

The Abu Dhabi Cleaner

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (August 2025)



Cleaning Staff at Raha International School in Abu Dhabi

There are always droves of them. Hanging around in the corridors and canteen, standing to attention, armed with mops and brooms, waiting for the (frequent) spills at the water dispensers and children accidentally dropping items from their lunch boxes. Silent. Always ready. No job too messy or too revolting.

But it isn't always lunch time, although this extends over several hours—staggered lunch breaks ensuring each your group at the school get time to visit the canteen. What do they do

the rest of the time? They stand guard of course, in the corridors. Silently. Waiting. Although I have caught them talking to each other now and again, sharing a joke even. Shocking.

This is the world of the Abu Dhabi cleaner—in this particular case the school cleaner. To be seen, when required, but not heard. And after serving their purpose, to melt back into the background from whence they came—somewhere in a corridor, I think. The speed at which they appear with mop, and bucket, and cloth, and a smile, illustrates the seriousness with which they perform their duties. They conjure up huge mobile workstations with huge mops when required, the speed amazing, and they disappear just as quickly as they came. Some of these workstations are like small vehicles, on wheels, with all sorts of compartments containing all manner of tools essential for any job.

These workers, like [the Abu Dhabi taxi driver](#) and [restaurant employee](#), endure twelve-hour shifts. However, unlike their less fortunate counterparts, they only work a six-day week. Lucky them—a seventy-two-hour week instead of eighty-four. Shhh, don't tell the taxi drivers—goodness knows what would happen. It could lead to mass demonstrations. Riots even. Then again, nothing would happen. Public protests are illegal in the UAE, as are unions and any other form of collective action at work. I suppose that means private protests might just be okay. Well, not really. Legal, maybe, but not okay.

And that's not all they have over their fellow victims of abuse in the taxi and restaurant trades. They can have, if they so choose, up to two months of holiday, on half pay, with air ticket provided. But the salary itself is "Little, little." So little I cannot get them to reveal what it might be, despite my best endeavours, stopping short of asking bluntly. But I don't want to upset these wonderful ladies, always in good spirits (outwardly anyway), humouring me with what they're comfortable to divulge when I start with my

incessant questions.

They love Fridays because, “Everyone goes home.” They don’t mean themselves; they still have to do their twelve-hour shifts. This incriminates their employer as a double statute breaker: not only are they failing to adhere to the forty-eight-hour working week, but they are also neglecting the recently introduced Friday half-day law, which was implemented with the switch from a Friday-Saturday to a Saturday-Sunday weekend. The cleaners, however, are happy to work at their own pace without the constant interruptions of the school day: children trudging back and forth between lessons, break time mishaps, and the thousand and one other things that occur over the school day.

It means they can finally get things cleaned properly, without their hard work being immediately undone by some mischievous miscreant, often with no respect for what they perceive as *the help*. Pupils are shocked when I make them clean their own mess and preach sermons on how others have enough to do without extra burdens being added by ne’er-do-wells (ok, I don’t use that expression). The default mindset being: *surely it’s their job to clean, so by making an unnecessary mess, and not cleaning up, I’m giving them something to do—keeping them in employment*. It’s a novel idea to them that these people are also human beings, or at least equally important human beings.

They are low-paid, poorly treated, and tasked with cleaning spoiled children’s messes. Yet, when I catch them unawares, they are joyful, smiling, and joking. I use ‘unawares’ because their usual expressions are poker-faced or serious. My current schedule—I have an odd working pattern this year—provides me with an opportunity to see how these ladies interact with each other without others present. They are tired and at times unhappy. We are human after all, but that still puts them a cut above many; most people I know would likely feel downright miserable, hopeless even, in their shoes.

They look forward to their one day off a week.

“What will you do?”

“Sleep!” One shouts back.

“It’s too much free time, you won’t know what to do with yourselves.”

They laugh, not just at my bad joke but at the sheer amusement, I think, that someone from my background is interacting with them and showing an interest in their lives, not just sticking to ‘their own kind’ as is the tendency out here. They all live in shared accommodation provided by the company, six to a room. Transport to and from work, in the form of a minibus, is also provided.

Living in such close quarters, under such working conditions, they have to get on well—otherwise, life would be hell. They always seem supportive of each other and in good spirits, almost as though being anything but positive would bring everybody else down in such tough circumstances.

There’s only one among their small army who doesn’t quite fit the stereotype I paint. I’ll call her Norah. Norah, a very robust lady who dominates the conversation among her colleagues, is, as they are, in good spirits today. Not always, she cheekily admits. She is rather pleased with herself for having a reputation of being formidable and argumentative because nobody wants to share with her and so she has her own room. The others just have to make do.

I guess the intended ratio was four to a room but Norah has upset that arrangement. It would never cross the minds of the employers, though, to give them the privacy of a room each.

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