



## Protecting Migrant Workers' Human Rights in the Middle East

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### I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migrant workers form the foundation of many economies in the Middle East, yet they often face widespread abuse, exploitation, and lack of legal protection. Many laborers arrive under the kafala system, which ties them to employers and leaves them susceptible to mistreatment. This brief examines how migrant workers' rights are systematically violated in the region, explores the roots of these abuses, and highlights why the issue matters on a local and global scale. International and domestic reforms are necessary to ensure fair treatment for millions of workers whose labor sustains the Middle East's economic development.

### II. OVERVIEW

The Middle East is home to millions of migrant workers, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Migrants primarily come from South Asia: countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka and from various African nations, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Ghana, and

Nigeria. Migrants work in demanding fields in the region such as construction, domestic service, and service industries. Despite their great importance to the region's economy, they are denied basic human rights, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and freedom of movement.

A central feature of this exploitation is the kafala system, an almost century old system, which forces migrant workers to be sponsored by an employer to live and work in the country. An employer typically being an extremely wealthy citizen in the region. This system restricts their ability to change jobs, report abuse, or leave the country without employer permission. Human rights organizations have long criticized this arrangement as a form of modern-day slavery.

#### *4. Relevance*

This issue matters to me because it highlights how systemic injustice can persist when vulnerable groups have no voice in shaping their own conditions. As the child of immigrants and more importantly as someone who values justice, I see clear connections between the struggles of migrant workers abroad and issues of fairness and dignity faced by underrepresented groups in the

United States.

On a global scale, migrant worker abuse absolutely undermines human rights and international labor standards. It also damages the reputation of countries that depend on international partnerships and global events. For example, Qatar's preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup drew global criticism for worker deaths and labor exploitation, pushing the world to confront how economies benefit from but fail to protect migrant labor.

### III. HISTORY

#### A. Current Stances

The abuse of migrant workers in the Middle East has deep roots in the economic boom of the 1970s, when oil wealth spurred rapid development throughout the region. The oil boom triggered a sharp rise in migration to the Gulf. For example, between 1975 and 1985 the largest annual growth in foreign labour migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council states occurred (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Labour Migration to the GCC Countries*, Al-Najjar). Over time, this arrangement created a permanent cycle of dependence on cheap labor.

International organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have repeatedly documented widespread violations of

migrant workers' rights. Some reforms have been attempted. Qatar, for instance, introduced changes to the *kafala* system in 2020, allowing workers to change jobs without employer permission and setting a minimum wage. Yet reports show that enforcement remains weak, and workers continue to face retaliation for speaking out.

Governments in the region generally defend the sponsorship system as necessary for economic management and national security, while critics argue that it is fundamentally incompatible with international human rights standards. Civil society groups, trade unions, and NGOs continue to call for abolition of the *kafala* system, stronger labor inspections, and mechanisms for workers to access justice.

### IV. POLICY PROBLEM

#### A. Stakeholders

It is given that the primary stakeholders are women themselves, especially those who are seeking job opportunities or are already placed in mid to high tier jobs. These barriers prevent their career advancement, leaving them in lower-paying jobs and limiting their access to leadership roles. As a result, they are left to be treated poorly. Ideally, these women should have a stake in the policy that evaluates their performance, ensuring that the mechanisms in use are fair and just.

Businesses and corporations are stakeholders as

they stand to benefit from diverse leadership and a more equitable workforce. However, systemic biases in these organisations are what cause (and further exacerbate) gender inequality. Therefore, it is pivotal to sensitise such companies of the importance of inclusivity to enhance workplace morale, performance and reputation.

#### *B. Risks of Indifference*

If governments and employers do not act, wage theft and injuries will continue. Worker debt will increase trafficking risk. Countries and firms will face reputational damage and more project delays and legal disputes. Relations with key origin countries will suffer. The region will lose productivity as workers leave jobs, strike, or disengage.

#### *C. Nonpartisan reasoning*

Protecting workers strengthens the economy because timely pay and safe sites improve retention and productivity. Clear rules and fast remedies support the rule of law and reduce disputes. Fair hiring and mobility protect basic human dignity. Better compliance also supports trade, investment, and global events.

#### *Tried policy*

Many GCC countries use Wage Protection Systems. This is a system that routes pay through banks and allows audits. These systems work best only when enforcement is extremely consistent.

#### **V. POLICY OPTIONS**

##### ***Option 1. Strengthen and stricter enforcement of current rules***

Governments should expand shelters and publish

data on time pay. Authorities can widen the coverage of wage protection systems that are already in place and additionally require regularity of reporting. This option is viable as it uses existing laws and expands on them.

##### ***Option 2. Improve bilateral agreements with origin countries***

GCC countries should come to a general consensus on shared standards for fair recruitment, wage verifying, mobility, protection of passports, and ensurement of worker safety rights. This option creates expectations for employers across the different countries in the region. It requires political agreement.

#### **Recommended path**

Ultimately, the government should combine enforcement with bilateral fixes. First steps should focus on ending the worker paid recruitment fees, verifying monthly wages, protecting the passports of workers, and extending these protections to domestic workers. Simultaneously, Middle East countries should work with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Kenya, and Ethiopia to resolve existing claims.

#### **Implementation plan**

Months 0-3: Develop standard bilingual contracts and launch online chat support service in language known commonly to workers.

Months 3-12: Enforce the ban on workers paid recruitment fees and passport withholdings.

Months 6-8: Publish quarterly pay timeliness data.

Months 12-24: Conduct at least one announced and one unannounced audit each year in sectors with high risk factors.

## Metrics

Track share of workers paid on time each month and share of workers not paid on time each month. Track number of job transfers approved without employer consent. Track complaint counts and regions from which they derive from. Track number of sanctioned recruiters and employed and compare it with the number removed after compliances.

## Costs and funding

Main costs include shelters, inspection teams, wage data systems, and hotlines. National labor ministries can fund these activities through budget allocation.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Migrant workers drive infrastructural and economic growth in the Middle East. To protect them, remove debt at entry, verify wages monthly, and allow safe job changes. With steady enforcement, abuse will fall and trust will rise.

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