

'They have to be punished': the mothers trapped in the UAE by 'love crimes'

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Single migrant women left destitute by Covid can't leave until they have served sentences for sex outside marriage - but virus restrictions mean prisons won't accept them

When Reyna* took a taxi to Al-Awir prison in Dubai, [United Arab Emirates](#), she was hoping to turn herself in and be admitted as an inmate. The former domestic worker from the Philippines had brought her three-month-old son along with her.

Reyna lost her job during the pandemic; she can no longer pay for their rent or food and wants to return to her homeland. But in order to be permitted to leave the UAE she must first serve a jail sentence for having sex outside marriage, which is illegal under the country's Islamic laws.

A UAE-based official confirmed to the Guardian there are several thousand cases of migrant mothers with children born outside marriage in the country.

Reyna's son - the evidence of her crime - is stateless, since his birth has not been registered. This means that he has no access to healthcare, including vaccinations.

"It's hard here. I have no money, no visa. If I was alone I could go home. But I can't. The problem is the baby," says Reyna, 30.

Her request for imprisonment was denied. To minimise the spread of Covid-19 in UAE jails, the country has reduced the number of those being incarcerated during the pandemic. This has left unmarried migrant mothers stranded in the Gulf country because they are still required to serve a jail sentence - at some point - before they are allowed to leave.

"For unmarried mothers, the authorities will not readily forgive the 'love crime'. The mothers have to be punished," says Barney Almazar, an attorney at Gulf Law who also provides free legal aid to migrant workers.

"[The consulate's] priority is sending people with cancelled visas back home. We are not their priority" - Sarah

Of the UAE's 9.9 million inhabitants, about 70% are low-paid migrant labourers mainly from Asia, working in construction, hospitality, retail, domestic work and as taxi drivers. These sectors have been hit hard by the pandemic, triggering a wave of unemployment among migrants, with thousands deciding to repatriate.

As healthcare professionals are legally required to report any unmarried mothers they treat, such women often decide to give birth at home, without professional medical assistance or pain relief.

When her labour began, Maria*, 32, says she repeatedly ran up and down stairs in her building,

hoping the exertion would speed up her baby's delivery and spare her nine roommates inconvenience. "It only took an hour," she says. "I paid a woman in our community to help me cut the umbilical cord."

Like thousands of other women from the Philippines, Maria came to the UAE to work as a live-in domestic maid, with her visa sponsored by her employer. But he was abusive.

"I wasn't allowed much food, he took my phone, he wasn't nice. When my boss left for work at 6.30am one morning, I put my things in a garbage bag and ran away," she says. "But I was still new to the country. I didn't have friends or relatives here who could help me."

Her child's father, a migrant worker from Pakistan, was a stranger who made contact with her on social media. She was vulnerable and had nowhere else to go. "When I got pregnant, he went away," she says. "He's never met the baby."

Maria's daughter is now two and they are homeless. She turned herself in to the authorities in February and served two months in jail with her child, before being released as the coronavirus situation became more serious. She is waiting to be readmitted to jail.

"We stay in the shopping mall all day, then at night we go to my friends' room to sleep. We sleep on the floor," she says.

The women who were interviewed had moved to the UAE to support their children back home.

"Sometimes they scold us and say: you're not here for work. You are here for making babies" - Maria

Sarah*, 36, left the Philippines a decade ago, when her twins were six months old. They are being cared for by their grandmother. Sarah has not seen them since, and she now has another daughter, Layla*, who was born in Dubai. "I video call my children back home. But sometimes they don't want to talk to me. They don't understand English and Layla doesn't understand our language," she says.

Without birth certificates, children born to unmarried mothers are unable to enrol in school in the UAE. Missing opportunities for education greatly concerns their mothers.

Before the pandemic, when she was still earning money, Sarah sent Layla to an informal school in Dubai that another woman from the Philippines had set up for undocumented children. It cost her 600 dirhams (£125) per month, a sacrifice from a monthly salary of 3,000 dirhams. The bottom bunk bed they share in a dorm room costs 750 dirhams.

The pandemic adds an additional layer of stress for the mothers and their children, who are not eligible for healthcare in the UAE. Rumours of home remedies and measures to prevent Covid infections pass around the migrant communities via social media.

"We drink hot water with salt every day. Then the virus won't come to you," says Sarah. "We are very worried about our kids getting sick. They won't drink the drink."

The mothers say they have received minimal help from the Philippine consulate in Dubai and had been denied appointments to speak to staff about their problems. "Their priority is sending people with cancelled visas back home. We are not their priority," says Sarah.

Paul Raymond P. Cortes, consul general at the Philippine consulate in Dubai says: "The Philippine mission in the UAE, and elsewhere in the world, affirms its strongest commitment to assist its

nationals in distress. With reference to children born out of wedlock, the UAE policy is clear. Notwithstanding, our assistance to these mothers and their children remain committed.”

The UAE government’s National Media Council did not respond to a request for comment.

Approaching the consulate for assistance is also fraught because staff can be aggressive, the mothers say. “Sometimes they scold us and say: you’re not here for work. You are here for making babies,” says Maria. “They’ve made me cry.”

“We all just want to go back, but it is so difficult,” says Sarah. “Yes, we made a mistake, but we’re all human.”

**Names have been changed to protect identities*

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