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LOST SOULS IN THE DUNE

AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF THE REALITY OF
MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MIDDLE
EAST

Master's thesis in Master of Fine Art
Supervisor: Nabil Ahmed
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ABSTRACT

Behind the closed doors of the lavish homes of the Middle East lies a ruthless truth. Quite a large number of migrant domestic workers bear the weight of reality in silence. Over the past few years, along with men, millions of female domestic workers from South Asia and Africa have migrated to Middle Eastern countries in search of job opportunities, where they were promised decent accommodation, a good salary, food, and a healthy working environment. But in most of the cases, the reality is just the opposite, as the bulk of them are being abused, exploited, and tortured physically and mentally by their employers. This issue deserves our collective attention, as in this era, human rights are basic. This project resonates with the hearts and minds of those who bear witness. The power of art can leave an incredible mark on the world and inspire others to stand alongside the victims in the fight against violence and for women's empowerment. While migrant workers from all over the South are included in my artistic research, a significant portion of my text focuses on Bangladeshi female migrants. For an artist, art is voice, art is light, and the purpose of this artistic research is not only to discuss statistics but also to make the word violence visible.

Contents

- INTRODUCTION..... 1
- CHAPTER 1 2
 - NATURAL DEATH?..... 2
 - WHY SHOULD WE CARE? 4
 - MODERN DAY SLAVERY?..... 4
- CHAPTER 2 6
 - ART AND HUMAN RIGHTS..... 6
 - METHODOLOGY 10
- CHAPTER 3 12
 - LOST SOULS IN THE DUNE..... 12
 - TWO SIDES OF THE COIN 12
 - TAHMINA 13
 - THE TREE OF EMPATHY..... 15
- CONCLUSION..... 18
- BIBLIOGRAPHY 20

INTRODUCTION

Tahmina woke up before dawn to prepare breakfast after enduring another night of torment with a bruised body and a shattered spirit. Ignoring the urge to scream, shivering Tahmina remained silent to avoid disturbing her sleeping employer. Her streaming tears were begging for an end to this violence. Tay was fiercely pleading with an activist group for assistance the day before her body was discovered in her employer's parking lot. Their stories are not unique; they echo the experiences of millions in the Middle East.

“Our struggle for social services, i.e., for better working conditions, will always be frustrated if we do not first establish that our work is work.”¹- Silvia Federici

Domestic work is not recognized as employment in Bangladesh. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women constantly face numerous threats to their safety and well-being, which proves Bangladesh is not yet an ideal place for women. Many women from Bangladesh are going to the Middle East to improve their economic condition, but at what cost? Most of them are employed in domestic work, caregiving, and cleaning, and a few in the construction, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors, which are considered low-skilled jobs. The expected monthly salary for domestic workers is 1500–3000 SAR/AED. However, every day they are facing various challenges in their exploitive workplace, including low wages, long working hours with no day off, a lack of necessary healthcare and food, legal protection, and physical and sexual harassment. “There are approximately 6.6 million domestic workers over the age of 15 employed in the Arab States of the Middle East, representing around 8.7 percent of the total number of domestic workers globally”². Saudi Arabia stands in first place with 3.7 million migrant domestic workers (mostly women), followed by the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq.

Through surveys, case studies, and communicating with individuals who were exposed to these conditions firsthand, this text seeks to explore the abusive work environment conditions in the Middle East. This project calls on society to confront the harsh realities faced by countless women all over the world and creates a chance to start conversations.

¹ Federici, S. (1975), *Wages Against Housework*, The Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, page 83

² *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers in the Middle East* (2021) International Labour Organization

CHAPTER 1

NATURAL DEATH?

For any country with a high unemployment rate, it is considered a blessing if someone gets a job outside of the country. If it is a life-changing opportunity, then why are they returning home within a few months or years after joining? And what about those who are returning home in a coffin as a corpse? According to research conducted by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), from 2017 to 2022, a total of 709 female Bangladeshi laborers perished while working as domestic help. As per Tasneem Siddiqui (founding chair of RMMRU), “in 69% cases, the migrant workers' deaths were described as caused by natural factors, including diseases, while 31% were from unnatural causes including accidents and suicide.”³ It is also a matter of wonder what makes them take their own lives. Sufia Begum said, “Unable to bear the torture, I stabbed myself in the neck. Many tried to die by suicide in KSA. Actually, the circumstances forced them to do so.”⁴ “Up to 10,000 migrant workers from Asia are estimated to die each year in the Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait. More than half of the deaths are unexplained, with terms as ‘natural causes’ and ‘cardiac arrest’ often used, according to human rights group.”⁵

Families of dead workers in Middle Eastern countries receive death certificates without explanation, often citing natural death. Without any investigation or autopsy, the families are forced to accept the fact, as they do not have anywhere to go for justice. They lack legal recourse and cannot speak out for the victims. Also, workers must undergo medical tests before obtaining visas. So, if they have any deadly diseases, they should not get the visa. According to statistics provided by BRAC, a large number of female labors who experienced deaths labelled “natural death” were under the age of 40. It is clear to all that these deaths are not natural. Even so, many girls have attempted suicide while staying at the safe house because they could not get over their tragic memories. While describing a suicide attempt in a Riyadh safe house, Khaleda Akhter (Bangladeshi) said, “Nine women were trying to hold down nine wounds. She cut herself on her hands, feet, and torso. The blood was glistening on the floor.”⁶

³ 709 female migrant workers die in five years: study (2023) *The Business Standard*.

⁴ Hasan, S. (2020) 473 women migrant workers dead abroad since 2016, 175 in Saudi Arabia alone, *The Daily Star*

⁵ McQue, K. (2023) UAE to investigate recruitment of Filipina domestic worker who died, *The Guardian*

⁶ Ullah, A. (2018) *Abuse in Saudi Arabia: How Bangladeshi maids escape ‘dream job’*, Middle East Eye



Figure 01: Nodi (a Bangladeshi migrant), returning home in a coffin from Saudi Arabia, Photo: SK Enamul Haq

The ones who got the chance to return home are still fortunate, considering that they are still alive, even though they almost experienced death very closely. But what about the young, beautiful lives that we have lost? They are not even alive to speak for themselves and share their story.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

It is a matter of doing what is right. If raising your voice may make some changes, why would you not? Even though we are not directly affected, it is our moral responsibility to offer empathy and support to those who are in need. We must recognize our shared bond with humanity for a better world- a world where we believe in fairness and justice for everyone.

If we look at the statistics, compared to people moving from south to south, there are very few people moving from south to north. Human rights in the workplace are strictly enforced in the West. However, human rights are not a black-and-white issue where the West is considered the best evidenced by instances of selective application and hypocrisy. For instance, repelling and sometimes containment in closed centres at EU borders for the Ukrainian refugees. Also, human rights violations in Gaza are getting ignored by western powers. This selective and self-interested approach undermines the universality of human rights, although further exploration of this is beyond the scope of this conversation.

“According to the Interior Ministry, there is a consistent crackdown on foreign nationals, with 479,000 being returned to their home country out of 678,000 arrested. During that same period, 14,511 foreign nationals, most of them Ethiopians and Yemenis, where violence has forced many to flee, were arrested for crossing the border irregularly from Yemen into Saudi Arabia.”⁷ With this statement, we can assume the general state of human rights for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. In recent years, many new laws have been introduced due to public pressure. Discussing the issue of violence is vital for advancing human rights, safeguarding labor rights, and influencing policy adjustments to protect the health and well-being of workers. Thus, we can encourage the government to support victims and prevent further instances of violence.

MODERN DAY SLAVERY?

In the 21st century, have we really come out of the concept of slavery? It is particularly evident in Gulf countries. Despite advancements in human rights, this cruel reality still exists somewhere. What was once shielded from public view has now become an open secret, with agencies publicly advertising servants as products on their official platforms. With so many unreported and undocumented cases, this subject is still partially concealed from our attention. While this shiny-looking serving industry works as a source of income for some, for many migrants, this experience is not less than surviving in hell.

⁷ *Ten ways that Saudi Arabia violates human rights* (2024) Amnesty International


FULL NAME		FATHIMA NACHIYAR		Ref:	
Religion	Height	Weight	Position Applied	HOUSE MAID	
Muslim	160 CM	62 – KG	Monthly Salary	BHD. 140	140. دينار
			Contact Period	2 Years	عامين
			Contact No.		
			Passport No	P8771607	
			Personal Information		
Nationality	INDIAN	هندي			
Gender	Female	أنثى			
Date of Birth	23/04/1986				
Age	37				
Place of Birth	TAMILNADU	تاميل نادو			
Marital Status	MARRIED	متزوج			
No. of Children	2	الثنين			
Educational Qualification	-	-			
Languages					
English	Medium	واسطة			
Arabic	Yes	نعم			
Native Language	Yes	نعم			
Previous Employment Abroad					
Period	Position	Country			
2 Years	House Maid / Cook	Kuwait			
Skills & Experience					
Cleaning	Yes	نعم	Knows how to cook Arabic Food	Medium	واسطة
Washing / Laundry	Yes	نعم	Knows how to cook her country Food	Yes	نعم
Ironing	Yes	نعم	Willing to learn	Yes	نعم
Taking care of Children	Yes	نعم	Other General House Work	Yes	نعم
Taking care of elderly	Yes	نعم	Washing	Yes	نعم
Other Skills					
REMARKS					

Figure 02: Details of a domestic worker on an agency's social media page

While collecting data for my research, I came to know about some well-known agencies that hire workers in the Middle East. When I went to their official page on Instagram, their advertisements, posts, and captions caught my eye. They display pictures of the women that they have for sale along with their personal information like religion, age, marital status, height, weight, complexion, price, etc. Nia from Kenya said, "The staff force you to put on a hijab, then they film a video of you,"⁸

Initially, agencies hire workers with loads of fake promises and make them sign contracts. After arrival, the agencies cease their passports. Sometimes the workers have only two choices: either working in an abusive workplace or being illegal in a foreign country. Basically, they were left with no choice. Mina S, an Indonesian domestic worker from Riyadh, stated that her madam (the employer) gave her two choices: either work without a salary or die. There would not have been any issue if it worked like a fair job opportunity. But the situation gets worse when the employers start to think that they own their domestic help and can make them do anything they want. This raises a big question about the human rights of our society. Lack of privacy (cameras in bedrooms and sometimes no bedrooms) is a common fact in so many cases. A survivor, Kabita Bagum, said that three men used to regularly rape her. "In interviews with 110 returnees, 86 percent did not receive their full salaries, 61 percent were physically abused, 24 percent were deprived of food, and 14 percent were sexually abused- local migrant rights group Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) found."⁹

⁸ McQue, K. (2023) 'We lie on the floor till someone buys us': shocking allegations of UAE agencies' abuse of domestic workers, *The Guardian*

⁹ Rahman, P. (2019) Abused Bangladeshi domestic workers struggle for justice at home, *Aljazeera*

CHAPTER 2

ART AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Domestic violence often remains invisible, yet art has the potential to bring attention to this issue in a profound way through various mediums such as painting, sculpture, literature, and performances that go beyond just journalism and anthropology. Many artists around the world are advocating for labor rights. The Gulf Labor Artist Coalition is a group of artists who are acknowledging this inhumanity. Gulf Labor writer Dr. Andrew Ross (editor of *The Gulf: High Culture/ Hard Labor*) has questioned the cost of economic development in the Gulf through his writings. Artist Clark Clark curated an exhibition titled “Kafala: Migrant Labor in the Arabian Peninsula,” where artists aimed to spotlight the harsh labor conditions. Artist Molly Crabapple’s drawings and illustrations vividly point out the depth of this plight. Norwegian artist Jonas Bendiksen has also contributed to this exhibition.



Figure 03: Living condition of Migrant labors



Figure 04: Molly Crabapple, Slaves of Happiness Island, 2014



Figure 05: Occupation of Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice by Gulf Labor

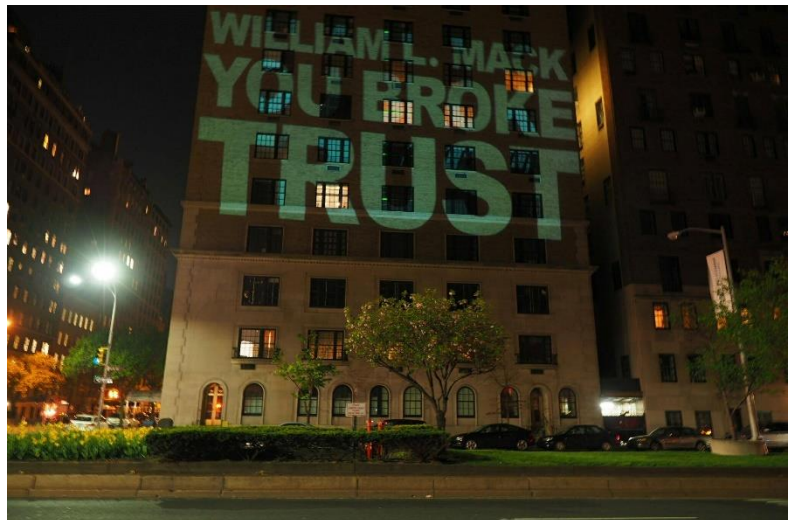


Figure 06: After the Guggenheim Museum ceased talks with Gulf Labor regarding worker protection in Abu Dhabi, G.U.L.F. sent a message to the museum and its trustees on museum walls.

Since my bachelor's, I have been actively working on addressing societal imbalances and issues, especially focusing on women. Exploring my research, I realized how our societal norms and structures often dominate women in this mirandized era of women's empowerment. Particularly, my series of drawings and paintings based on how women's progress is suffocating under the stare of our society's evil eyes have gained significant acclaim. In one of my master's projects, I worked on a visual essay (Are we really independent?) that was based on a true story about a boy who was brutally killed by the ruling political party students' league. On that project, I tried to highlight my visual storytelling quality by portraying the whole story of that horrifying night in a comic book-style illustration technique. Through these projects, gradually, I was inclined towards my final project.



Figure 07: One of my paintings from the series on violence against women



Figure 08: Are we really independent?

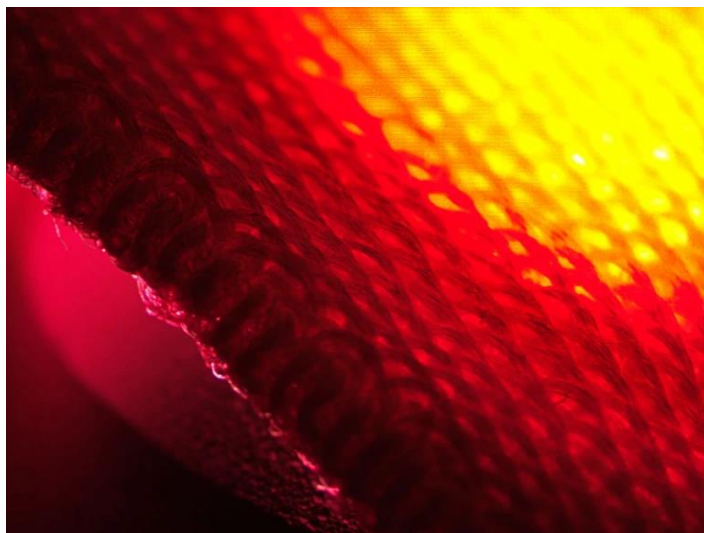


Figure 09: Edge of ribbon Kalpana wore. Photo: Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

Additionally, the photographic series by Bangladeshi photojournalist Shahidul Alam, “Searching for Kalpana Chakma,” has profoundly inspired me. Through simple yet intricately detailed photographs capturing Kalpana’s (the missing girl) surroundings, personal effects, and attire, he masterfully conveys her story, allowing viewers to connect with her narrative.

METHODOLOGY

One of the reasons that impelled my migration from my home country to Europe was a safe environment. In my migration experience here, my workplace has consistently provided a sense of safety where I feel respected. Nevertheless, in my mind, I was always concerned about those women who are trapped in the thorns of abusive workplaces, particularly in Middle Eastern countries. I have heard stories from a male (Filipino) colleague in Norway about his experience working as a chef in Saudi Arabia. Once, he mentioned that one of them had to stay awake all the time while the others slept because there was no lock on the door. They have heard stories about men getting raped by men. It made me wonder how much harder it must be for women. The common phenomenon of women returning to Bangladesh from such regions was a natural aspect of my awareness until I went deeper into this disturbing reality.

Initially, I started my research by collecting data from different articles, newspapers, social media, online websites, and books and creating a mind map on the wall of my studio. To go further with my project, the most essential and challenging part was to immerse myself in those unique environments, connect with people who hold these painful stories, and develop an intimate understanding and connection. I got a chance to interact with a former domestic worker who went to Saudi Arabia in 2016 and returned home after struggling for months. At first, she refused to talk to me, as it is not easy to open the darkest chapters of our lives in front of a stranger. Fortunately, I managed to interact with one of her relatives. Interviewing the survivor's sister was my first step to unveiling the puzzle. Later, I interviewed the survivor. These interviews were also very challenging for me, as the only way to reach them was through direct phone calls, hindered by a notably poor network.



Figure 10: Mind map on my studio wall

My final artistic plan is to create a powerful and expressive body of work, an installation, that inspires the audience to think about this rising issue of violence against women workers in the Middle East. By immersing myself in diverse communities and capturing the stories of one individual, I aim to shed light on their struggles, fears, and consciences. I will be using some personal objects of the victim so that the viewers can connect with her. As an artist, I believe in the power of visual storytelling to provoke thought, and only art can fight against all the odds without causing any violence.

CHAPTER 3

LOST SOULS IN THE DUNE

In the final display, I want to present an installation. An installation that invites viewers to engage with the victims. There will be three elements to my installation, which are a video, a monument, and the hand-painted fabric of a direct victim. Using reality and interactive technology, visitors will explore the survivors' physical and emotional dimensions.

TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

Social media is a place where we can get the maximum exposure. When discussing the experiences of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East on social media, two opposing viewpoints are presented. On one side, agencies use social media to show a positive image of domestic work, making it seem like a good opportunity. They often post videos of workers describing their qualities, making it look like everything is fine. But on the other hand, many workers share their stories online, showing the real challenges they face and seeking help from the government and the ambassador.

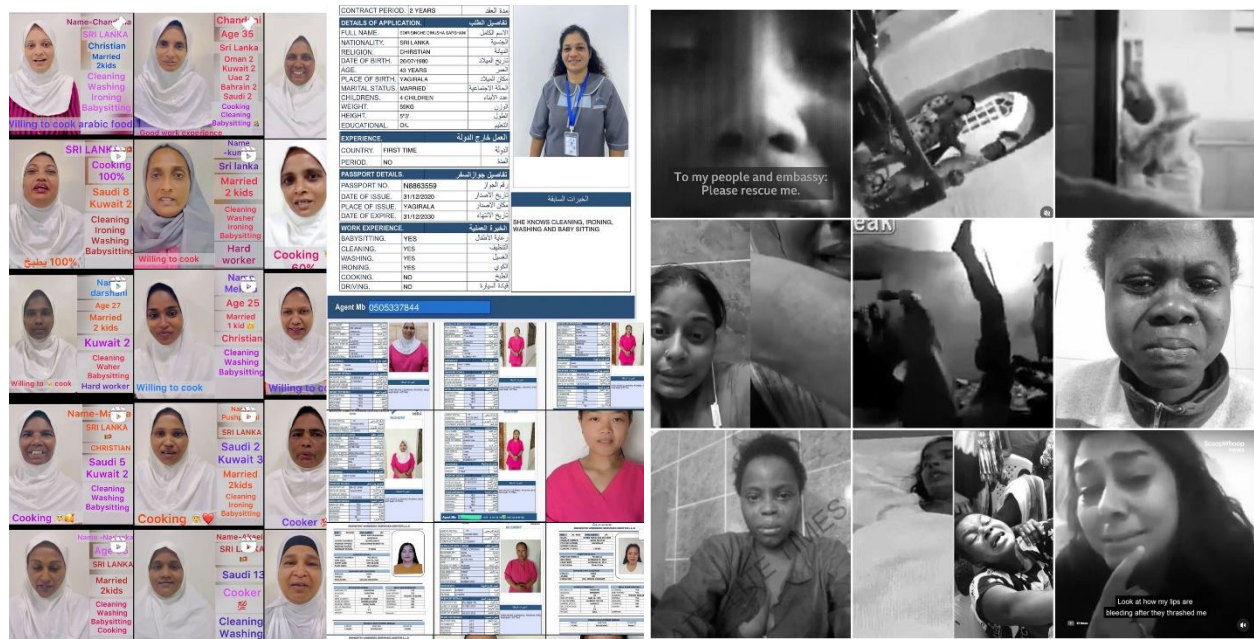


Figure 11: Two different sides of social media (picture collected from social media)

The first element of my project will be a video. Here, I will highlight how agencies make domestic work look appealing to potential clients on social media, but in reality, many workers suffer from exploitation and even die. The video will remind viewers about the harsh realities that workers endure behind the glossy images on social media. I am not saying all of them have the same experience, but it is a matter of concern that if such news comes out, the reality may be more than what we are seeing. Thousands of stories get buried every day. Though most of the victims do not have access to social media, some of their stories are being exposed.

TAHMINA

Mst. Tahmina Khatun is one of the survivors who could make it to Bangladesh after being brutally tortured in Saudi Arabia. Tahmina is a widow and mother of two children, residing in Chomollikpara, Kushtia, Bangladesh. Tahmina's story represents the vulnerability and resilience of migrant domestic workers.

She went to Saudi Arabia in 2016 through a local broker, who showed her many fancy dreams of a good life abroad. When she landed there, she was worried about the poor condition of the agency's accommodations and other systems. Sooner, she realized she was trapped when her employers took her passport. She was not allowed to use the phone or even talk to anyone. Two men who lived in the same house sexually assaulted her. Her health rapidly deteriorated as a result of having to labor nonstop for the entire day. She could barely sleep. Even the woman who lived there physically mistreated her. She was admitted to the hospital twice due to physical abuse and a lack of proper food, sleep, and rest. When her employer realized that she might die at any time, they sent her back to her family. Still, she did not get her full salary.



Figure 12: Tahmina's simple life

Amidst the darkness of Tahmina's story, I could see a glimpse of hope when she willingly shared her very personal belonging with me so that I could do something on her behalf. She gave me one of her sarees. As a principal element of my final artwork, I will use one of her traditional clothe, which is called 'saree' in Bangla. It is a long, one-piece fabric. This will serve as both a canvas and a path where the audience can explore her journey.

This monochrome, comic-style representation of her journey with paint and embroidery serves as a testament to her strength and resilience. By combining elements of traditional art with contemporary mediums, I want to create a narrative that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries, inviting viewers to witness Tahmina's story and reflect on the wider impact of violence against those migrants. Here comes a question: am I using her belonging for the sake of my art? The answer is no. Her journey does not deserve an ordinary canvas. For me, this is the best way I can show my respect and bring people closer to the survivors.

THE TREE OF EMPATHY

Firstly, I want to raise the question: why is there no monument or memorial anywhere (not in the Middle East, not even in Bangladesh) for the innocent people who died in the Middle East due to abuse? All the victims had to face a terrible death, but no one remembers them except their family. Do they not deserve a little bit of empathy for what they had to experience?

As the third part of my installation, I propose the creation of a monument to honor the memory of those who sacrificed their lives in pursuit of employment opportunities in the Middle East. The selection of an appropriate location for the monument is the main concern of this proposal. It must be a place that symbolizes both the magnitude of the tragedy and the demand for reminiscence. I think that Saudi Arabia, particularly the airport, perfectly fits all the requirements of this monument site, as it stands as one of the primary destinations, tragically witnessing a considerable number of deaths. By installing the monument at the Saudi Arabian airport, we can take the opportunity to pay homage to the victims while confronting visitors with the stark reality.



Figure 13: The Tree of Empathy (background collected from the internet)

This proposed monument, “The Tree of Empathy,” will take the form of a tree with three branches, which will symbolize growth, resilience, and remembrance. The branches of the tree will be sculpted in a way that will resemble the facial structure of a female, serving as a tribute to the victims. As the material of the monument, I tend to go with highly reflective metal. Thus, the tree will act as a mirror, inviting viewers to confront their own reflection and empathize with the victims. This interactive aspect of the monument will encourage visitors to engage with the artwork on a personal level.

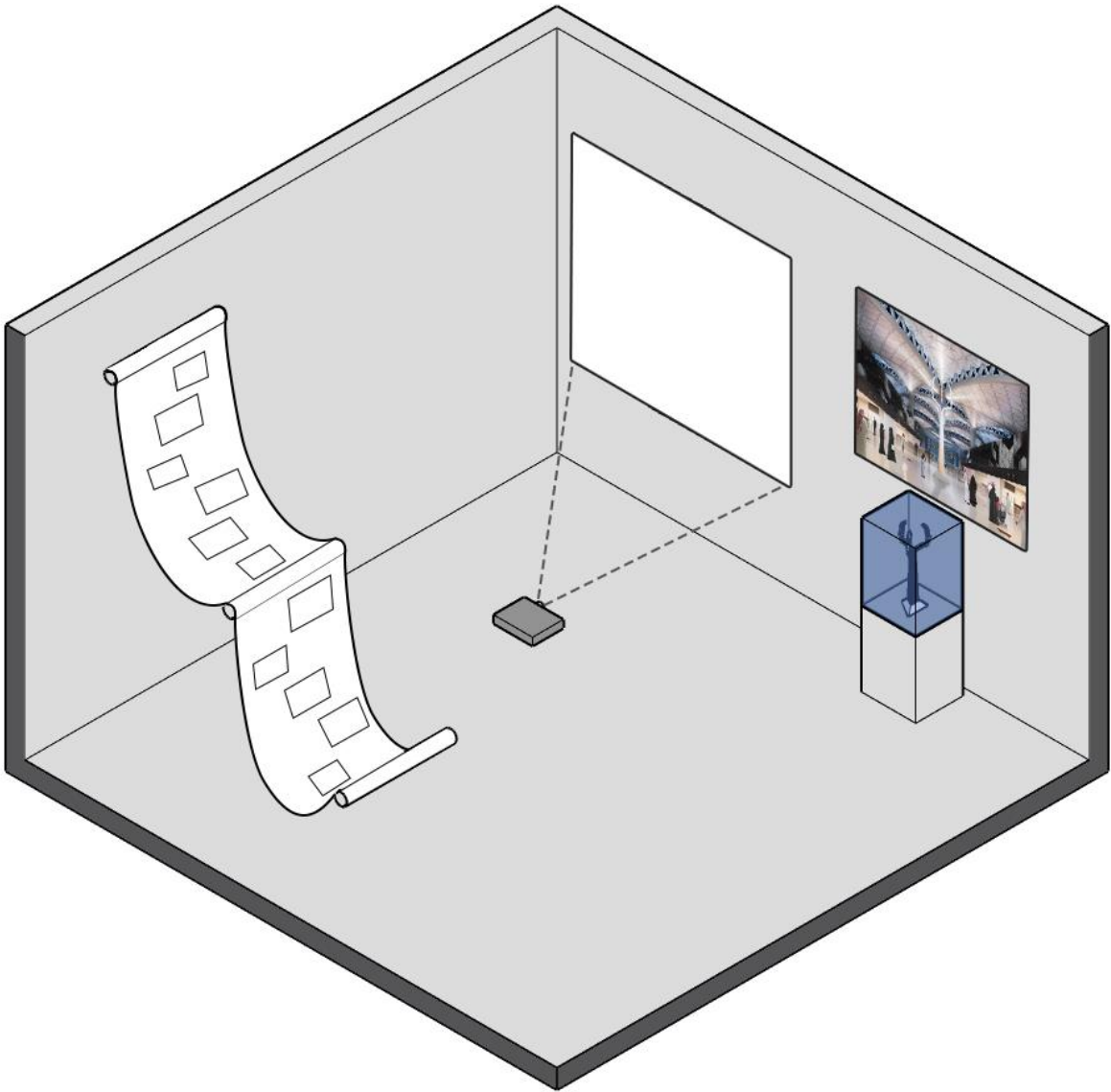


Figure 14: Exploring the idea of the installation

CONCLUSION

The Saudi Arabian kafala system binds the work permits of migrant workers to their employers. Sometimes, workers have been denied the right to return home due to this law. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by Bangladesh with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Bangladesh government took some welfare actions that should have guaranteed the security of migrants. But this is not applicable for the protection of female domestic workers. However, it is excessively expensive and a very lengthy process to take legal action against employers or agencies. Hence, no one bothers to take a strong step against the offenders. Again, according to Saudi Arabian law, the victim must be present to file a case against their employers, but no one feels safe staying there. Sometimes, when they manage to escape and seek help from the police or their recruitment agencies, their actions can get worse. In most cases, agencies sell them again to new employers rather than taking any action, keeping them trapped in a cycle of abuse. Most likely, the police will send them back to their original employers, as the employers often make false accusations, such as robbery charges, against the victims.



I believe, in this matter, the Bangladesh embassy has a vital role to play, but unfortunately, they are unable to protect their people. After all, these victims become too traumatized and unstable to go further and fight. In fact, many of them do not even know about the safe houses around them. This is how their exploitation is increasing day by day, but the Bangladesh government is unable to create any pressure on Middle East countries for this. Besides, being a densely populated country, the Bangladesh government fails to provide enough job opportunities for the people, which sometimes pushes them to search for other opportunities in foreign countries. As female domestic workers are also contributing to the country's economy, it is a question for the government: do they not deserve protection?

We cannot solve this grave issue of violence within a few days. Expecting help from the government would be a foolish decision too. However, there is still some hope. Artists, writers, reporters, and social organizations are constantly working on this. This remaining public pressure marked some positive changes in some of the countries as well. Critics claim that although Saudi Arabia has become more accepting of the arts lately, these developments are merely transactional. According to the new domestic workers law in the UAE in 2022, servants will have a paid day off every week and 12 hours of a daily rest period. Also, Saudi Arabia introduced a new law in 2023 where it is mentioned that employers cannot keep their employees' passports or any other personal belongings. On an important note, in 2019, Qatar formally abolished the terrifying kafala system. But, at the end of the day, all these actions seem impressive only in theory, as we barely see them in practice. Yet, we cannot back up and keep calm as new cases are still coming. Safe houses for migrants represent an important alternative route to shelter and support. Migrants spend months in safe houses in the hope of returning home someday. Despite being a small country, Bangladesh does have some basic labor laws and several labor unions for different sectors. Over the years, I have seen women's labor organizations fighting for their rights and securing their demands. If we can create such unions in Gulf countries, where many Bangladeshis migrate for work, we can take the first step towards a safe work environment in the Middle East.

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