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Modernization and Cultural Variation in Kuwaiti Domestic Work: Insights from Hadar and Bedouin Households

1. Introduction

The transformation of Kuwait from a modest pearling and trading society into a modern petrostate is one of the most striking examples of rapid socio-economic change in the twentieth century (Crystal, 1992). Prior to the discovery of oil in 1938, Kuwait's economy revolved around maritime trade, fishing, and pearling, with seasonal migration patterns and extended kin-based social organization (Casey, 2007). Modernization accelerated after oil exports began in 1946, ushering in unprecedented state revenues that were channeled into large-scale infrastructure projects, free education, public healthcare, and a comprehensive welfare system (Herb, 2014). These reforms reshaped everyday life, moving much of the population from extended-family compounds in older districts to planned suburban neighborhoods, with clear demarcations between public and private spheres (Al-Nakib, 2016).

This modernization also transformed labor markets. As Kuwaiti citizens withdrew from manual and domestic labor, the state facilitated large-scale immigration to meet workforce demands (Shah, 2004). Initially, migrant workers came from nearby Arab states – Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen – to staff the civil service, schools, and hospitals (Fargues, 2006). By the late 1970s and 1980s, as the economy diversified and household incomes rose, the demand for domestic labor increased sharply (ILO, 2017). Recruitment networks expanded to South and Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Indonesia (Kapiszewski, 2006; Moors et al., 2009). Filipina domestic workers became especially prominent in Kuwaiti households, sought for their perceived English proficiency, childcare skills, and adaptability to employer preferences (Ahmad, 2017).

Historically, domestic work in Kuwait was performed by enslaved Africans or local poor women in exchange for food, shelter, and modest pay (Zdanowski, 2011; Alajmi, 2012). This changed with the abolition of slavery in the 1960s and the introduction of





formalized recruitment through private agencies. By the early twenty-first century, domestic work had become a cornerstone of household organization for all Kuwaiti families, enabling female household heads to balance increasing social obligations, employment, and leisure (Shah et al, 2002; Ahmad, 2017). In Kuwaiti society, domestic workers occupy a paradoxical position – simultaneously embedded in the household’s intimate spaces while remaining socially and legally distinct from the family unit (Longva, 1997). The boundaries governing this relationship are shaped by multiple factors: kinship traditions, privacy norms, religious practices, and socio-economic status (Al-Nakib, 2016). Differences between Hadar (urban, historically sedentary merchant-descended) and Bedouin (tribal, historically nomadic) households further complicate this picture (Longva, 2006). While both groups participate in the same national labor market, their household structures, hospitality norms, and spatial arrangements differ in ways that may influence how domestic workers are integrated or segregated within the home (Al-Nakib, 2016; Longva, 2006).

Despite the visibility of domestic work in Kuwaiti daily life, scholarship on the subject has focused predominantly on legal regimes, abuse cases, and the kafala (sponsorship) system, often drawing on NGO reports or international advocacy campaigns (Human Rights Watch, 2010; ILO, 2017; Longva, 1997). This literature has been crucial in documenting vulnerabilities, yet it has tended to treat Kuwaiti employers as a single, homogeneous category (Shah, 2004). Little attention has been paid to how internal cultural divisions – such as those between Hadar and Bedouin households – shape employer practices, expectations, and relationships with workers. Studies have also rarely examined the nuanced social functions that domestic workers perform beyond completing assigned tasks, such as facilitating children’s bilingualism or mediating between household members (Saravanamuttu, 2018).

This omission is significant for two reasons. First, household-level differences in trust, spatial boundaries, and childcare delegation may affect workers’ quality of life, job satisfaction, and long-term retention. Second, without such differentiation, policy recommendations risk being too generic, overlooking the specific cultural logics that shape household behavior. Addressing this gap requires qualitative, fine-grained analysis of employer perspectives, grounded in everyday experiences rather than generalized assumptions. The present





study contributes to filling this gap by providing preliminary qualitative evidence on how Hadar and Bedouin Kuwaiti households employ and interact with Filipina domestic workers. Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews with Kuwaiti housewives – five from Hadar households and three from Bedouin households – conducted in 2025 as part of a larger doctoral project, the research explores five interrelated themes that emerged from thematic analysis:

A. Shifting ethno-national preferences and cultural perceptions: How do Hadar and Bedouin households articulate their reasons for hiring Filipina domestic workers, and how are these shaped by cultural perceptions of nationality, religion, and work ethic?

B. Evolving dynamics of trust and emotional attachment: In what ways do employers develop (or withhold) trust toward domestic workers, and how does emotional attachment manifest in daily interactions?

C. Language and childcare as emerging social capital: How is language proficiency – particularly in English – perceived as a resource for childcare, education, and household management?

D. Household labor expectations and spatial hierarchies: How do households structure domestic workers' duties, movement, and access to spaces within the home?

E. Cultural integration and adaptability: What factors facilitate or hinder the integration of domestic workers into the social life of the household?

By situating these questions within Kuwait's modernization trajectory, the study links macro-level social change to household practices. Both Hadar and Bedouin employers value Filipina domestic workers for their reliability and childcare skills, but differ in their engagement. Hadar households emphasize English proficiency, broader home access, and collaborative relations, while Bedouin households maintain stricter privacy, defined spaces, and formal hierarchies.

These preliminary insights underscore the need for further research with a larger, more diverse sample, integrating the perspectives of domestic workers themselves, and extending the analysis to other nationalities and household types. Such an approach would not only deepen understanding of domestic labor dynamics in Kuwait but also inform more culturally responsive policy interventions,





particularly in relation to the enforcement of Kuwait's Law No. 68/2015 (Kuwait, 2015) on Domestic Workers, which sets formal standards for working hours, rest days, and grievance mechanisms but whose application remains uneven in practice.

2. Related Work

2.1. Kuwait's Economic and Societal Development

Kuwait's historical trajectory from a modest coastal settlement to one of the most affluent and urbanized societies in the Gulf region represents a compelling example of rapid socio-economic transformation. Established as a fishing village under the Bani Khalid clan in 1618, Kuwait's early economy revolved around shipbuilding, pearling, and maritime trade, culminating in the emergence of a thriving merchant class by the 18th century (Slot, 1991). The town's integration into the East India Company's trade networks consolidated its role as a Gulf maritime hub, with the lucrative horse trade and bustling port further cementing its strategic position. Politically, Kuwait evolved from an autonomous sheikhdom to a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, later becoming a British Protectorate until independence in 1961 (Crystal, 1992). These transitions laid the groundwork for a political and institutional framework capable of accommodating rapid modernization in the mid-20th century (Tétreault & Al-Mughni, 1995).

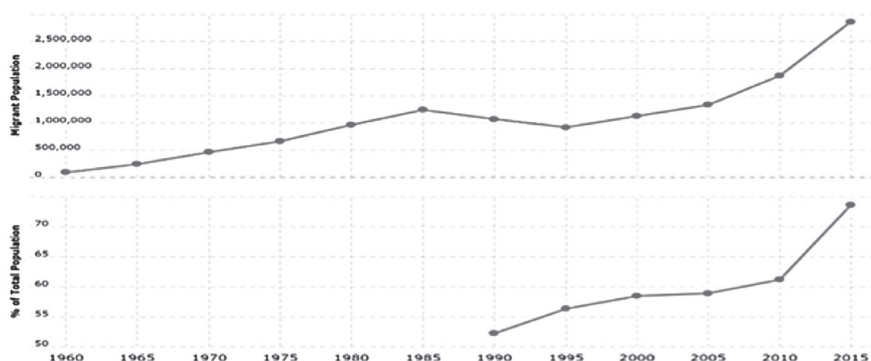
The discovery of oil between 1938 and the early 1950s initiated a developmental "take-off" phase. Oil exports began in 1946, triggering massive revenue inflows and enabling large-scale state-led investments in infrastructure, free education, public healthcare, and a comprehensive welfare system. By the 1970s, Kuwait had become one of the most developed economies in the Middle East, with per capita incomes rivaling those of industrialized countries. Urban development transformed the physical and social landscape, moving much of the population from extended-family compounds in the old quarters to modern suburban neighborhoods. (Al-Nakib, 2016). Economic prosperity was accompanied by social change, including the expansion of women's access to education and healthcare. However, the economic crises of the 1980s, such as the Souk Al-Manakh crash, and the devastation of the Iraqi invasion in 1990 exposed the vulnerabilities of an oil-dependent economy (Crystal, 1992). Post-liberation reconstruction in the 1990s coincided with a resurgence





of conservative Islamic values, a shift that would influence both legislation and everyday social norms (Tétreault & Al-Mughni, 1995). By 2015, Kuwait's population had reached 3.74 million, with 1.2 million citizens and a non-citizen majority, reflecting decades of reliance on foreign labor. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Migrant population growth in Kuwait, 1960–2015, in absolute numbers and as a percentage of total population, reprinted from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2015.



This demographic transformation is closely tied to modernization: as state-led urban expansion and institutional growth accelerated, labor demand outstripped the capacity and willingness of Kuwaiti citizens to fill low-wage and domestic service roles (Shah, 2004).

2.2. Modernization Through Rostow's Stages

Kuwait's socio-economic transformation can be examined through Walt Whitman Rostow's (1960) model of economic development, which outlines five sequential stages: Traditional Society, Preconditions for Take-off, Take-off, Drive to Maturity, and Age of High Mass Consumption. This framework allows for a structured comparison between Kuwait's experience and broader modernization theory. Figure 2 illustrates the alignment between Rostow's stages and Kuwait's historical trajectory, highlighting both parallels and divergences. See Figure 2 below. In the Traditional Society stage, Kuwait's subsistence-based economy was characterized by limited technological innovation, with social organization centered on kinship ties and religious cohesion. Economic activity focused on pearling, fishing, and shipbuilding. The Preconditions for Take-off

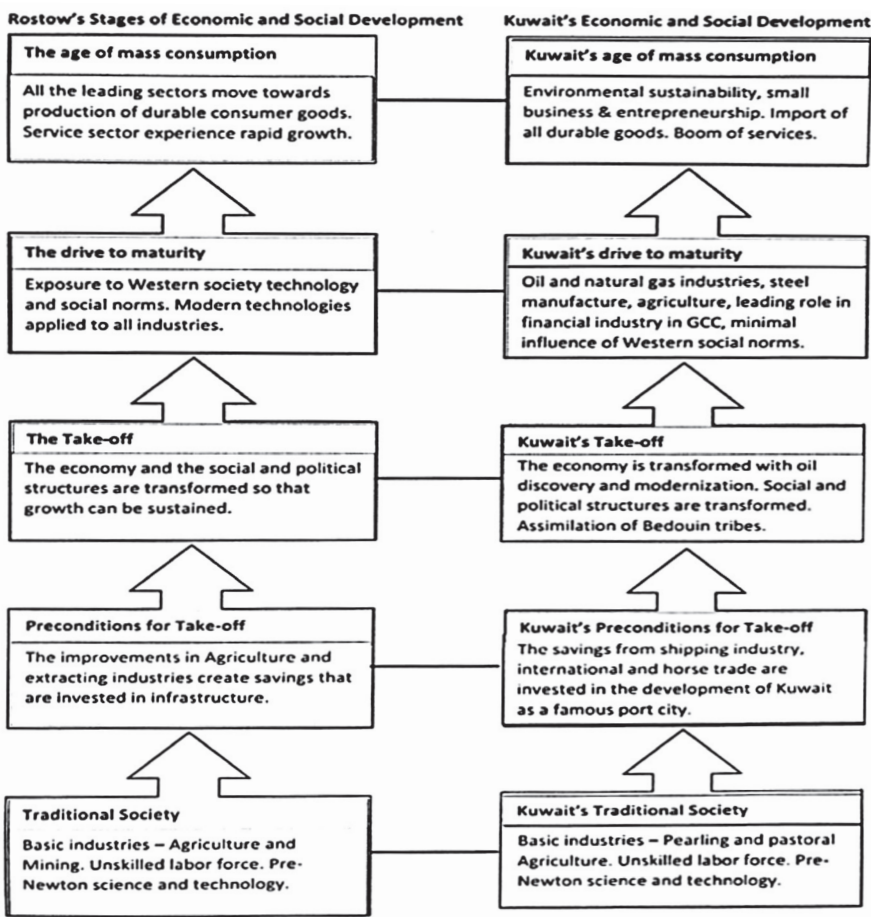




emerged under British protection, when infrastructural improvements, maritime trade security, and the establishment of rudimentary governance structures laid the foundation for rapid development. Kuwait's Take-off period coincided with the post-oil discovery boom from the 1950s to the 1970s, marked by rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and the establishment of modern education and health systems. State oil revenues funded housing, transport, and a welfare system that drastically improved living standards. It is interesting to observe that in the final two stages of Rostow's model, Kuwait's development differs significantly. In the Drive to Maturity stage, Kuwait invested in energy and infrastructure projects, including the Shagaya Renewable Energy Park and the Al Zour Refinery (Oxford Business Group, 2022). However, the country remained dependent on imports for manufactured goods, signaling incomplete maturity according to Rostow's definition. Exposure to Western norms is neither applicable nor consistent with this context, as both Kuwaiti Hadar and Bedouin – while perceiving Western education as more advanced – are generally opposed to Western behavioral patterns and social life, adhering instead to their own culturally rooted values and Islamic traditions particularly after the 1991 Gulf War. Finally, in the Age of High Mass Consumption, economies typically exhibit diversified production and widespread consumer culture. Kuwait exhibits high consumption levels but diverges from this model by maintaining a heavily import-dependent economy (Al-Fulaij, 2022). This divergence highlights the roles of political culture and social conservatism in shaping modernization outcomes in the resource-rich state. (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Rostow's Five Stages of Economic and Social Development & Kuwait's Development and Modernization Processes, adapted by the author



2.3. Urbanization, Social Segmentation, and FFWDs Employment

Urban planning and housing policy have been central to Kuwait's modernization trajectory. The master plan developed in the mid-20th century by British planners introduced concentric ring roads and designated residential areas, which evolved into Kuwait's six governorates. Affluent merchant families, predominantly Hadar, were allocated housing near the city center in governorates like Asima and Hawalli. At the same time, many newly naturalized Bedouin citizens were resettled in peripheral areas such as Jahra and Ahmedi. This urban geography reinforced socio-spatial divisions, institutionalizing

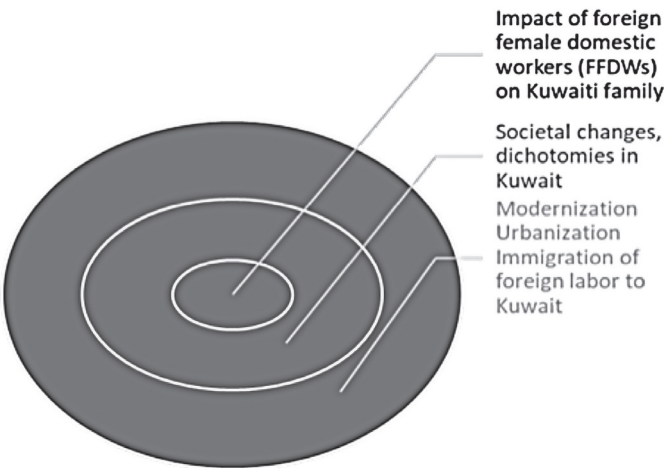


class and tribal distinctions. Traditional extended-family compounds were replaced by nuclear households in large, state-subsidized homes, often exceeding 400 square meters (Al-Nakib 2016: 91–148). The upkeep of such homes increased demand for domestic labor, particularly female live-in workers from South and Southeast Asia (Shah, 2004).

The modernization process also deepened the Hadar–Bedouin divide. Hadar families, historically urban and merchant-based, tended to be more liberal and globally oriented. Bedouin households, with deep tribal roots and more conservative socio-cultural traditions, have historically been concentrated in state-sponsored and security-related employment sectors, reflecting both state policy and communal preferences. Employment patterns among Bedouin men frequently include positions in the army, police, National Guard, and firefighting services, as well as in the oil sector – particularly in roles related to field operations and security (Crystal 1992: 78–82). These occupational concentrations not only provide stable income and social prestige but also reinforce the Bedouin community’s collective identity as protectors of the state and custodians of national security. In contrast to the mercantile and professional occupations more common among Hadar families, Bedouin economic life has been less oriented toward private-sector entrepreneurship and more closely tied to state patronage systems, which offer guaranteed benefits, pensions, and housing allowances. This employment structure, coupled with a firm adherence to tribal codes of honor and Islamic values, often correlates with stricter gender norms, heightened segregation between men and women, and more clearly demarcated household roles. Consequently, Bedouin households may approach the employment of foreign female domestic workers through a lens that prioritizes religious compatibility, modesty, and spatial separation, thereby maintaining traditional boundaries even within the context of a modernizing national economy. These cultural distinctions shape household organization and the roles assigned to domestic workers. The layered relationship among macro-level modernization, mid-level societal transformations, and micro-level household dynamics is illustrated in Figure 3, which presents a zoom-in view of the interconnectedness linking Kuwait’s modernization and immigration processes to the role of FFDWs within the family sphere. (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Zoom-In Pattern of Interconnectedness, created by the author.



At the outermost layer, state-led modernization and urban planning initiatives fundamentally reshaped Kuwait's economy and demographic structure. The influx of foreign labor, integral to these modernization efforts, not only met the growing demand for infrastructure and service sector workers but also introduced new socio-cultural dynamics into Kuwaiti society. The middle layer reflects the resulting societal changes and dichotomies, such as the deepening Hadar–Bedouin divide, the stratification between nationals and expatriates, and evolving gender roles. These divisions shaped access to resources, exposure to global cultural influences, and preferences in household labor recruitment. At the innermost layer, these structural and cultural shifts converge in the everyday realities of Kuwaiti households, particularly through the employment of foreign female domestic workers (FFDWs). The presence of FFDWs has transformed domestic organization, parenting practices, and children's exposure to alternative worldviews. The figure underscores that the impact of FFDWs on family life is not an isolated phenomenon but the direct outcome of multi-scalar processes linking national development strategies, societal restructuring, and intimate household relations. In this way, the concentric layers capture the structural embeddedness of domestic labor in Kuwait's modernization trajectory and the reciprocal influence between macro-level policies and micro-level family life.

The contemporary domestic labor market in Kuwait is sustained through the kafala (sponsorship) system, under which a worker's legal residency is tied to their employer. This system limits worker



mobility and, in practice, often results in passport confiscation and limited labor protections (Shah et al., 2002; Longva, 1997). Despite contractual provisions for rest days and regulated duties, many domestic workers report long hours, restrictions on movement, and varying degrees of integration into the family (Ivanova, 2020).

Domestic workers in Kuwait occupy a paradoxical social position: deeply embedded in the household's intimate spaces while remaining socially, legally, and symbolically distinct from the family unit. Household hierarchies are reinforced through spatial arrangements—such as separate living quarters for workers – and through cultural boundaries shaped by kinship traditions, privacy norms, and religious practice.

2.4. Research on Domestic Labor in Kuwait and the GCC

Research on domestic labor in Kuwait and the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region has grown over the past three decades, reflecting both the scale of migrant domestic work and the intensity of public debate about labor rights, cultural integration, and household dynamics. Much of the literature has focused on three interrelated themes: (1) the legal and regulatory environment, particularly the kafala sponsorship system; (2) documented cases of abuse, exploitation, and systemic vulnerability; and (3) macro-level analyses of labor migration flows to the Gulf from South and Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. These studies, often drawing on human rights reports, media coverage, and policy analyses, have played a critical role in highlighting structural inequalities and informing advocacy for reform.

In the Kuwaiti context, early ethnographic work by Longva (1997) and anthropological analyses by Al-Kandari & Crews (2014) examined the social boundaries that structure employer–worker relations, noting the paradoxical position of domestic workers as both integral to household functioning and excluded from full social membership. These findings resonate with similar studies in other GCC states, such as Qatar (Gardner, 2011) and the United Arab Emirates (Mahdavi, 2011), where domestic workers' embeddedness in private homes is coupled with legal and social isolation. However, the Kuwaiti literature remains comparatively limited in exploring intra-national variation – especially differences between Hadar and Bedouin households – and how these differences shape integration, delegation of duties, and spatial access within the home.

A second strand of scholarship has examined the kafala system as a structural determinant of migrant vulnerability. Studies by





Shah (2004), Human Rights Watch (2010), and the International Labour Organization (2017) have documented how the tying of residency status to a single employer can restrict mobility, facilitate exploitation, and hinder access to justice. Law No. 68 of 2015 on Domestic Workers, while groundbreaking in setting statutory rights such as rest days and maximum working hours, has faced challenges in consistent enforcement (Kuwait, 2015). Comparative research across the GCC shows similar patterns: legislative advances often coexist with implementation gaps, leaving protections uneven.

A more minor but significant body of research has moved beyond legalistic and rights-based frameworks to explore the social functions of domestic work. Studies in Bahrain (Karolak, 2010), Saudi Arabia (Al-Jafr, 2022), and the UAE (Said, 2025) have investigated how domestic workers contribute to children's language acquisition, intergenerational care, and even the transmission of global cultural practices. In Kuwait, Ahmad (2017: 160–205) has highlighted how domestic workers can serve as conduits for English-language exposure, cultural adaptation, and even emotional mediation within households. However, these contributions are often absent from dominant policy narratives, which frame domestic work primarily as service provision and labor rights. Within Kuwait, scholarship has paid little systematic attention to how cultural heritage, tribal affiliation, and socio-spatial arrangements influence employer practices. The Hadar–Bedouin distinction – central to understanding Kuwaiti social organization – has rarely been integrated into empirical studies of domestic labor. This omission is important, as Hadar households, with their historically urban and merchant roots, may prioritize different skill sets and relational norms than Bedouin households, which often maintain stronger privacy norms and gender segregation. These cultural distinctions may affect the degree of trust extended to workers, the spatial mobility permitted within the home, and the framing of the employer–worker relationship (as “like family” versus strictly professional).

Finally, there is a noticeable scarcity of qualitative studies incorporating the perspectives of both employers and workers in Kuwait. Much of the available data is either worker-focused – often collected through NGOs and international agencies – or based on employer surveys that lack ethnographic depth. Few have engaged with the everyday negotiations of space, language, and trust that define the lived realities of domestic labor. Moreover, the impact of





domestic workers on the household's cultural capital – including bilingualism, intergenerational care, and social networking – remains an under-researched dimension.

In sum, while the existing literature provides critical insights into the structural and legal dimensions of domestic labor in Kuwait and the GCC, it leaves notable gaps in culturally grounded, comparative household-level analysis. Specifically, there is a need to investigate how internal cultural divisions – particularly the Hadar–Bedouin dichotomy – intersect with modernization processes to shape the recruitment, management, and social positioning of domestic workers. This study directly addresses this gap, situating household practices within Kuwait's broader modernization trajectory and its evolving socio-legal landscape.

2.5. Research Questions and Identified Gap

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses two interrelated research questions:

RQ1: What are the social implications of having female domestic workers from the Philippines on the Kuwaiti family members and households that have recently become urbanized?

Here, “social implications” refers to the effects on moral values, demographic patterns, cultural behaviors, and interpersonal relationships within households. This includes the influence of FFDWs on language acquisition, religious observance, emotional attachment, and gendered divisions of labor.

RQ2: What kind of social benefits and social problems arise from employing Filipino housemaids in Bedouin and Hadar families, and what are the differences and similarities?

By situating these questions within Kuwait's unique modernization trajectory and its complex socio-cultural divisions, this study fills an important gap in the literature. This comparative, culturally specific perspective is essential for understanding the intersection of modernization, migration, and household organization in contemporary Kuwait.

3. Methodology and Analysis

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the socio-cultural dynamics of domestic labor within Kuwaiti households.





The research examines explicitly how modernization and internal cultural divisions between Hadar (urban, merchant-descended) and Bedouin (tribal, historically nomadic) families shape employer–employee relationships with Filipina domestic workers. A qualitative approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of household practices, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics that are often invisible in quantitative datasets (Creswell, 2013).

The study employs a comparative framework to investigate whether household type influences domestic worker integration, spatial arrangements, and interpersonal expectations. While the original research plan envisioned 32 interviews (15 Hadar, 17 Bedouin), the present manuscript reports preliminary findings from 8 completed interviews: 5 Hadar and 3 Bedouin households. These preliminary results offer an initial comparative perspective while acknowledging that the full dataset will provide a more comprehensive picture.

3.2. Study Population and Sampling Frame

The target population includes Kuwaiti households across the six governorates – Al Asimah (Capital), Hawalli, Farwaniya, Mubarak Al-Kabeer, Ahmadi, and Jahra – employing at least one Filipina domestic worker. The focus on Filipina workers is intentional, given their prominence in the sector and the specific stereotypes, skill perceptions, and linguistic abilities ascribed to them in Kuwait (Parreñas, 2015). The sampling strategy integrates three non-probability approaches: Quota Sampling, based on Kuwait's demographic patterns, to ensure proportional representation of Hadar and Bedouin households. For this preliminary phase, the quota was reduced to accommodate eight accessible households while maintaining the distinction between Hadar and Bedouin. Purposive Sampling – Limiting participation to households employing Filipina domestic workers, to maintain cultural and occupational comparability. Snowball Sampling – Leveraging the researcher's social and professional networks to identify initial participants, who then referred additional households. This approach is efficient in accessing private domestic spaces, where trust and rapport are prerequisites for participation (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008).

The current preliminary sample is distributed as follows:

Hadar households ($n = 5$): Located in Al Asimah (2), Hawalli (1), and Mubarak Al-Kabeer

Bedouin households ($n = 3$): Located in Ahmadi (2), Farwaniya (1).





3.3. Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with housewives, who are typically the primary employers and supervisors of domestic workers in Kuwait. The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A1) was designed to explore household decision-making, trust dynamics, and cultural perceptions. The interview guide was informed by both the literature and pilot testing, covering five thematic domains:

- Household composition (e.g., number of residents, family structure).
- Family relationships (including intergenerational roles).
- Domestic worker duties and appearance (scope of work, work hours).
- Attitudes toward domestic workers (trust, autonomy, discipline).
- Perceived influence of domestic workers (language exposure, mediation).

Interviews were conducted in English and lasted 30–60 minutes. In all cases, interviews took place in the participant's home, allowing for contextual observation of household space and interactions. Ethical protocols were followed in accordance with institutional guidelines (see Ethical Considerations).

3.4. Analytical Framework and Tools

The analytical strategy for this study combined content analysis and thematic analysis, enabling the quantification of recurring topics and the interpretation of their more profound sociocultural significance. This dual approach was particularly well-suited to the exploratory nature of the research and the comparative focus on Hadar and Bedouin households. Content analysis provided a systematic framework for identifying the frequency and distribution of concepts. In contrast, thematic analysis facilitated a nuanced exploration of how meanings are constructed and negotiated within different household contexts. Thematic analysis, following the widely recognised six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowed the researcher to move beyond surface-level description toward interpretive depth, linking patterns in the data to broader theoretical concerns such as modernization and social stratification.



Coding Process

Interview transcripts were first read in full to familiarise the researcher with the data and to identify potential points of interest. From this initial review, a codebook was developed (Table 1), incorporating deductive codes derived from the study’s research questions, the modernization theory framework, and the Hadar–Bedouin cultural distinction. Examples included modernization, migration drivers, and the gendered division of labor. Inductive codes emerged organically from the data during open coding. These captured unanticipated issues, culturally specific practices, and locally relevant terms, such as privacy boundaries, the maid-as-mediator, and hospitality rituals. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Codebook of Themes and Definitions. Source: created by the author

Code	Definition	Example (Interview)	Intensity Pattern
Employer expectations	Employer’s stated duties, schedules, or role boundaries for the FFDW.	H01_Qusra: “Only after 2 years, I allowed her to cook and take care about the laundry.”	High (5 across all)
Trust and communication	Expressions of trust, closeness, or clear communication patterns.	H01_Qusra: “I treat her as if she is my oldest daughter...”	High in Hadar, variable in Bedouin
Religious compatibility	Religious alignment or accommodations shaping relations and routines.	B02_Saba: “She arrived wearing hijab... she prayed five times a day...”	Higher in Bedouin
Language and instruction	Language use/learning and explicit instruction on tasks.	H05_Qurana: “We spoke English to her daily...”	Higher in Hadar households with educated employers
Childcare responsibilities	Direct caregiving for children.	H03_Faiha: “She is a nanny for my youngest son...”	High in households with young children
Cleaning/cooking duties	Household maintenance and food preparation.	B01_Faha: “Her work is only for the kitchen...”	High overall
Privacy and spatial arrangements	Room/amenities for the worker; spatial restrictions.	B03_Isa: “She has her own room, her own bathroom...”	Higher in wealthier households
Discipline and obedience	Rules on disciplining children; compliance expectations.	B03_Isa: “My mom wouldn’t give them that right [to discipline us].”	Prominent in Khaifa & Isa
Maid’s nationality preference	Preferences or contrasts among nationalities in hiring.	B02_Saba: “Before, I had four Filipino; now one from Sri Lanka.”	Generally low
Emotional attachment or detachment	Affection or distance between family and FFDW.	B02_Saba: “They were crying when they hugged her...”	Stronger in Saba & Qusra
Cultural differences	Differences in customs, dress codes, or norms.	H02_Zahra: “Uniform is important... this is a Muslim country...”	More explicit in Zahra, Khaifa, Saba



The coding process followed these sequential steps:

Initial Coding – Each transcript underwent line-by-line coding to capture explicit statements and implicit meanings embedded in tone, phrasing, and context.

Code Consolidation – Related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories. For example, instances of the maid's limited authority and discipline of children were merged into the broader category of Authority in Child-Rearing. Similarly, references to the maid's room location and restricted access to family spaces were combined under Spatial Segregation of Domestic Workers.

Theme Development – Categories were examined for overarching patterns within and across household types. This stage involved identifying relationships between codes, noting contrasts between Hadar and Bedouin households, and relating findings to the modernization framework. The themes generated at this stage – such as negotiated authority, architectural expressions of hierarchy, and linguistic mediation—reflected the intersection between cultural traditions and modern domestic arrangements.

Heatmap Analysis – Code frequency and co-occurrence patterns were visualised through heatmaps. These visual tools, adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), enabled the researcher to identify areas of thematic density quickly and to see how themes were distributed across household types. These patterns are presented in Figures 4 and 5, which compare the thematic distributions and co-occurrences between Hadar and Bedouin households. For instance, trust and communication emerged as high-frequency themes in both Hadar and Bedouin cases, whereas emotional attachments were more prevalent in Hadar cases. See Figure 4 and Figure 5 below.

Figure 4. Heatmap – Intensity of Codes Across Interviews, created by the author

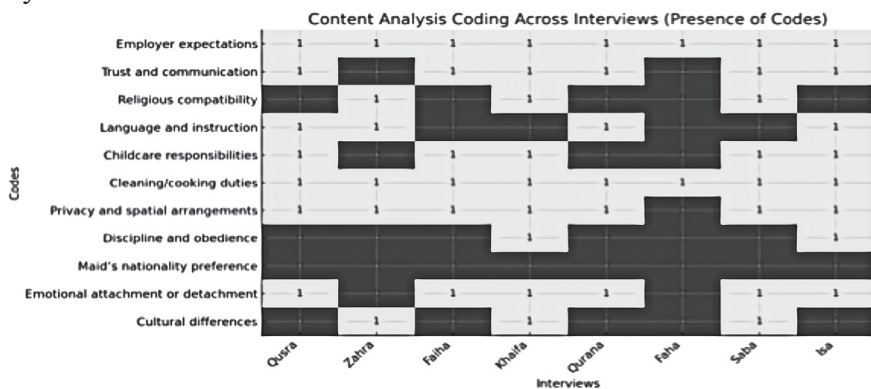
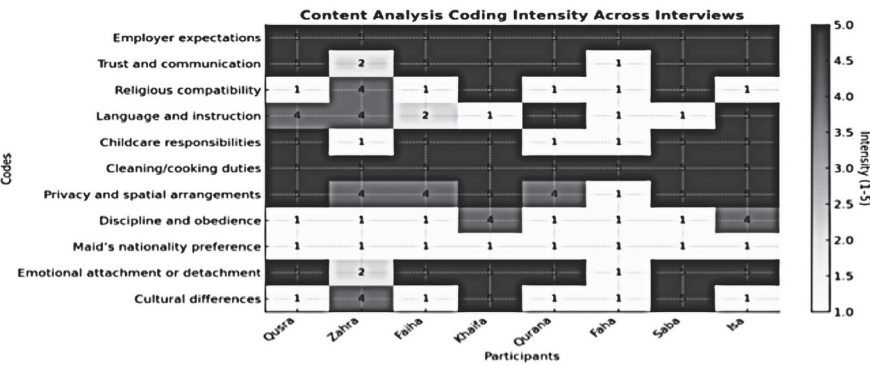


Figure 5. Heatmap – Distribution of Themes by Household Type, created by the author



Software-Assisted Organization – While interpretation remained firmly in the hands of the researcher, NVivo 12 was employed to facilitate code management, ensure consistency in coding application, and enable cross-case comparisons. This combined approach ensured that findings were both empirically grounded and theoretically informed, producing results that are methodologically robust and culturally meaningful. The integration of heatmaps and thematic matrices further strengthens the analysis by offering visual confirmation of emergent patterns and by enhancing transparency for readers and reviewers. As such, this analytical framework serves as the bridge between data collection and the comparative findings presented in Section 4, where the implications of these patterns for understanding modernization and domestic labor in Kuwait are explored in detail.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, for research involving human participants. All interviewees were informed of the study’s aims, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection (see Appendix A2). Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifying details in transcripts were removed or altered. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Ethical protocols included signed informed consent forms, explicit assurances regarding privacy, and secure data handling. Fieldwork for this preliminary phase was conducted between January and July 2025.



3.6. *Limitations of the Methodology*

The most significant limitation is the small preliminary sample size of 8 interviews, which constrains generalisability. However, these interviews offer valuable exploratory insights and provide a methodological template for the remaining fieldwork.

Additional limitations include:

Selection Bias: Reliance on social networks may over-represent households that are more socially connected. Response Bias: Given the sensitivity of domestic labor issues, participants may underreport conflict or negative experiences. Researcher Positionality: The researcher's partial insider status through long-term residence in Kuwait may facilitate access but could also influence interpretations.

4. Results

In the following analysis, key themes are presented alongside their relative prominence, as depicted in Figures 4 and 5. These heatmaps highlight both convergence and divergence in Hadar and Bedouin responses, supporting the qualitative findings. Table 1 serves as a reference framework for interpreting these results.

4.1. *Content Analysis*

The content analysis of eight interviews – five with Hadar (H01-05) and three with Bedouin (B01-03) homemakers – reveals both recurring and context-specific patterns across the 11 thematic codes identified in the updated codebook and heatmap. Employer expectations emerged as a consistent thread across both Hadar and Bedouin households, though the tone, emphasis, and flexibility varied. Among Hadar respondents, expectations often combined efficiency, discretion, and respectful conduct as essential to the smooth running of the home. “I expect her to be on time, to follow instructions, and not to interfere in private matters” (H04_Khaifa). Others stressed the importance of maintaining calm and avoiding confrontation, as one noted, “She should listen and not answer back; this keeps the home calm” (H05_Qurana). In some cases, these expectations evolved, with greater responsibilities entrusted as trust was built. H01_Qusra explained, “Only after 2 years, I allowed her to cook and take care of the laundry,” reflecting a gradual delegation of tasks once reliability was proven.





In contrast, Bedouin households tended to articulate expectations more bluntly and tie them directly to adherence to clearly defined duties. “I told her exactly what she needs to do. If she does that, there is no problem” (B01_Faha). This performance-based approach reflects a more fixed arrangement, where the stability of the relationship rests primarily on the worker’s compliance with her assigned responsibilities rather than on a gradual expansion of trust or duties.

Trust and communication patterns revealed subtle but important differences between Hadar and Bedouin households. In Hadar contexts, trust often developed into a willingness to delegate significant responsibility, sometimes framed in familial terms. H01_Qusra remarked, “I treat her as if she is my oldest daughter,” while H02_Zahra noted, “I can give her the key if I need to go out; she knows how to handle the children.” Open dialogue was valued as essential to maintaining harmony, “If there’s a problem, we talk. I don’t shout” (H01_Qusra), and shared language skills, as in H05_Qurana’s household, where they “spoke English to her daily,” helped facilitate both instructions and personal rapport. In Bedouin households, trust tended to be more conditional and tied closely to performance. B01_Faha explained, “If she finishes her work, she can rest; I don’t want to repeat instructions every day,” underscoring a focus on routine adherence rather than emotional closeness. While appreciation for reliable work was present, the tone reflected a more formal, task-oriented approach where satisfaction was measured primarily by the completion of clearly defined duties. Religious compatibility played a varied role across households. In Hadar contexts, skill, trust, and personality generally outweighed religious affiliation. As one respondent explained, “What matters is trust and behavior, not what she prays” (H01_Qusra). Even in more conservative Hadar homes, Christian workers were accepted if they were respectful and adapted to the household’s norms. Bedouin accounts, while not uniformly prioritizing religion, more often noted shared faith practices when present. B02_Saba recalled, “She arrived wearing hijab... she prayed five times a day,” an alignment that could ease integration by reinforcing familiar routines and values. Still, for many Bedouin employers, as in Hadar households, the decisive factors remained respect for Islamic traditions and the ability to fulfill household duties effectively, rather than strict religious conformity.

Language and the role of domestic workers in children’s education varied considerably, serving as both a practical tool and, in





some cases, a form of social capital. Several Hadar respondents valued the English exposure a Filipina worker could provide, noting its benefits for their children's development. "My daughter improved in English thanks to the maid" (H05_Qurana), one explained, while also recalling, "We spoke English to her daily," a practice that streamlined communication and fostered rapport. Others, however, discouraged educational involvement, citing either lack of qualifications or a desire to maintain parental control: "She doesn't help with homework; I handle that" (H04_Khaifa). In Bedouin households, English proficiency was appreciated primarily for its practical utility in giving instructions. While educational contributions were not a focus, employers still acknowledged that English fluency could streamline workflows and reduce misunderstandings, reflecting its value as a functional rather than aspirational asset. Childcare responsibilities were a central component of the domestic worker's role, particularly in households with younger children. Hadar employers often integrated the worker more fully into daily routines, entrusting tasks such as preparing meals, managing school pickups, and supervising play. As H03_Faiha explained, "She is a nanny for my youngest son," reflecting the direct caregiving role often assigned to her. Some described a collaborative rhythm in which the worker supported the mother's routines, yet discipline remained consistently under the employer's authority. "She can care for them, but discipline is my job" (H05_Qurana).

In Bedouin households, domestic workers also provided childcare but were more likely to be confined to physical care, with strict boundaries around authority. B02_Saba emphasized, "She watches them but does not give orders," underscoring a preference for maintaining the mother's sole authority in behavioral matters. This pattern points to a shared cultural norm across both contexts that, while caregiving may be delegated, moral and disciplinary authority remains firmly with the employer. Cleaning and cooking duties were universally recognized as the non-negotiable core of the employment relationship, forming the foundation of the worker's role across both Hadar and Bedouin households. In Hadar homes, these routines were often varied and described in precise detail: "Every day it's laundry, dusting, and cooking for lunch" (H04_Khaifa). Workers were expected to rotate between cleaning rooms, managing laundry, and preparing meals, with some employers expressing gratitude for their diligence but generally treating these contributions as baseline obligations rather than skilled labor.





In Bedouin households, the scope was often more tightly defined from the outset, with a sharper focus on specific tasks. As B01_Faha explained, “Her work is only for the kitchen,” reflecting a prioritization of food preparation and related cleaning over broader household duties. Readiness for hospitality was also emphasized, with kitchens kept spotless and homes prepared to receive guests at any time. Both Hadar and Bedouin employers, however, valued efficiency and organization, with several noting that Filipina workers “know exactly how to clean... all the detergents and other materials for cleaning,” reinforcing a nationality-based preference tied to perceived competence in household maintenance. Privacy and spatial arrangements were consistent across all eight households, with every interviewee noting that the domestic worker had her own room and private bathroom. In Hadar homes, these provisions were often framed as part of fair treatment and comfort, sometimes including additional amenities. “She has her own space; she can rest when she finishes work” (H05_Qurana) illustrates how such arrangements were presented as considerate gestures, even though the underlying household hierarchies remained intact. In Bedouin households, the same facilities were provided but were more explicitly tied to maintaining physical separation from family areas. “Her room is on the top floor; that’s where the workers stay” (B01_Faha) reflects this deliberate spatial demarcation. Preferences for nationalities were strongly expressed, particularly among Hadar respondents, with Filipinas consistently praised for cleanliness, organization, and familiarity with cleaning materials. “They are cleaner and more polite” (H03_Faiha) was a common refrain, with several employers emphasizing that Filipinas “know exactly how to clean” and understand “which detergent is for what,” requiring minimal training. This perception combined cultural notions of politeness with practical advantages in domestic upkeep.

While Bedouin respondents were generally less vocal about their nationality preferences, recognition of these qualities remained. B02_Saba reflected on her hiring history, “Before, I had four Filipino; now one from Sri Lanka”, and acknowledged that her Filipina worker “understood the cleaning from day one.” Similarly, B03_Isa praised her worker’s “organized way of doing everything, from the kitchen to the laundry.” Across both contexts, English fluency enhanced appeal, making Filipinas a preferred choice for many households, driven by a blend of perceived cultural compatibility and proven technical skills.





Emotional attachment or detachment varied across household cultures and personal chemistry, revealing both expected patterns and notable exceptions. While the overall trend pointed to a stronger tendency toward emotional closeness in Hadar households, the interviews reveal that such bonds could also form in Bedouin contexts when the domestic worker's personality encouraged connection. Several Hadar respondents described their workers as "like family," sharing conversations, gifts, and mutual trust. One explained, "She's like family to me now; we sit together sometimes and talk" (H01_Qusra), while another noted, "I trust her completely—I can leave her with the children and know everything will be fine" (H05_Qurana). Gestures such as bringing gifts from travel (H02_Zahra) or sharing meals reinforced a sense of personal regard alongside professional expectations.

In Bedouin households, the prevailing norm leaned toward formality and clearly bounded roles. B01_Faha described the arrangement in functional terms: "I told her what her work is; if she does it, there is no problem." However, exceptions stood out. B03_Isa recalled a Filipina domestic worker named Lisa who became emotionally significant to the family. Described as "so sweet, like a mother of all of us," Lisa's kindness, attentiveness, and affectionate gestures, such as preparing food in special ways for the children, were remembered fondly years later. Isa reflected, "Maybe she felt the connection towards us because we were the same age as her kids... she was always smiling... very open and friendly." In another Bedouin case, B02_Saba recounted the departure of a long-term worker: "They were crying when they hugged her...", a rare but genuine display of mutual affection. These examples suggest that while Hadar households more routinely integrate emotional rapport into the employment relationship, Bedouin households are not immune to such bonds; their emergence is more situational, shaped by the worker's demeanor and the interpersonal chemistry within the household. Cultural differences surfaced in both Hadar and Bedouin households, often in relation to food preparation, hospitality norms, dress codes, or religious practices. In Hadar homes, adaptation to local customs was typically seen as a gradual process, with employers willing to provide guidance. "At first she didn't know our ways, but now she follows the rules" (H03_Faiha) reflected a common view, while H02_Zahra emphasized propriety: "Uniform is important... this is a Muslim country..." Such instructions aimed to align the





worker's presentation and behavior with local expectations over time.

Bedouin accounts, while equally attentive to cultural propriety, tended to frame these expectations as fixed and non-negotiable from the outset. "We showed her from the beginning what is allowed, and she follows that" (B02_Saba) illustrates a preference for immediate compliance rather than gradual adaptation. Yet in both contexts, acceptance was more likely when the worker demonstrated flexibility and respect for household traditions, underscoring the idea that successful integration depended on mutual accommodation between employer and worker.

4.2. Thematic Analysis

A. Shifting ethno-national preferences and cultural perceptions

The pronounced preference for Filipina domestic workers reflects a convergence of modernization-driven household needs and enduring cultural stereotypes. In the context of Kuwait's post-oil urban transformation, Hadar families' valorization of traits such as cleanliness, organization, and English proficiency aligns with their self-image as modern, internationally oriented households. Bedouin employers, while less vocal about cultural fit, increasingly recognize these same attributes as practical advantages in running an efficient home. These preferences exemplify the intersection of the globalized labor market with entrenched local ethno-national hierarchies, sustaining and reconfiguring social narratives that have been shaped by the twin forces of modernization and the region's historical trajectories of labor migration.

B. Evolving dynamics of trust and emotional attachment

Patterns of trust and emotional closeness reveal the interplay between modernization's shift toward more individualized, nuclear family structures and the persistence of traditional kinship boundaries. Hadar households, more exposed to urban cosmopolitanism, often integrate domestic workers into semi-familial roles, reflecting a softened application of hierarchical norms. In contrast, Bedouin households – rooted in tribal traditions and more rural origins – tend to maintain formal boundaries, though modernization's influence is evident in occasional exceptions where personal rapport overrides cultural scripts. This dynamic underscores how emotional bonds in domestic service are negotiated within, and sometimes across, structural divides.





C. Language and childcare as emerging social capital

English proficiency, concentrated among Filipina workers, functions as a form of social capital in Kuwait's increasingly globalized urban environment. For Hadar families, it supports aspirations for their children's educational advancement and global mobility, consistent with modernization's valorization of formal education and linguistic capital. Bedouin households, while valuing English primarily for practical management, are also participating in this shift as schooling and urban employment demand greater language competency. The coupling of language skills with childcare responsibilities reflects a transformation in domestic work from purely manual labor toward roles that influence children's socialization into a modern, urban milieu.

D. Household labor expectations and spatial hierarchies

The precise delineation of duties and the allocation of private rooms with bathrooms for domestic workers exemplify the coexistence of modern household infrastructure with entrenched social hierarchies. In Kuwait's urbanized housing landscape, these arrangements signal both the capacity to provide amenities (a marker of middle- and upper-class modern living) and the persistence of spatial segregation rooted in older social orders. Hadar households, often in larger urban homes, may rotate workers through varied tasks, while Bedouin households, some with layouts designed for extended kin gatherings, emphasize readiness for hospitality. This reflects how modernization shapes the material setting of domestic work without erasing traditional status boundaries.

E. Cultural integration and adaptability Integration into household life remains mediated by the balance between modern urban values of flexibility and the persistence of cultural conservatism. Hadar employers often permit gradual adaptation, echoing the pluralistic tolerance fostered by urban diversity. Bedouin households, while equally situated in the modern state, tend toward immediate enforcement of established norms, reflecting the durability of tribal codes in the face of rapid modernization. In both contexts, adaptability emerges as a two-way negotiation, shaped by the worker's willingness to learn and the employer's capacity to reconcile tradition with the practical demands of a modern urban household.





5. Conclusion

The integration of foreign female domestic workers into Kuwaiti households reflects the interplay between modernization, urbanization, and enduring cultural hierarchies. Hadar and Bedouin employers share a reliance on this labor but differ in relational styles: Hadar households often combine formal duties with personal rapport, while Bedouin households tend to preserve formal boundaries, relaxing them only when mutual trust and worker personality encourage closer ties.

Strong preferences for Filipina workers – valued for skill, organization, and English proficiency – show how global labor flows are filtered through local ethno-national hierarchies shaped by historical migration patterns. Language skills serve as a form of social capital, especially in childcare, yet domestic labor remains organized within clear spatial and hierarchical boundaries. This study, though based on a limited number of interviews, underscores how modernization in Kuwait has reconfigured rather than replaced traditional household structures. Future research with broader participation will be essential to capture the full complexity of domestic labor relations across the Gulf.





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