



SUDANESE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES' STRUCTURE AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IN THE UAE

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to investigate the family situations and living arrangements of Sudanese immigrant families in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is based on data collected five years ago from 1,689 Sudanese expatriates in the UAE. Using non-probability sampling methods, they were selected from the Sudanese populations who have moved to the UAE since the 1970s.

Findings: The findings indicate that immigrant Sudanese families face some difficulties in their family structure and living arrangements. Over one third of husbands left their wives back home in Sudan and visited them at least once a year. Other families preferred to send their children to Sudan for educational purposes while the parents remained in the UAE working. According to the respondents, these arrangements are not ideal because family members become divorced from each other.

Originality/value: This is a valuable research because it is the first time an empirical study on Sudanese immigrant families' structure and living arrangements in the Gulf countries has been executed. The findings are therefore of importance in a number of countries.

Keywords: Sudan, Migration, Sudanese families, Sudanese immigrants, Sudanese community, UAE, Gulf States, Living arrangements, Family structure, Host country

Paper type: Research paper



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**Sudanese
immigrant in
UAE**

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of migration and immigrants has imposed itself on contemporary human societies, becoming a key concern to many in different parts of the world. The issue also has an equal degree of significance to the countries of origin and countries of destination alike, i.e., in terms of social, economic and political perspectives. According to the (2011) annual report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), “global migration has become a process through which global communities were able to exchange talents, expertise, skills and services”.

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The organization admitted that numbers of immigrants are in progressive increase. During the year 2000 the figure was about 105 million; today it has jumped to 214 million, i.e., one migrant in every 33 individuals worldwide. The UAE state provided good evidence for such claims: in 2010 it received up to 3.3 million immigrants out of the total number of immigrants in the Middle Eastern states, which amounted to 26.5 million. The UAE came second to Saudi Arabia, who is first in this respect, hosting about 7.3 million immigrants, according to IOM. The UAE represents a unique model among all countries of the world, as the number of immigrants hosted by the state exceeded the number of its own citizens, amounting to as high as 70% of the total population. Such a high percentage has resulted in various social, economic and political impacts, prompting UAE to apply a set of precautionary measures to reduce the inflow of immigrants i.e.: establishing necessary policies to increase the number of citizens in the labour market. The majority of these immigrants are from continental Asia and from the Arab countries.

Among the Arab countries is Sudan, which is characterized by the IMO as a country with active migration movements internationally and internally. This is true if we consider the major factors that lead to this situation. Sudan, since its independence in 1956, has suffered from civil wars in many different parts of its territory, including the south, Darfur region, the eastern region, and recently, the Kordofan Province and the Blue Nile Province. In addition to these manmade problems, during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the country has witnessed waves

of natural crises, such as desertification, drought, famines and hunger (Teklu *et al.*, 1991; Webb *et al.*, 1991; Olsson, 1993). These local civil wars and the natural crises created political unrest, instability, hunger, displacement and resulting poverty in a vast area of the country. As a consequence, the Sudanese economy has failed to meet the basic needs of its people, and has pushed its citizens away, mainly to the Gulf Arab Oil Producing States. The data from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2012) in Table 1 show that the growth rate of the migrant stock steadily increased from the 1960s to the late 1980s when it underwent a slight change due to the discovery of oil in the country.

Although migration from Sudan to the Gulf States started as early as the 1930s, it intensified during the 1970s. The literature confirms that migration rates doubled during the 1970s, with the doubling of oil prices, which coincided with the oil exports embargo to the West imposed by those states in 1973 (Shah, 2001). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) had taken the lead in attracting large numbers of Sudanese professionals and technical labour due to its geographical proximity to Sudan, which facilitated travel between the two countries separated only by the Red Sea. Likewise, the historical economic and social relations between them played an important role in furthering that migration. According to Sudan's migration profile report of 2011 prepared by the IOM and showing Sudanese migration activities to the GCC between 1998 and 2007, Saudi Arabia hosted the most Sudanese at 206,494, followed by the UAE at 9,598, Qatar at 4,474, Kuwait at 959, Oman at 749 and Bahrain with only 69.

While KSA was the first station for Sudanese migrants, the UAE was the second in terms of intensity and quality of migration. Following its independence in 1972, the UAE directed its attention to Sudan for the attraction of a trained workforce to manage the affairs of the newly born state in all aspects. It is said that British colonial authorities, who dominated both countries in the past, advised the UAE leadership on the eve of their departure to make use of the services of Sudanese civil servants, who had been trained by the British colonial authorities, and who had mastered the English language, a factor which will help communication between the British administration and the UAE State in the future. This relation between Sudan and the UAE had been strengthened by the visit of HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan to Sudan. This was his first visit as a president outside the UAE after

	Population at mid-year (thousands)	Estimated number of female immigrants at mid-year	Estimated number of male immigrants at mid-year	Estimated number of international immigrants at mid- year (both sexes)	International immigrants as a percentage of the population	Female immigrants as a percentage of all international immigrants	Growth rate of the migrant stock (%)
1960	11 513	114 188	127 770	241 958	2.1	47.2	-0.5
1965	12 963	114 458	121 891	236 349	1.8	48.4	3.4
1970	14 699	139 125	140 840	279 965	1.9	49.7	2.8
1975	17 056	160 957	160 823	321 780	1.9	50.0	16.1
1980	19 970	353 327	365 188	718 515	3.6	48.7	13.5
1985	23 382	685 473	722 303	1 407 776	6.0	48.6	-2.0
1990	26 066	618 592	654 549	1 273 141	4.9	48.5	-2.7
1995	29 352	538 727	572 416	1 111 143	3.8	48.4	-5.3
2000	32 902	413 104	440 763	853 867	2.6	48.3	-5.8
2005	36 233	308 295	330 301	638 596	1.8	48.7	-
2010	43 192	363 000	390 447	753 447	1.7	48.2	-

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (<http://esa.un.org/migration/p2k0data.asp>)

Table I. Sudan
migration country
profile (1960-2010)

independence and establishment of the UAE State with its six other emirates. That visit was fruitful and Sudan agreed to the secondment of highly educated and trained staff for employment in the UAE in almost all fields of specialization, including educational, economic, military, legal and information. That is why there is a high percentage (48%) of highly educated Sudanese among those who migrated to the UAE compared with other Gulf States. As for today, the Embassy of Sudan to the UAE estimated that there are more than 75,000 Sudanese immigrants in the UAE. This study aims to investigate the structure and living arrangements of Sudanese immigrant families in the UAE after approximately four decades away from home.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data collected five years ago from 1,689 Sudanese expatriates in the UAE. Using non-probability sampling methods, well-structured and tested questionnaires were distributed among the population of Sudanese who had moved to the UAE. The investigator assigned a number of trained data collectors from each emirate with the assistance of the board members of the Sudanese Social clubs, which are found in almost every emirate and who facilitated the respondents' selection operation. In spite of this, some difficulties were experienced during data collection, including locating the respondents and choosing the data collectors, although the leaders of the Sudanese communities in every emirate were very helpful. Approximately 30% of the respondents were reluctant to answer all the questions, believing that the research might have something to do with the Sudanese government. All the collectors were part-timers and did not have spare time to go around the emirates.

The respondents live in Al Ain town (24.6%), Abu Dhabi (24.8%), Dubai (24.5%), Sharjah (6.8%), Fujayrah (5.1%), Ajman (3.1%), Ras Al Khaymah (6.0%), and Umm Al Qaywayn (5.1%). Male participants comprised (83.6%), while female participants comprised (16.4%) of the sample. Participants' age ranged between 18 and 75. Married participants comprised 71.9%, 25.1% were single, 1.9% were divorced, and 1.1% widowed. Forty percent of the participants were university graduates, 8.1% had postgraduate degrees, 27.2% had high school certificates, 13.2% completed general secondary school, 7.9% completed primary school, and 4.3% had no formal education or did not complete primary school.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES A SUDANESE MIGRANT IN THE UAE?

The group of Sudanese immigrants in the UAE had the advantage of embracing cadres of highly qualified individuals, who outmatched their counterparts in the other Gulf States. More than 48% were university graduates and/or held postgraduate degrees. One of the major reasons behind this was that the Sudanese immigrants, at the onset, came to the UAE according to agreements between the governments of Sudan and the UAE, as mentioned earlier. Pursuant to which, some employees of the public sector in Sudan were seconded for service in the latter state. Migration of those groups of employees was processed through official channels, which subjected them to interviews and specific requirements for selection. The government of Sudan also allowed the private sector in the UAE to contract the services of Sudanese professionals through official channels.

These facts indicated that most of those groups of Sudanese immigrants to the UAE enjoyed distinctive levels of education and training. The relatively high levels of educational qualifications of the Sudanese immigrants enabled them to occupy very important government and non-government posts in the UAE. They occupied higher-paid posts relative to other Sudanese in other Gulf States, like Saudi Arabia for example, where incomes are more modest, ranging between 1,000 Rial Saudi (RS) to 3,000 (Karar, 1996), (about \$ 266 to \$ 800) i.e. equivalent to 980 to 2900 emirates dirham. The percentage of those who received more than 6,000 (1.7%) emirates dirham monthly amounted to 31% of the total sample of the study. All Sudanese families who came to the UAE four decades ago had benefited from the distinct social welfare services (i.e. free medical treatment, education and subsidy on family essential items) which were provided by the UAE state for its citizens and residents alike. That welfare system helped immigrants to spend their incomes on items other than education and medical treatment and enabled them to meet other family obligations back at home. It is well known that remittance from Sudanese immigrants abroad played a significant role in the improvement of overall economic conditions in Sudan and became one of the main sources of the Sudanese economy during the difficult period of the 1990s (Brown, 1992; Yang, 2004). According to the IOM report of 2011, the formal Sudanese remittance reached USD 1.9 billion in 2008.

Research results indicated that professionals with postgraduate degrees formed 8% of the total number of Sudanese working in the

UAE. University degree holders formed 40% and secondary school certificate holders comprised 27%. Those groups of educated immigrants acquired their expertise and training inside Sudan and outside in the developed countries over a long period of time; therefore high levels of efficiencies were lost by Sudan. Other studies on Sudanese immigrants in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh City, for example, indicated that: more than one third (39%) of them had a secondary school certificate, 19% completed primary school, 15% completed intermediate level, 11% had university degrees, and only 3% had postgraduate degrees (Al Khidhairi, 2009).

The findings of this study reflected that Sudanese civil service employees who migrated to the UAE represent 35% of the total population of Sudanese immigrants, technicians amount to 14%, engineers from different specializations comprise more than 9% and teachers 6%, consultants 2% labourers 16%, drivers 4%, businessmen 9%, students 6%, with a total of 1227. Approximately 462 did not respond to this question. This may be because some of these respondents did not wish to reveal the type of work they had done in the past for security reasons. Others may not have had a job back home and did not wish to reveal this fact to the interviewer. Others may have been peasants and preferred to keep that confidential. This result differed from the findings of other studies on the professions of the Sudanese in Saudi Arabia, which indicated that the vast majority were engaged in minor professions, e.g.: vendors, production and operation of the means of transport, administrative activities, appliances and equipment repairs, construction works and clerical work (Karar, 1996).

For over 75% of Sudanese residents in the UAE, migration to the UAE was their first time of migration; the rest came from other Gulf/non-Gulf Arabic states. The percentage of those who came from non-Arabic countries was 17%, most of whom came from the US and Britain. Migration of Sudanese families from Western countries to the Gulf States, as a phenomenon, started during the 1990s, in not insignificant numbers. Such migration is attributed to several reasons, the first of which involved preservation of the identity and sense of belonging of their families. That was the most important motivation for leaving Western countries with the aim of obtaining proper socialization for their children, according to principles of Islamic values and Arabic culture. The second reason was that all the Sudanese families in the UAE (except a few) are from the northern part of Sudan. This means they are Muslims, speak Arabic and dress similar to those in the emirates. These characteristics made them

adjust promptly to the host culture without fear of discrimination (which they suffered in Western countries) and enabled them to retain their culture (Elhag, 2010).

The third reason was the geographical proximity of the Gulf States to Sudan, which facilitated families' travel to and from Sudan. The fourth reason was that pay rates in the Gulf States were higher than in Western countries, considering, in particular, that Gulf States do not impose income or purchase taxes, as is the case in Western countries. The fifth reason was that most of the professionals, such as university professors, are more likely to find a good educational and research environment due to the fact that the UAE universities are more technologically advanced compared to other universities in the region. Sixth, those families believed that work in the Gulf States facilitated appropriate means for their final return to Sudan, since returning home is universally of great concern (Carrión-Flores, 2012; Dustmann and Kirchkamp, 2002). Finally, for some it was more convenient to be near Sudan in order to monitor their investments at home.

THE SITUATION OF SUDANESE FAMILIES IN THE UAE AFTER MORE THAN FOUR DECADES

The following section analyzes results of the research on “working conditions” in the UAE, and their impact on Sudanese families. Statistical results of the research indicated significant variations between the periods of time spent in the UAE. Periods of residence varied between less than one year and 46 years. The percentage of those who stayed 10 years or less was 50%, those who stayed 21 years or less was 25%, and those who stayed more than 25 years was 25%. Now, four decades after the first migration of Sudanese families to the UAE, many changes have taken place within the work and family settings. Studies indicated that some Sudanese immigrants resorted to medical or psychiatrist treatment during their lengthy stay in the UAE (Shallal and Abdelrahman, 2009). The families faced some difficulties, lately as a result of the changing economic conditions in the Gulf States and the emergence of strong competition in the labour markets by other Arabic or Asian nationals. These factors led to further difficulties in the quest for employment and shifting between jobs. This, in turn, led to the spread of unemployment among Sudanese communities, and contributed to family breakdown, the rise of poverty conditions and lack of accommodation in the Gulf States. This was coupled with the reluctance of high numbers of Sudanese to

return home in the light of their existing conditions. The separation of family members is a disease facing all immigrants in many societies (Elhag, 2010). International immigrant family members are known to change their roles, especially women's roles, in times of crisis in order to maintain the continuity of the family. The Sudanese families were no exception. There are a number of cases where wives left the home to seek employment in order to generate more income for their families after their husbands contracts ended. Those conditions created a gloomy picture and generated panic concerning their unknown futures.

Generally speaking, the most important challenges that confronted the Sudanese families in the UAE are as follows: 1) Large segments of family heads reaching retirement age, and those who were jobless represented 9% of the research population. This group suffered a variety of health problems, unlike those who were still in work. Such health problems included bodily disorders, depression, anxiety and strain. 2) The UAE ceased to be an attractive place for job seekers from Sudan due to low pay rates and the increasing cost of living, particularly with regard to house rents and the high cost of children's education.

3) More than 95% of the total respondents believed that obtaining a job in the UAE is no longer an easy task. This could be attributed to various factors. First, the UAE sought to recruit its own citizens instead of expatriates. Second, problems concerning the global economic crisis and their implications for the UAE. Third, the intensity of competition between foreign communities for the UAE's labour market, where the Sudanese community were considered the weakest circle, due to their inability to properly "promote and market" themselves in the labour market. In addition, the Sudanese community members were disinterested in providing assistance to those who needed it, in contrast to the attitude of other communities. 4) Primary education for children created a big burden for Sudanese families in the UAE. Free education is no longer available. A large number of families sought other alternatives for their children, such as private education, which is very expensive, or sending them home to Sudan to complete their education. Neither option is easy for families and either increases their financial burden or exposes them to the risk of family break-up by sending their children home in spite of their knowledge that children living without their parents have less chance of success in the educational process (Hernandez *et al.*, 2008). This uncomfortable situation often led to acute tensions and

problems, which stormed family life and led to family separation. Families who sent their children back to Sudan amounted to more than half of the sample (55%).

5). About 62% of Sudanese families in the UAE were forced to leave wives in Sudan, mostly for economic reasons, exposing themselves to family break-up, which implied adverse effects on all family members, both emotionally and physically. 6). Parents who were separated from their spouses or their children, or from both, suffered physically, psychologically and socially (Shallal and Abdelrahman, 2009; Bhugra and Jones, 2001). Results have shown differences between men who had their wives with them, and those who sent their wives back to Sudan. Members of the second category were younger in age, felt more homesick and suffered diseases such as hypertension and diabetes (Shallal and Abdelrahman, 2009).

7). Families who spent three decades in the UAE now needed to send their children to universities. The low income families were unable to meet the high costs of university education in the countries of migration; some of them sent their children to Asian countries where costs are relatively low, and others sent them back to Sudan, preferring to suffer the distress of “Expatriate children’s Dilemma!” Thanks to the establishment of the “Expatriate’s University”, many of their problems in this respect will be overcome. 8). Some families who were able to provide a university education for their children were confronted by an unexpected and more difficult problem: their residence. UAE laws do not allow children at the age of maturity who have completed their university education to stay in the country.

9). Some of those families were broken up due to divorce or separation. This had an adverse impact on all family members. Families differed in their responses to that problem. Some of the divorced wives preferred to return to Sudan with their children, some left the children behind, and others left their families and children and looked for residence in another emirate. 10). These circumstances led more than three quarters of the research sample (77%) to look into the possibility of returning to Sudan. 11). A considerable percentage of the researched population feared this option. Generally speaking, opinions of the research population were almost similar with regard to the situation in Sudan: some of them believed that it was attractive (35%); others believed it was expelling (29%). However, more than one third did not know what to answer.

Another segment decided that there would never be a return to Sudan, and those represented 22% of the sample. The major concern of this last group on their return home is how to make contented living conditions for their families. The following section tackles some of the problems faced by immigrants' families in their homeland.

“SERVICE GRATUITY”: ITS ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES AND EFFECTS ON SUDANESE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

This section of the study deals with the question of “service gratuity” or that amount of money given to employees after their work contracts end. According to the UAE’s labour legislation, expatriates working in the state are entitled to service gratuity at the end of their service period, which means that families have no right to current pension pay, as is the case in Sudan. The following observations could be made with respect to families whose service periods have come to an end, and who received their service gratuities: 1) Families had different uses for these gratuities e.g. some of them made good plans for investing the money in successful ways, which facilitated their decisions on the final return to Sudan. On their return, they were able to settle without any serious problems, except for the need to adapt to the problem of culture shock faced after spending such a long time away from home. 2) Some families were hesitant to make any plans for their final return and were thus taken by surprise that their service periods came to an end. They then made quick decisions, returned home and failed to make sound plans for the investment of their money. Their lives thereafter were disrupted and uncomfortable. All family members experienced constant problems but remained in Sudan.

3) Another segment also failed to make early plans for their return (Tuhamy, 2012), failed to invest their savings, were unable to settle and tried hard to return to the UAE or another GCC country, even if by illegal means. Such attitudes resulted in breach of the regulations of the host country(s) by those individuals, i.e. when they sought to obtain residence visas in those countries. These results are consistent with the findings of studies on Sudanese immigrants in Saudi Arabia (Nour and Ajuba, 1999), which indicated that the vast majority of the study sample had not achieved their goals from migration to Saudi Arabia, even after spending ten years or more in the country.

4) More than half of the Sudanese families in the UAE (55%) were not able to construct or buy a house in Sudan, which could have helped

them to make the decision to finally return. Those who were able to construct or buy a house at home formed 45% of the sample. 4a) Some of these families' sons obtained jobs in the state's departments; about 11% of the sample married and settled in the UAE. 4b) Some families benefited when their sons' took jobs in the UAE by obtaining residence visas and being accommodated with their sons. Some families took advantage via sound investment of their "service gratuities" and establishment of their businesses in the UAE (but those formed a minority of the Sudanese in UAE). Other parents settled with their sons under their sponsorship without returning to Sudan, and preferred to remain indefinitely. 4c) This situation required those young people to sponsor their elderly parents in order for them to obtain residence in the UAE.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the structure and living arrangements of the Sudanese immigrant families in the UAE after about four decades away from home. From the collected data and a number of conducted interviews and my own observations, it is safe to say that although they are satisfied with their residence, almost all the Sudanese immigrant families in the UAE feel threatened by the precarious nature of their work contracts which can result in them having to return to Sudan before fulfilling their set goals. In addition, immigrant Sudanese families face difficulties in their family structure and living arrangements due to the anxiety generated by their precarious employment and economical prospects. More empirical studies are recommended on the structure and living arrangements of Sudanese families in the UAE.

Because this is the first empirical study on the family structure and living arrangements of Sudanese immigrant families in the Gulf countries, its findings are of importance to a number of parties: 1). The Sudanese families abroad; 2) Decision makers in both the host countries and Sudan; 3). University and college students; 4). Researchers; 5). The documentation libraries and institutions.

It is also recommended that families who return to Sudan should seek out other families who settled before them. It is found that these groups are very helpful in many aspects, including consolidation of families' relations with each other, where all family members enjoy relations with other counterparts, and facilitating the process of re-adaptation, as they encourage the practice of regular "coming together".

During these gatherings, all find the opportunity to interact with those group members with whom they have old bonds and/or share common interests. Old members of those groups provide advice and guidance to recently returning families with regard to various aspects of social life, sharing with them information about the best schools for their children and the best centres for medical services. In terms of economic aspects, those groups share mutual confidence and trust between them, which enables returners to cooperate with each other in many ways, the most important of which is the issue of investing their financial returns from expatriation. In addition, family members will find material assistance when needed.

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