that stakeholders themselves have identified as necessary (Kapiszewski, 2021; Parreñas & Santellano, 2022; Poston & Singelmann, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to hear from communities whose voices are routinely absent from UAE labor reform discourse. What it found challenges foundational assumptions about the relationship between host and migrant populations in stratified Gulf labor systems. Young Emirati nationals and South Asian migrant workers do not see themselves as adversaries competing over limited recognition or resources. They see themselves as parties to a shared problem one that a sustained, government-funded commitment to worker education could meaningfully address.

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Young Emiratis framed this investment as an act of cultural integrity, not diplomatic compliance. Migrant workers framed it as recognition of their humanity and their potential. Both understood it as the precondition for the genuine cross-cultural connection that neither group currently experiences. Together, they articulate a reform vision that is simultaneously more ambitious and more grounded than anything produced by external commentary: not incremental compliance with international standards, but substantive investment in the people who make the UAE function, expressed through the cultural values its citizens most want to embody. Centering these voices does not produce comfortable conclusions it reveals how much current policy leaves on the table. But it also illuminates a path forward, and it is one that the communities most directly affected have already mapped.

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