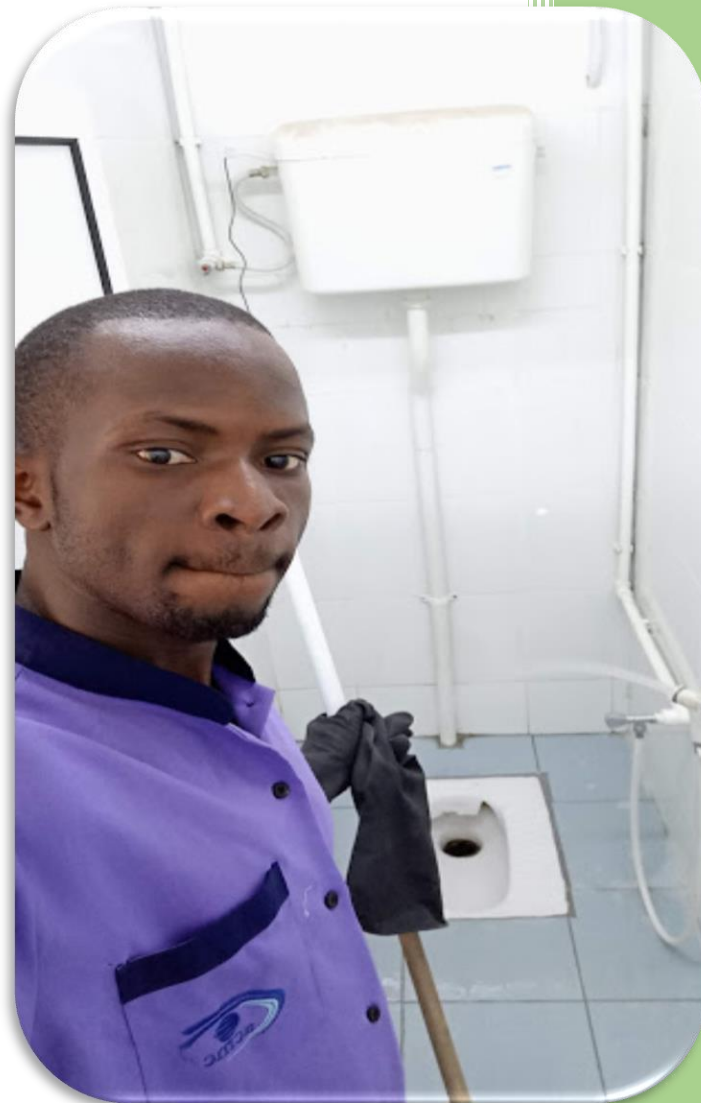


2020

A Dream Turned Sour



Alex Juma

6/21/2020

Objectives

1. To sensitize young people who are thinking of working in the 7 countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to the harsh realities of migrant employment conditions in the region.
2. To warn aspiring migrants against signing employment contracts before they travel to seek work in the region because they have no legal validity.
3. To suggest to young people that they would be better off staying at home and putting the money that they spend in seeking work overseas into business in their home country.

Introduction

This is my true story, but I have used pseudonyms to disguise the identity of the people and companies involved herein except my family. Like any other ambitious young man so was I. I had dreams to achieve, a dream to make my family and community happy, a dream to change my life. “I knew I will become a millionaire” when I got to GCC. I was then confident that I will build a home for my family, and give back to the community to help support the less-fortunate, but this was still a dream for it was only to turn real when I got to the GCC. I always kept in mind that all dreams are valid. Despite pieces of advice from friends about the dreadful conditions under which so many migrants worked in the GCC, I still believed in myself and went ahead to pursue my dream. I saw my friends and their advice as ways of killing my future so I went ahead to do that which I believed was the best choice.

I was born in Bondo Hospital in September 1990. My young days in the nearby village of Aduwa were not easy as my parents separated when I was 5 years old and then each went on to marry again and have more children. I was the first-born of eight siblings and we were all brought up under very constrained circumstances. My father died when I was eleven, leaving me in the care of an uncle and my grandmother. I moved from school to school, dropping out frequently because we did not have the money to pay school fees. Eventually, having been awarded a bursary by St Pius Got Matar Secondary School in Bondo Sub-County, I was able to complete my secondary school education, qualified to enter university but, once again, unable to afford it. To make ends meet and get useful experience I became a Board of Management teacher and then gained entry into the prestigious Kenya Medical Training College. I was overwhelmed with the joy of joining college in 2012, but at the back of my mind the question was how will I pay USD 576 per year for

the 3 year course. These fees were well beyond my reach but my grandmother sold her only cow to help me continue my studies and I earned extra cash from repairing phones, delivering water and boda-boda driving, ferrying passengers on a motor cycle.

God works in a way we cannot understand. In December 2016 I graduated with a Diploma in Health Records and Information Technology, happily married to Maryanne and blessed with a lovely child, Leilah. I had also brought back my mother from Uganda after 10 years, meaning I had every reason to be happy. Once graduated I got a job that matched my qualifications at Kisumu County Hospital, earning USD 250 per month. This allowed me to buy a motor cycle and employ a boy in my community to use it to ferry passengers.

My dream, however, drove me to leave behind all this happiness with the aim of giving my family the best they could imagine. What followed will leave you wondering what went wrong.

The Fateful Story

It all started in 2016 on October 2nd when my best friend came back from Dubai. She had no intention of returning to the UAE following what she went through, working for a pittance as a house-help. Anxious to get on a plane and go, I brushed aside her tales of sufferings and still saw the prospect of work in the Gulf as a great opportunity to grab. My determination to go ahead was reinforced when I was told that, with my qualifications, I would be able to get a career job, earning between USD3,000 and 4,000 per month.

I quickly ran to my friend for guidance on how she got to visit the UAE. She introduced me to one of her friends who then conned me into paying him USD 800 with a promise to get me to the UAE by November 2016. As at that time I was earning very little from my job, I had to secure a bank loan to raise the USD 800.

After waiting for about a year without any progress, I decided to travel to Nairobi to search for an agent who would genuinely help me to get a job in the Gulf states. It was November 2017 when I met Mr. Zidane who made going to Dubai sound as easy as ABCD. This strengthened my conviction that all was going to work out well. We went for a medical checkup at a cost of USD 88 at Bayan Medical Center as it was a GCC accredited hospital that could perform the tests approved for expert work permit application. After two days the result was out and I was FIT to work abroad. Amen; this made me see my dream accomplished.

Mr. Zidane had won my confidence and so I readily agreed to his request that I pay some funds to facilitate faster processing of my travel. As I was down and out, I decided to sell things that I had in my house as well as the motor bike that was helping us to gain a little to eat on a daily basis. I managed to raise about USD 600 from the sales.

When I remembered having lost USD 800 the previous year, I felt reluctant to give him the money. Questions kept ringing on my mind - what if history repeat itself? He then introduced me to his friend, Pablo, an agent. He convinced me that he had ready jobs in Dubai and gave me a contract letter for an Administrator's job that would pay me USD 560 monthly. Who was I to reject an open door? I was easily convinced to take the chance. I scraped up USD 300 to pay Pablo who assured me that I was to be in Dubai in the next two weeks. When the two weeks elapsed, Pablo's phone has gone off-line.

I felt like taking away my life having lost everything I had. These agents were cunning as, before starting any transaction, they made sure they had your passport. This they claimed they did to make sure you pay them when they had arranged for issue of a visa but it turned to be the other way round: I would have to pay for return of my passport even before getting a visa! Given the large number of job applicants, they could earn a lot of cash whether they found you a job or not.

I lost hope and demanded to be given back my passport without success during the whole of 2018. I was broke, struggling to pay back the loans. I suffered serious depression, knowing that all that I had paid had been fruitless. The world was like an enemy trying to devour me.

It was not until March 2019 that Mr. Zidane called me and asked if I was still interested in working in GCC. He gave me reasons why I was wise to take the chance and assured me that in 3 months with what I would be paid there I would be able to clear my loans and achieve my goals. That was convincing to me. I decided to take this one last chance of achieving my dream, and I went for another USD 88 medical test as the other one had expired.

Mr. Zidane then introduced me to Mr. Aftab, my future employer in Bahrain who was a migrant investor from **India**. We had a direct conversation on the phone and I was then sure that my dream finally had come true. I paid Mr. Zidane USD 100 for the connection. Mr. Aftab then requested my passport details and medical test result. He then provided me with a contract letter under which I would be paid about USD 500 and be provided with good supplements including food, transport

and accommodation. I quickly signed the contract since the terms and the pay were favourable. I already saw myself changing the lives back in my community within a short while.

Three days latter my visa was issued, he then asked me to pay for my air ticket and travel to Bahrain. By this time, I had run out of money completely. As a last resort, I explained the situation to my friends in Italy who paid for my travel and my ticket was issued.

On 10th April 2019, how awesome it was to pass all the check points and to be cleared to start the travel of my dreams. This was the first time to be on board a plane. I was flying Air Arabian to Kingdom of Bahrain. The joy was overwhelming to, at last, be going overseas to work. I started picturing my life at the end of my contract with Company X, Manama City, Kingdom of Bahrain.

After a cold and sleepless night in Sharjah airport I arrived in Bahrain on 11th April 2019 at 08.10 am. I submitted my resignation letter to my employer back in Kenya and cleared with Immigration Department. I was ready and keen to start my new job in Bahrain.

At 9.30 am, Mr. Aftab picked me from the airport and on our way to his office, the lectures started. It was a long one-sided conversation relating to my work, I felt uneasy but realized that I had no alternative but to accept what I was given. When we got to his office, he gave me a sandwich and tea. We then got onto signing papers. Mr. Aftab's seeming charm had vanished. He was now a different man, harsh and the only one to speak. My role was to listen and take his advice.

He issued me with a new contract letter which bore no resemblance to the one that I had signed in good faith in Nairobi. I was to be paid the equivalent of USD 280 or just over half the agreed amount. I was shocked but there was no room to question this as just the two of us were alone, locked inside his office. In this isolated situation, with no one to whom I could appeal, all I could do was to sign the documents, sometimes without even having time to read them as he behaved as though he was late for something.

After I had signed away my future hopes, he borrowed my passport, scanned it and, then prepared a loan letter indicating that I owed him BD. 500 (about USD 1,500) which I would have to repay over months. When I asked him what the 'loan' was for, he claimed that he had brought me to Bahrain so I had to pay him. It was hell already from day one. Finally, I had to sign a letter granting him custody of my passport as surety for the 'loan' that he had given me. I was flabbergasted and deeply shocked but I was powerless to do anything to change the situation.

The next morning, I had to report for work at 5.00 am and continue working, with no overtime, till 6.00 pm. Although the contract that I had signed specified that I was an Administrator, my job was to clean toilets. I was responsible for 91 toilets used by 500 staff from Company B which was his client. I had to clean the toilets twice daily but before starting each morning, I had to sweep the whole Company B's compound which was about an acre in size. By the end of the first day I felt sick and dazed, and my hands were full of blisters.

All my dreams seemed dead. Not only was the work hugely demanding and demeaning, but living conditions were also appealing. I was assigned to share a room of about 7 by 12 metres with 8 other migrants. We slept in double-decker bunks and had the use of a small kitchen and a washroom connected to it. I was the only Kenyan and my flat-mates included 1 Sri Lankan, 3 Indians and 4 Ugandans. The house was full of rats, cockroaches and, worst of all, bedbugs.

I was so stunned by what had happened to me that on several occasions I almost got knocked over when I had to cross roads. It took me about 6 months to accept my situation and to confess to my family what had happened while they were struggling to make ends meet in Kenya without any of the income that I had aspired to send to them.

It was only after I eventually got home that I learnt just how traumatic the effect of my absence had been on my family and especially on Maryanne. I was so shattered and ashamed of the turn of events that I could not bring myself to tell her what had happened to me in Bahrain, fearing that it would make her panic. Looking back, she told me of how she went through heartbreak and depression. Friends convinced her that I must have found another wife in Bahrain. She even went as far as engaging another man just in case things went so wrong that she could be sure of having a husband.

I came to realize that I had – like thousands of other migrants in Bahrain - been cheated, exploited and thrown into bondage by a labour supply company that was operating illegally. Despite the laws in place to protect workers' rights, the company had connections in the Ministry of Labour who assured Mr. Aftab freedom to flout them.

I discovered that the labour laws of Bahrain do not state that the employee should pay any travel expense but the sponsor should take care of everything if the company offered to provide a work permit or residence work visa. Similarly, the law does not allow employers to retain an employee's

passport. However, as in my case, employers get round this provision by making their employees sign agreement forms indicating that they have requested them to hold the passport in safe keeping. That then binds employee to employer and nothing other than clearing their so-called loans could allow a migrant to escape from the state of modern-day slavery into which they had unwittingly found themselves thrown by rogue agents and employers.

Buying My Freedom

No human is perfect. One chilly morning, as I was continuing my daily tasks, my boss came by following a complaint from one client. This day was like hell. What got me worried most was he threatened to ‘make me suffer’ in Bahrain. He reminded me that I had nowhere to run to, following the loan letter the he had made me sign he had my passport and so traveling back home or changing employer was not possible.

This happened at a time when my friends in Italy had written to enquire how I was getting on in Bahrain and so I explained my predicament. Who is God? Truly nothing is hard for Him. Without delay, I received a transfer of about USD 1500, which I paid to my boss and got my passport back. I then resigned from company X.

I was free to leave Bahrain but decided to take advantage of being there to look for a new job in which I could apply my skills.

A friend tirelessly tried to help me secure another opportunity that would match my qualifications but all was in vain, and my money was running low. Come February 5th, 2020, I decided to travel back to my mother land. With the little funds I had, I booked an Air Arabian ticket home for 3rd March.

I was perplexed on 1st March, when I was notified that my flight was cancelled. All planes that were flying via UAE were cancelled as UAE became the epicenter of COVID-19 spread in the region. The airline would not refund the cost of my ticket but to offer credit note, once again I had nothing to do but to reach back to my friends in Italy who again sent me money and I was able to fly to Kenya via Ethiopia.

The relief of being back on Kenyan soil, reunited with my wife and child, was overwhelming but destined to be short-lived, once again for reasons outside my control. Almost immediately my

regained freedom was snatched away by the conditions that were laid down to curb COVID-19. We found ourselves in lockdown in Nairobi, far from home, with no jobs and no money with which to survive – but that’s another story!

Some Positive Experiences

I must say that despite being unable to achieve my dreams in a GCC country, I learnt a lot during my stay there and gained pleasure from being able to help people who had run into the same type of problems as those that had confronted me from the day I set foot in Bahrain. I witnessed the most inhuman behaviour imaginable, but I also found friendship and solidarity amongst people who had suffered similar or even worse abuse. While there may have been some fair-minded migrant employers, it was clear that majority operated illegally and with impunity. Those workers who were most exploited by their bosses were employed as cleaners, domestic helpers, labourers, housekeepers and security guards, among others.

Many aspiring migrants are desperate to lead a better life and so are easily lured by agents’ promises of good terms and conditions which bear no relationship to the contracts with which they are provided on arrival in the country. I remember expressions of shock and dismay of 12 Kenyans with whom I travelled when, on arrival at the airport, they were faced with signed contracts indicating that they had agreed to work as lowly-paid house-helpers.

I thank God that, once I had bought my freedom, I was able to rescue 3 house-helpers. Despite it being an illegal act to help foreign migrants (especially house-helpers) to run away from their employers, I had to take the chance to save the three. I managed to take them to the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) office from where their cries were heard and employers summoned. They all managed to travel back home on winning their cases.

I was surprised to learn that about 90% of the ladies working in Bahrain as door to door cleaners had no visas. Many had run away from house-help jobs, but found themselves stuck in the country as illegal immigrants unable to travel back to their home countries. I learnt how their situation could be resolved and shared the information with them, enabling some to run to the LMRA and present documents that allowed them to stay legally within the country.

Conclusions

1. Many aspiring immigrants including myself were convinced that working overseas would automatically result in well-paid jobs and shorter working hours. I and many of my new-found friends discovered on arrival at our destination that the opposite applied. We found that we had been deliberately deceived about work prospects and incomes and forced to become bonded labourers, working very long hours for low pay, much of which had to be spent on repaying 'loans' that had never existed. We had no idea of our rights as migrant workers in the country or of how to report irregularities.
2. The decision to work abroad is one of the most important decisions that you will make in your life. Take time to look carefully at the prospects and the risks involved, aware that, in many countries agents and employers are prone to exploit their employees.
3. Before entering into commitments to work abroad in any other country, study (through internet searching, including the country page of the International Labour Organization - ILO) the scope of the labour market, your rights under the Labour Law, the obligations of employers and the experiences of other migrants. Note down the means of contacting the relevant ILO office and national Ministry of Labour migrant assistance services.
4. Never surrender your passport or other travel or identification document. You are entitled by law in almost every country to retain these documents.
5. Don't sign any document that you do not understand: you need to seek clarification no matter what it takes just to be on the right track.