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Doha: A Tale of Two Cities

Behind anything great, there is always something that makes it possible. Yet, many a time, that something goes unrecognized or unequal. Such is the case with many of the emerging global cities in our modern world. There is an evident split between the wealthy of the city, who reap the benefits of the economy, and the workers, immigrants, and lower class, who work to make it possible but gain little of the benefits. The split can be seen in many characteristics of a city, from spatial location to housing type, living conditions to income, resources to accessibility.

This distinction is particularly apparent in Doha, the capital city of the Middle-Eastern country, Qatar. From a sleepy pearl-fishing town in the 1800s to an industrious, oil-filled metropolitan, Doha has become one of the wealthiest cities in the world, with per capita GDP over \$100,000 in US Dollars. Doha is home to some of the wealthiest individuals in the world, yet it also has one of the biggest problems of inequality and income gap. These issues have especially come to light with the upcoming Soccer World Cup to be held there in 2022.

Doha's inequality is focused in four main areas: the wealth gap, living and working conditions, resources available, and citizenship-based exclusion. The country of Qatar has a population of about 2.5 million, made up of 250,000 native Qataris and 2.2 million immigrants, most of which are workers predominantly from India, Pakistan, Philippines, Nepal, Iran, Egypt, and Sri Lanka. Most workers come to Doha in the dream of a better life and income for them and their family back home. Once they arrive, however, they discover this is far from the reality. Due to the Kafala sponsorship system, workers are not allowed to leave the country without being

first released by their employers. There is also an initial recruitment cost required to be paid by each worker to the employer to get a job. Moreover, they cannot send money back to their families for a certain length of time and can barely spend any money on themselves either.

When people outside of Qatar look at the GDP, it appears to have wealthy, well-off residents. This measurement is skewed because it takes into hand only the income of the native Qatari citizens who accrue all the wealth, and not the less wealthy non-native Qataris. According to the Business Insider, Qatari citizens in Doha receive free electricity, water, and health care, and low-interest loans. “The leader of the Al Thani ruling family, Sheikh Hamad, is worth \$2 billion on his own. Family members are paid in order of their proximity to the Sheikh.” The wealthiest individuals, therefore, are CEOs, royals, or government officials. The New York Times adds “They are eligible for public assistance if they do not have a job, often receive generous pensions and acknowledge they will not take any jobs they do not consider suitable for them.” Yet, Qatari citizens complain that they are losing low-income, service sector jobs to foreigners.

Based on research from staff reporters from the Borgen Magazine, the average Qatari citizen in Doha makes over \$690,000 every year. In contrast, the non-Qataris’ incomes range between \$1,900 to \$6,000 per year. Most expat workers are required to work six days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day (plus an obligatory two to four extra hours weekly), all for under \$50 a week. Even the most fortunate non-native workers get paid only \$1 per hour, far below the USA’s minimum wage. Expatarrivals.com tells us that living in Doha is not cheap either, especially since most goods are imported because the productive economy focuses mainly on oil. Unskilled migrant workers receive the lowest wages – even the lowest of the Qatari citizens’

jobs pay a minimum of 3,000 Riyals per month (\$180 per week) in the areas of agriculture, forestry, fishing, courier, transport, driving, hair, beauty, and fitness. (OnlineQatar.com)

The GINI Index or GINI Coefficient is often used as a gauge of economic inequality, measuring income or wealth distribution among a population. According to the Economist, Doha's GINI is 41.1, indicating that the wealthy receive more than thirteen times the amount of wealth the poor receive. The rich keep getting richer while the poor are locked into a constant state of poverty with limited potential upward movement potential. The Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics of Qatar released a report of the 2012-2013 fiscal year which stated that in Doha, both the average monthly income and average monthly consumption of native Qataris were double that of non-Qataris who are majorly expats and workers.

The significant gap in income affects what and how much people in Doha can afford. This can be seen in the distinct level of education, type of housing, and basic resources available for consumption. Most Doha residents in the upper wealth quintile of the population have reached tertiary education or higher. In contrast, the lowest quintile of Doha's residents has reached largely primary education, if that at all. The majority of schools in Doha are private international schools too expensive for the lower-class families and individuals to afford. Another reason for this educational gap is that most lower-class children and young adults must work every day in order to earn money and so do not have the time to go to any type of school.

Another major area of disparity is in housing, both availability and type. In the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics report, it indicated that 64.7% of upper-class Dohans live in grand villas while 63% of lower-class Dohans lived in small modest houses. This excludes the housing for workers, which cannot even be considered housing but more like tenements. An ABC reporter visited the worker hostels and came back with a saddening report of their living

and working conditions. There are 300 men in only 20 rooms in a multi-story building in which their laundry hangs from lines across the already cramped rooms. The “meals had been cooked on filthy gas burners in a room where the floor was caked in grime and the walls consisted of breeze blocks and crumbling plaster.” (Ms. Burrows, ABC) Amenities surrounding them are equally limited and squalid, such as “roads unsealed and choked with heavy trucks and construction equipment, ... no recreational facilities, ... a rubble-strewn wasteland, ...no proper sewerage system, or electricity, and often there are issues with very basic accommodation.”

With the lack of health and sanitation, members of the lower quintile of the population are more subject and susceptible to disease. According to the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics report, “Generally, the data indicates that nearly half of the Qatari population (48%) is exposed to one of the environmental pollutants (smoke, odor, dust, etc.). This percentage amounts to almost 70% of the lowest standard of living individuals, compared to 47% of the highest standard of living individuals.” The conditions in which lower-class Dohans live and work are quite hazardous to their health and well-being.

The issue of affordable housing has created much conflict between human rights advocates and land developers. There is not much investment value in building affordable housing because land prices are quite high and there will not be as much profit return for the developers as compared to luxury buildings. Because of this conflict of interest, Doha suffers from a huge shortage of accommodations for the many workers who have come to live there. “Al Argan Investment Company chief information officer Ramy Echo said, ‘between now and 2017 about 250,000 homes would need to be built but only 150,000 were planned, leaving a gap of 100,000.’” (ArabianBusiness.com) This poses the question: if there is not and will not be enough affordable housing in Doha, will it turn into a slum? Have parts of it already turned into one?

In sharp contrast, the upper class of Doha receives subsidized housing and free land, allowing them to build up mansions and luxury accommodations. One example that shows the building disparity is the stadiums being built for the World Cup of 2022 – Doha is spending \$260 billion on building the new stadium, public transport, freeways, hotels, apartments, and restaurants. All these new facilities will be equipped with air conditioning, heating, and other such amenities that remain out of reach for the workers who are making it happen. Doha can be called a city with no place for those who built it.

Income disparity also affects what types of resources an individual or family can buy. These resources range from anything like transportation and food to entertainment and clothing, and the differences between resources available help paint two different pictures of Doha.

For workers, life in Doha is minimalistic and drab since the budget they are provided with is controlled and limited. Clothing consists of two pairs of work clothes per year, meaning that they must wash it every day, a situation which is rarely feasible given the lack of cleaning supplies. Food is also minimal, lacking any variety and often omitting necessary nutritional components such as fruits, vegetables, and dairy. There is no air conditioning or heating within residences, and transportation is limited to the buses used for transporting workers to the sites of construction en masse. At the site of work, amid the Middle Eastern heat, there is no cold water for workers, only hot water if even that is available.

Migrant workers, other non-native Qataris, and lower-class Dohans consumption is only a small percentage of the overall consumption in Doha. The Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics report says, “While the lowest quintile accounts for 20% of the population, it only represents 10% of total consumption. The consumption of the third and fourth quintiles is almost equal to their share of the population. On the other hand, the highest quintile has the lion share of

consumption with 34%.” The lowest two quintiles spend between ten to twenty percent of their share of consumption on food and housing and below ten percent on transportation, entertainment or tourism. In contrast, this case is reversed for the upper quintiles of Doha in which residents spend ten to twenty percent on transportation, tourism, and entertainment and less than ten percent on food and housing.

Doha is a city in which the rich can enjoy a multitude of indulgences, from fine dining to art and history, shopping to luxurious accommodations, and many more. Some of the extravagant shopping centers of Doha include The Villaggio Mall, The Gate, and the Souq Waqif, locations built for the tourists and the wealthy. To satiate one’s appetite, one can go to any of the numerous five-star restaurants that offer international cuisine and drinks with a sea-side view. For the tourist or the culturally interested, Doha offers museums such as the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum of Qatar, and the Arab Museum of Modern Art, as well as many art installations from local and traveling artists. Hotels are of opulent design and function, some including the Four Seasons, Sheraton Grand, St. Regis, and the Pearl. Clearly, the differences in lifestyle are apparent from the resources and luxuries available to each.

Lastly, Doha has an environment of exclusion based on whether one is a Qatari citizen or not. Migrants workers travel from their homelands to Qatar without their family in hopes of sending home money and creating a better life for their loved ones back home. Once they come to Doha, however, they experience severe segregation on top of the terrible living and working conditions due to the “family-only” zones all around the city and country. Locals create a very community-like feeling in the evening hours as families and tourists swarm bazaars and local eateries, go shopping at the grocery store or enjoy the music in the streets.

However, blue-collar migrant workers are shunned from the area and kept out, not even allowed to visit the grocery store for necessities. A report from the Independent newspaper states, “Certain public spaces in Doha - markets, shopping malls, town squares - have been designated as “family zones”: in effect, for locals and Westerners only. Armed security guards patrol these areas, escorting those of south Asian appearance firmly towards the exits. Migrants are even banned from living in certain areas. A few years ago, the country’s Central Municipal Council proposed designating Friday - most workers’ only day off - a “family day”, during which non-Qataris would be banned from entering the country’s many popular shopping malls.”

This ban on blue-collar workers goes further than just leisure and shopping – they are banned from living in certain parts of the city as well. Due to the World Cup, migrant worker population in Doha has seen a sharp increase, a situation which concerns and scares many native Qataris. Migrant workers now make up about 94% of the workforce in Doha. In order to restrict where migrants live, “In 2010, the government passed a law that effectively banned blue-collar migrant workers from living in certain parts of the country. Last year, it published further details of these “family zones”, which include virtually all of Doha.” (The Guardian)

The inequality in Doha is just one example in thousands of the difference between the upper- and lower-class. That makes us wonder, what is to blame for this reoccurring disparity? Is inequality an inherent consequence of becoming a global city? What role do globalization and capital flow play in creating this split? Does globalization really help those who live in and move to a city?

Some argue that cities will inevitably be unequal but that that inequality is not a bad thing. Such opinions are held by economist Edward Glaeser, who opines that “cities shouldn’t apologize for their poverty because cities don’t make people poor ... cities attract poor people

with the promise of economic opportunity.” (Chicago Council on Global Affairs) This, however, comes with a qualification that there must be an opportunity for social mobility; otherwise, this principle of economic opportunity does not hold true. Most jobs currently in demand require high levels of qualifications and education which the poor do not have, preventing them from getting those jobs to make more money. Globalization has begun to rely heavily on outsourcing or “brain gain”, in which people from outside the city who are more trained or work for cheaper are recruited and brought in to fill these jobs. It is expensive for the poor to get such education, and groups that have been historically marginalized based on demographics tend to stay that way.

Another argument is that inequality in cities is harmful but not inexorable. This view argues that “there are indeed pernicious forms of inequality in global cities but that they can be overcome by the right sorts of investment and policy.” (Chicago Council on Global Affairs) Two of the main limiters of social mobility are lack of affordable housing and exclusionary policies, both of which we can see in the city of Doha. To fix this problem, there is a need for national financial and policy support which may require putting more financial pressure on the wealthy. This idea, however, scares policymakers because they do not want to drive out the rich who are key funders of the city through taxes.

In Doha, oil-production has generated wealth for the few and hardships for many. It faces the problem of many emerging global cities - the 1% versus the 99%. These issues have become more pronounced given the human rights violations occurring towards the migrant workers for the 2022 World Cup. Because the oil production businesses are owned by royalty and upper-class individuals, the wealth earned from it only exacerbates the income gap. Blue collar workers

in Doha are trapped in their monetary situation because there are minimal policies to aid their financial situation, lack of pension and insurance being some examples.

As is evident by the example of Doha, many emerging and emerged global cities suffer from the issue of inequality which can be attributed to the flow of capital created by globalization. Workers and those in the lower-class continue to receive unequal treatment, opportunities, and resources, slowly affecting the whole city because they are part of what constitutes it. Therefore, any city in the age of globalization is not one but two cities: a city for the rich and a city for the poor.

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