MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS AND TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS: PREVENTION, RIGHTS PROTECTION AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS, ESPECIALLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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This submission is made in response to the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children's call for input on migrant domestic workers and trafficking in persons. It is based on research conducted by Amnesty International between 2019 and 2025 with a focus on the rights of migrant domestic workers in Arab States, particularly Lebanon, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the abuse of domestic workers has long been hidden behind closed doors, despite the vital contributions these workers make to national economies, labour markets and family life.

Arab states are home to 6.6 million women and men employed as domestic workers, with Saudi Arabia hosting the largest number of domestic workers in the world as a share of its labour force.[1] The country's official data shows that in the first quarter of 2024, 3.9 million people - all of them foreign nationals - are employed in this sector,[2] representing approximately 28% of the Saudi Arabia's total 13.4 million foreign nationals.[3] In the last two years alone the country hired almost 500,000 new foreign domestic workers,[4] with the government stating that it now hires female domestic workers from 33 countries.[5] Qatar's more than 167,000 domestic workers are also comprised entirely of foreign nationals.[6] Before the financial and economic crisis that started in 2019, Lebanon was home to more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers, mostly women, however according to the International Organization of Migration this had dropped to approximately 177,000 in 2024.[7]

The domestic work sector is highly racialized, with the overwhelming majority – if not all – domestic workers in Lebanon, Qatar and Saudi Arabia hailing from South and Southeast Asia and, increasingly, Africa. They face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, race, citizenship, national origin, socio-economic and migration status when they travel to the Gulf for employment.

This is only compounded by the kafala sponsorship system - a collection of laws, decrees, ministerial decisions, regulations and customary practices. Under this system, an employer or sponsor is responsible for a foreign worker's legal status, including their visa and work permit throughout their stay in the hosting country.

Despite some recent limited reforms and efforts to rebrand the system across the region, a worker's legal right to remain in the country is still tied to their employer, limiting their ability to change jobs or leave the country without the sponsor's consent. This creates power imbalances and often leads to the exploitation of migrant workers, restricting their mobility and subjecting them to abusive working conditions that, in many cases, amount to trafficking and forced labour.

As such, since their introduction in the last century, kafala systems have reinforced and institutionalized a racialized labour structure that disproportionately affects migrant workers from Africa and Asia.[8] Domestic workers – and women domestic workers in particular - form one of the lowest stratum in this hierarchy, and enjoy the least protections due to their typical exclusion from national labour laws and the gendered nature of their role in private households.[9]

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[1] ILO, "Making decent work a reality for domestic workers in the Middle East: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention", 2011 (No. 189)", 2021, Pp.2-3, https://www.ilo.org/publications/making-decent-work-reality-domestic-workers-middle-east-progress-and

[2] General Authority for Statistics, "Labor Market Statistics Q1/2024", see Tab 2-2, https://www.stats.gov.sa/documents/20117/1400941/Register-based+Labour+Market+Statistics-+Q1+2024+En_0.xlsx/a8c99460-ec91-afb2-e159-b8c99e069bc4?t=1734052190943

[3] See General Authority for Statistics, "Saudi Census Statistics 2022", breakdown by nationalities, https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/w/الجنسية-2?category=127396&tab=436327

[4] Saudi Gazette, "234000 domestic workers joined Saudi employment market in a year", 7 January 2025, https://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/648417/SAUDI-ARABIA/234000-domestic-workers-joined-Saudi-employment-market-in-a-yearn; and Gulf News, "Saudi Arabia: Rise in overseas house help", 5 April 2024, https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-rise-in-overseas-house-help-1.1712308624160

[5] MHRSD, "More than two million contracts for recruitment of domestic workers from 33 countries through the Musaned platform until 2023", 17 April 2024, https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/media-center/news/170420244

[6] As per Qatar's 2023 Labour Force Sample Survey, available at https://www.npc.qa/en/statistics/Statistical%20Releases/Social/Labor%20Force/Annual_Bulletin_Labour_force_2023_AE.pdf

[7] IOM, "IOM Launches Emergency Appeal to Support 400,000 Displaced in Lebanon", 2 October 2024, https://www.iom.int/news/iom-launches-emergency-appeal-support-400000-displaced-lebanon, These numbers do not appear to account for the thousands of undocumented migrant domestic workers.

[8] For an insight into the history of the sponsorship system across the Gulf, see: Omar Hesham AlShehabi "Policing labour in empire: the modern origins of the Kafala sponsorship system in the Gulf Arab States", 2019, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 48:2, pp. 291-310, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2019.1580183

[9] For further details, see: Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia", (Index Number: MDE 23/9222/2025), 13 May 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/9222/2025/en/.

Yet by taking on essential household tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children, domestic workers not only enable others to participate in the workforce but also play a key role in driving economic productivity themselves, whilst often without receiving the recognition or compensation they deserve. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a key objective of the government's Vision 2030 - a plan to diversify the economy – is aimed at increasing Saudi women's participation in the workforce, something that is enabled significantly by the domestic work provided by racialized migrant women in their households.[10] As one former Kenyan domestic worker in Saudi Arabia told Amnesty International, "Our work is vital…If I do not my work, everything will come to a standstill".[11]

Nonetheless, in Qatar,[12] Saudi Arabia,[13] and Lebanon,[14] Amnesty International's research has found migrant domestic workers facing indicators of forced labour and human trafficking for labour exploitation. The kafala system – which governs labour migration - enables and emboldens employers to exert tight control over workers' freedoms. Many are prevented from changing jobs, leaving the country, or even steeping outside the home. Employers may lock them in, confiscate their passports, cancel their ID documents or threaten to report them as having 'absconded' to the authorities. The lives of many domestic workers are characterized by extreme overwork and a lack of rest - often working excessively long hours, seven days a week, for months or years without a day off. In private homes, they may be subjected to intimidation and threats and in some cases physical and sexual violence at the hands of the families they service. Migrant domestic workers face deeply humiliating verbal abuse and treatment, including being called highly derogatory and dehumanizing names that reflect deeply rooted racism amongst some employers and agents. Some are also deprived of adequate food and decent living conditions. Their isolation further exacerbates their suffering — employers may limit or prevent their access to phones or the internet, cutting them off from the outside world. This lack of communication not only deepens their vulnerability but also prevents them from seeking help, justice or accountability.[15]

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have in the last few years introduced new legislation on domestic workers, as well as a series of reforms to their notoriously abusive kafala sponsorship systems. Nonetheless, the frameworks in place in all three countries remain wholly insufficient to deal with the marginalization and heightened and specific risks of trafficking and forced labour faced by migrant domestic workers.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION – EXCLUSION FROM LABOUR LAWS

In Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Lebanon, domestic workers are excluded from the national labour laws and are instead governed by regulations specific to this category of workers, which offer them fewer protections from forced labour and human trafficking.

[10] Vision 2030, available at: https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf
[11] Interview conducted by an Amnesty International researcher in person in Nairobi, Kenya, 13 March 2024.
[12] Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (Index Number: MDE 22/3175/2020), 20 October 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/3175/2020/en/ Amnesty International interviewed 65 women migrant workers in person during field trips to Qatar in May and November 2019 and communicated remotely with 40 others who were currently or recently employed as domestic workers in Qatar between May 2019 and September 2020. Amnesty International also conducted earlier research on migrant domestic workers in Qatar. See: "'My sleep is my break': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Qatar", (Index Number: MDE 22/004/2014), 23 April 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE22/004/2014/en/
[13] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).. Amnesty International has also conducted research on migrant domestic and care workers in other contexts, including Austria and Hong Kong. For example, see: Amnesty International, "Exploited for profit, failed by governments: Indonesian migrant domestic workers trafficked to Hong Kong, 2013, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA17/029/2013/en/; and Amnesty International, "'We just want some rights!': Migrant domestic care workers denied rights in Austria", 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR13/4326/2021/en/
[14] "'Their House is My Prison': Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon" (Index Number: MDE 18/0022/2019), 23 April 2019, https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/mde18/0022/2019/en/ This research was primarily based 32 in-depth interviews conducted by Amnesty International between June 2018 and January 2019 with migrant women working as domestic workers in Lebanon.
[15] See: "'Their House is My Prison': Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon" (previously cited); and "'Why do you want to rest?', Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (Index Number: MDE 22/3175/2020), 20 October 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/3175/2020/en/; and, Amnesty International, "'My sleep is my break': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Qatar"(previously cited), and; Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).

Saudi Arabia and Qatar

- In October 2023, the government of **Saudi Arabia** issued new 'Regulations for Domestic Workers and the Like' (hereinafter the Regulations), effective from October 2024, aiming to protect the rights of domestic workers and their employers. Updating earlier 2013 regulations, the new Regulations have introduced some safeguards related to working hours, break time, rest hours and weekly day off, and advocate for – though do not mandate - the monthly electronic payment of wages. They also introduce stricter penalties for employers who breach the Regulation's provisions.[16] However, the effectiveness of these measures will depend on the degree of enforcement and how strictly they are respected and implemented by the authorities.[17]
- The new Regulations continue to fall short in some key areas, including failing to mandate paid overtime, allowing employers to negotiate with workers their weekly day off, failing to set a minimum wage and lacking proper enforcement mechanisms.[18]
- Similarly, in 2017, **Qatar** introduced a new Domestic Workers Law.[19] Considering the particular vulnerabilities of domestic workers to abuse and given Qatar's international obligations – the law covering their rights should have gone above and beyond the protections contained in the national Labour Law. However, it did not. Indeed, the Domestic Workers Law leaves crucial provisions vague and therefore weak, thereby allowing the status quo to prevail on key issues, such as excessive working hours and the denial of weekly days off.[20]
- While both Saudi Arabia's new Regulations and Qatar's Domestic Workers Law represent a legislative improvement, neither meet international standards nor offer domestic workers the same level of protection as those other workers covered by their respective labour laws.

Lebanon

- In **Lebanon**, migrant domestic workers also do not enjoy protections afforded to other workers under the labour law, such as a minimum wage, overtime pay, compensation for unfair dismissal, social security and parental leave.
- The main legal document that outlines the rights and obligations of domestic workers and their employers in Lebanon is the unified standard contract, introduced by the Ministry of Labour in 2009. Despite setting out basic rights,[21] the unified standard contract has numerous shortcomings that leave workers at risk of exploitation and other serious abuse, including forced labour and human trafficking. It states that the worker's right to leave the home is subject to the employer's consent. It also allows the employer to terminate a contract if the worker "commits a deliberate mistake, act of negligence, assault or threat, or causes any damage to the interests of the employer or a member of his/her family" but fails to define what constitutes a mistake or act of negligence and does not require any supporting evidence to be presented.

[16] Article 29 of Decision No. 310, 7/9/1434 (15/07/2013). For more details about the previous penalties of the 2019 Domestic Workers Regulations, see MHRSD, "Penalties for employers violating the regulations for domestic workers and those in similar positions", 13 November 2019, https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/knowledge-centre/articles/305

[17] In researching its May 2025 report, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia", Amnesty International wrote to Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development on 21 January 2025 requesting information and data about the situation of domestic workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the laws and policies in place to protect them from human rights abuses in the country, including in relation to recent reforms. At the time of writing, no reply had been received.

[18] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).

[19] See Law No 15 of 2017, available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/MONOGRAPH/105099/128416/F-1438071320/QAT105099%20Eng.pdf

[20] For an overview of key provisions of the Domestic Workers Law, see Pp. 22 – 24 of Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar" (previously cited).

[21] The contract prevents the employer from forcing the worker to work outside the home; restricts the maximum number of working hours to 10 a day, with at least eight continuous hours of rest at night; entitles the worker to a 24-hour weekly rest period, paid sick leave and six days of annual leave; requires the employer to pay the full salary at the end of each month with receipts of payment signed by both parties, to purchase health insurance for the worker and to allow her to receive calls and to cover the cost of one phone call to her parents per month.

REGULATION OF LABOUR MIGRATION – INHERENT RISKS IN THE KAFALA SYSTEM

Although the Kafala sponsorship system differs slightly in its implementation and nuances across Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Lebanon, all three countries share common features that create a system of profound dependence for migrant workers on their employers, often resulting in abuse and exploitation. This includes tight restrictions on the ability of migrant workers to change jobs and leave the country. The dependency created, along with the scale of abuse it facilitates, is even more pronounced in the case of migrant domestic workers in all three countries.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

- The exclusion of domestic workers from the respective labour laws in Qatar and Saudi Arabia means that they have also not benefited to the same extent as other migrant workers from recent reforms to the kafala sponsorship systems, which typically apply to workers covered by the labour laws. As a result, migrant domestic workers continue to face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, including in relation to changing jobs and leaving the country without their employer's permission, further exacerbating their susceptibility to forced labour and human trafficking.
- One particularly concerning aspect of the sponsorship systems in Qatar and Saudi Arabia is the ability of employers to report domestic workers as having 'absconded' from their workplace, thereby putting the workers at risk of arrest and deportation. Similarly, employers can unilaterally cancel their employee's residence permit, again exposing them to potential deportation for a violation of residency laws through no fault of the worker's own.
- Although both countries claim to have increased restrictions on and scrutiny of employers' use of absconding charges, the reality is that neither has abolished the offence, meaning it remains a powerful tool for abusive employers. Amnesty International's research has shown that absconding accusations have long been used by employers in retaliation for workers requesting a job change, obtaining a final exit visa, or bringing a labour complaint against them. It sometimes also enables the employer to avoid paying overdue salaries or benefits.[22]
- In Qatar and Saudi Arabia, government systems tend to default to punishing the migrant worker without investigating whether they are escaping abusive conditions or if the employer's accusations are retaliatory in nature. Although affecting all migrant workers, absconding charges pose particular challenges for domestic workers, who, when fleeing abuse in their private workplaces, often end up perversely as the accused themselves, forced to endure legal battles before they can leave the country.[23]
- In March 2024, the Saudi Arabia government announced a revised system which sees the term "absconding" rebranded, allowing employers to instead file an "absence from work" report against domestic workers. However, this can still place the worker at risk. What the domestic worker is then permitted to do depends on the length of time spent in the country: a domestic worker who has already completed a two-year contract in Saudi Arabia has 60 days to legally change employers or to exit the country. A domestic worker who is under a new contract, however, is not allowed to change employers and must request an exit permit. After 60 days, in both cases, the domestic worker would be deemed to have violated residency laws and may face arrest and deportation if these actions are not taken.[24]
- Overall, while the addition of these 'grace periods' may somewhat ease the impact of absconding charges against migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, the regulations are highly complex and confusing, and they remain more restrictive than those afforded to workers covered by the Labour Law. Because the changes are so new, and the government has not published data nor responded

[22] Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (previously cited); and Amnesty International, "'My sleep is my break': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Qatar" (previously cited); and Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[23] See, for example: Migrant-Rights.org, "Huroob, Runaway, Absconding: Trapping migrants in extreme abuse", 30 September 2020, https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/09/huroob-runaway-absconding-trapping-migrants-in-extreme-abuse/
[24] MHRSD's regulation "Controls to Improve the Contractual Relationship of Domestic Workers and their Equivalents", March 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4d42a57e

to Amnesty International's requests for information, it remains unclear how they are being implemented in practice.[25]

- In Qatar, the government has also introduced several measures to curb the abusive use of absconding charges. According to the government, this includes employers no longer being informed immediately when their employee first submits an application to change jobs,[26] and not being able to accuse their employee of being "absent from work" if the worker has already submitted a complaint against the employer in question.[27] Further, according to the International Labour Organization, the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Interior (responsible for handling absconding charges) have "linked" their electronic systems in an effort to "prevent employers from taking such action after a worker submits their application" to change jobs, and it is now simpler for workers to reactivate their Qatar residence permit if an employer wrongly cancels it.[28]
- However, with the government of Qatar failing to publish any data or respond to Amnesty International's repeated requests on the number of workers facing false absconding charges, the effectiveness of these measures remains in doubt.[29] Representatives of origin country embassies, organizations working on the ground in Qatar, and workers themselves told Amnesty International that absconding charges and ID cancellation by employers continue to be some of the most serious barriers to workers being able to effectively move jobs.[30] Ultimately, the measures introduced to date fail to properly protect workers, with migrant domestic workers remaining at heightened risk.
- It is vital that going forward, governments provide concrete and transparent information on the impacts that the new regulations are having and consequently any further reforms that are needed.

Lebanon

- In September 2020, and following years of consultations, campaigning and advocacy by civil society actors, international human rights organizations, and the ILO, Lebanon's Ministry of Labour adopted a new standard unified contract for migrant domestic workers that included vital safeguards against forced labour.[31]
- Most important, the new contract would have allowed workers to terminate their contract without the consent of their employer. This would have been an important first step toward dismantling the abusive kafala system. Yet, in October 2020, and following a complaint filed by the Syndicate of the Owners of Recruitment Agencies, the State Shura Council, the country's top administrative court, suspended the implementation of the new standard unified contract, delivering a sharp blow to migrant workers' rights.[32] At time of writing it remains suspended.

RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

While migration to the Middle East can offer improved economic prospects for some, this largely remains a lottery for low-paid workers, dependent on the recruitment agent and individual employer, who retains almost unchecked power over their employee's working and living conditions, and legal status.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

- Domestic workers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia often report being misled or deceived during the recruitment process about the terms and conditions of their job, their role, or the nature of their employer and workplace – a key element of human trafficking.

[25] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[26] Ministry of Labour, "What is the procedure to change jobs in Qatar?", available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_754403.pdf
[27] Letter from Qatar's Government Communications Office to Amnesty International, 22 August 2020. On file with Amnesty International.
[28] Letter from Qatar's Government Communications Office to Amnesty International, 22 August 2020. On file with Amnesty International.
[29] Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (previously cited).
[30] Interviews conducted by Amnesty International researchers remotely and in person between June and October 2022. Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (previously cited).
[31] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Workers Rights", 30 October 2020, amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/10/lebanon-blow-to-migrant-domestic-worker-rights
[32] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Workers Rights" (previously cited).

- For example, Amnesty International found that local recruitment agents in Kenya preyed on the marginalization of some women and targeted the most economically vulnerable for recruitment. Many of the women interviewed for the organization's research on Saudi Arabia said that they were approached by local brokers in Kenya - at the behest of recruitment agents - who were aware of their difficult personal circumstances and their desperation for a steady income to support their families. The brokers described the "success stories" of people who had migrated before and gave the women false information about their prospective jobs in Saudi Arabia, including regarding the type of work they would be doing, working hours, rest time and days off, pay and living conditions. Some were also misled about how many family members they would be servicing in the household, or were promised administrative or teaching jobs, only to find out on arrival that they would be hired as domestic workers in private households. Once in Saudi Arabia, employers systematically breached the standard contracts that had promised them reasonable working hours and duties and often subjected them to severe labour exploitation, as well verbal, physical and sexual abuse.[33]
- A few women interviewed by Amnesty International in Saudi Arabia reported that their employers would 'loan' them out to work in different households, or even "sold" them.[34] A BBC investigation in 2019 found foreign domestic workers being bought and sold via social media sites and online marketplaces in the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia.[35]
- Some domestic workers also pay hefty fees to secure their employment abroad, increasing their risk of debt bondage, forced labour and trafficking. For example, while most of the women interviewed for Amnesty International's recent research did not pay recruitment costs to travel to Saudi Arabia, their male domestic worker counterparts were charged around USD 1,000 on average by local recruitment agents in Kenya,[36] despite Saudi Arabian law prohibiting the payment of recruitment fees by migrant workers.[37]

Lebanon:

- Concerns about exploitation and the lack of legal protection for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon led a number of countries of origin, including Ethiopia, Nepal and the Philippines, to impose a ban on their nationals from travelling to work as domestic workers there. The Philippines, for example, issued a deployment ban on Filipina domestic workers in 2006, which is still in in force to date. Officials at the embassy of the Philippines explained to Amnesty International that once a memorandum of understanding on labour cooperation and a joint liability protocol are signed by both governments, the ban will be lifted. Ethiopia, on the other hand, reinforced in 2018 its deployment ban to press the Lebanese government to sign a bilateral labour agreement. The Ethiopian consul general told Amnesty International: "Because we cannot wait forever, we banned our citizens from coming to Lebanon because of the huge human rights violations happening to them." Nepal issued a deployment ban for similar reasons in 2009.[38]
- Nonetheless, workers still come from these countries using indirect routes, with these bans increasing the cost of recruitment as well as the risks for workers who do travel to Lebanon despite their imposition. Diplomats at the Philippines embassy told Amnesty International in 2019 that all the domestic workers who came from the Philippines after the ban was imposed in 2006 had either been smuggled or trafficked into Lebanon.[39] Consequently, these workers are not registered with the embassy. According to the embassy officials, they are only made aware of such cases when Filipino workers go to the embassy to report a problem with their recruiters or employers.[40]

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[33] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[34] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[35] BBC, "Slave markets found on Instagram and other apps", 31 October 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-50228549
[36] Amnesty International also interviewed four men in Kenya in March 2024 who had recently returned from Saudi Arabia where they'd also been employed as live-in domestic workers, primarily family drivers. Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[37] See Article 40 of Saudi Arabia's Labour Law, available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/MONOGRAPH/74429/89847/F2095468703/SAU74429%20Arab.pdf
[38] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Workers Rights" (previously cited). Several countries also have similar bans on the recruitment of domestic workers to Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
[39] Interview by Amnesty International researcher with diplomats at the Philippines embassy, Baabda, 14 January 2019. Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Workers Rights" (previously cited).
[40] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Workers Rights" (previously cited).

ENFORCEMENT OF LABOUR RIGHTS

Shortcomings in the enforcement of laws, resulting in large parts from weak labour inspection regimes, remain at the crux of the failure of governments to protect migrant domestic workers from serious exploitation and forced labour, and to effectively identifying victims of human trafficking early.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

- The ostensive inviolability of the home is oft cited as a barrier to inspection of domestic work. In Qatar, the Ministry of Labour (then the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs (MADSLA)) told Amnesty International that it favours an approach based on awareness raising campaigns, citing Qatar's social structure, customs and traditions as justification.[41] Unlike in other sectors covered by the Labour Law, government inspectors cannot conduct domestic work inspections in the work place - private homes - unless the Public Prosecutor provides written permission, so instead they periodically inspects labour recruitment agencies.[42]

- According to the US State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Person's (TiP) report on Saudi Arabia, despite migrant origin country embassies reporting domestic workers facing wage theft, deprivation of food, forced confinement, excessive working hours, and extreme physical and sexual abuse, the authorities "only sought authorization to enter a home if there was overwhelming evidence of a crime". This, the TiP report notes, "left some unidentified victims at risk of trafficking and without protection". This is particularly concerning given that many domestic workers may not be able to leave their employer's home to file a report of abuse. Indeed, Amnesty International's recent research in Saudi Arabia revealed that all of the former domestic workers interviewed faced severe restrictions on their liberty, freedom of movement and privacy. Almost all said they were confined to their employers' houses, never allowed to leave alone. When they did go outside, they were always with their employers, tasked with looking after the children or cleaning other relatives' households.[43]

  It is essential that governments take innovative approaches to domestic work inspection, including actions that negate the need to enter the home if this is a barrier, and adequately resource, train, and empower such mechanisms. Actions in lieu of home inspections could include among other things, having inspectors request employers, and domestic workers to be interviewed at alternative locations or via remote video interviews; requiring domestic workers to be present when their employer renews their residence permit, and carrying out private interviews there; and requiring employers to maintain and provide, on demand, documentation such as contracts, work schedules and wage slips, and conducting interviews with domestic workers to verify the information.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability for labour abuse, forced labour and trafficking remains a crucial deterrent against serious exploitation, yet none of the countries have in place effective measures to combat these practices and ensure justice and remediation for migrant domestic workers.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

- None of the women who spoke with Amnesty International during its research in either Saudi Arabia or Qatar saw their abusers held to account for their actions.[44]

- Our research found that practices such as passport confiscation and unpaid wages, which are indicative of forced labour, are not automatically investigated in Qatar or Saudi Arabia, even when

[41] Meeting with Domestic Workers Unit officials at Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs (MADLSA, now MOL) in Doha, 26 November 2019. Amnesty International, "'Why do you want to rest? Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", (previously cited).
[42] Qatar Government Communications Office letter to Amnesty International on 22 August 2020 and MADLSA letters to Amnesty International received on 8 October 2020. On file with Amnesty International.
[43] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited).
[44] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited), and; "'Why do you want to rest' Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", 2020 (previously cited).

employers refuse to return passports or pay wages after domestic workers flee abusive households the police or their respective embassies.[45]

- Similarly, criminal offences such as physical and sexual abuse, including cases of rape against migrant domestic workers, are rarely investigated, and those responsible almost never held accountable. Rather, media reports in the region frequently highlight that those violating residency laws, 'absconding', or harbouring 'runaways' will be prosecuted.[46]

- According to regulations in both countries, employers who violate key provisions of the domestic worker legislation should face a fine. For example, according to the Qatar Domestic Workers Law, employers who breach their obligations around working hours, living conditions, weekly rest day, annual leave and end of service benefits will be fined QAR 5,000 (around USD1,375).[47] The fines double if an employer fails to pay the worker on time.[48] Similarly, Saudi Arabia's Regulations for Domestic Workers impose a fine of up to SAR 20,000 (USD5,330), and/or a recruitment ban for employers who breach its regulations. Penalties may be doubled for repeated violations, and additional fines may be imposed if multiple individuals are affected by the violation.[49]

- However, despite repeated requests to both the governments, Amnesty International did not receive, at the time of writing, any information about the number of employers sentenced for violating the laws and regulations or any actions taken against them.[50] Additionally, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the lack of access to the country and engagement with the government make it extremely difficult to effectively investigate and assess the human rights situation in the country. The government's reluctance to engage with human rights organizations or to allow independent scrutiny further complicates efforts to effectively reform the problematic labour system in place or hold accountable those responsible for abuses. This, in turn, hinders meaningful progress in advancing migrant workers' rights in the country.

- Although human trafficking is criminalized in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, neither country publishes official figures on the number of convictions, despite the pervasive nature of this crime, facilitated by the existing labour frameworks. In fact, the only available data comes from the US State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons (TiP) report.

- In Saudi Arabia, trafficking is punishable by up to 15 years in prison and a fine of SAR 1 million (USD 266,000). The US State Department has noted that while there had been an increase in convictions for all trafficking offences in 2023 (141, up from 60 in 2022), only 53 were convicted of labour trafficking, most of whom were sentenced to less than a year in prison. The 2024 TiP report described these as "lenient" penalties that "did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, undercut efforts to hold labor traffickers accountable, weakened deterrence, and increased potential security and safety concerns for victims."[51]

- Qatar's 2011 anti-trafficking law mandates a maximum seven-year prison sentence and a fine of up to QAR 250,000 (USD $68,662), rising to 15 years and a fine of up to QAR 300,000 (USD

[45] Amnesty International, "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia" (previously cited), and; "'Why do you want to rest' Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", 2020 (previously cited).
[46] See for example: Gulf Times, "19 arrested for illegally sheltering workers", 15 February 2023, https://www.gulf-times.com/article/655558/qatar/19-arrested-for-illegally-sheltering-workers; and The Peninsula, "More than 20 runaway domestic workers in Qatar arrested: MoI", 18 June 2023, https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/18/06/2023/more-than-20-runaway-domestic-workers-in-qatar-arrested-moi
[47] Article 21(1) of Law No 15 of 2017, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/MONOGRAPH/105099/128416/F-1438071320/QAT105099%20Eng.pdf
[48] Article 21(2) of Law No 15 of 2017, (previously cited).
[49] Article 29 of the Regulations for Domestic Workers and the Like, Decision number (40676), 17/03/1445H, https://www.uqn.gov.sa/archive?p=23825
[50] "'Why do you want to rest' Ongoing abuse of domestic workers in Qatar", 2020 (previously cited).
As part of its research for "Locked in, left out: the hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia", Amnesty International wrote to Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development on 21 January 2025 requesting information and data but at the time of writing, no reply had been received.
[51] US Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Saudi Arabia

$82,395) if the victim was "a female, a child, an incapable person or a person with disabilities", or if the offence resulted in death, amongst other aggravating factors.[52]

- While these are stringent penalties, Qatar only reported its first conviction for forced labour under the law in 2020.[53] The same year, for the first time the Criminal Court (first instance) convicted and sentenced a Qatari national to a year in prison for violating the Domestic Workers Law by physically abusing three domestic workers and denying their freedom of movement. Another forced labour case filed under the anti-trafficking law was dropped in return for the victims accepting financial compensation, the report states.[54]

- Since then, the government has continued to hand down some convictions for labour trafficking, with sentences of up to five years. However, "officials did not consistently consider labor complaints or violations where trafficking indicators were present as potential trafficking crimes". Rather, it detained and deported potential labour trafficking victims, the US State Department reports, including some fleeing abusive employers or seeking remedy for labour abuses and primarily resolved labour violations by transferring employees to new employers, requiring unpaid wages to be reimbursed and fining or blacklisting companies, without investigating for trafficking crimes.[55]

Lebanon

- Justice for migrant domestic workers and accountability for their abuse and exploitation also remains elusive in **Lebanon**.

- In 2011, Lebanon enacted a national anti-trafficking law, Law No. 164 of 2011 on Punishment for the Crime of Trafficking in Persons. Nonetheless, Lebanon's kafala sponsorship system increases the risk that migrant domestic workers suffer trafficking and therefore is in contradiction with the anti-trafficking law: If a migrant domestic worker is a victim of trafficking and leaves the sponsor without the latter's consent, the domestic worker would be in violation of residency laws, decrees and ministerial decisions that would turn the worker from a victim into an offender.[56]

- The 2024 Tip report notes that while the penalties for human trafficking are sufficiently stringent, it notes with concern that despite the prevalence of domestic servitude in the country, the government of Lebanon has not prosecuted such a case since 2015 and has never brought a conviction against a trafficker for such exploitation under the 2011 anti-trafficking law.[57]

- Lebanon's unified standard contract stipulates that, in case of a dispute between a worker and their employer, the two parties can report the matter to the Ministry of Labour with a view to the ministry aiding them to settle the dispute amicably. If an amicable settlement is not reachable, both parties are entitled to seek redress before the Lebanese courts. However, none of the workers interviewed by Amnesty International in its 2019 research said that neither these provisions in the contract - which is written in Arabic, a language that many did not speak or read - nor any other of its terms and conditions, had been explained to them before they signed it. In 2015 the Ministry of Labour established a hot line for migrant domestic workers to allow them to report cases of mistreatment or other abuse and receive help.

- None of the women interviewed by Amnesty International had reported their employers to the authorities in Lebanon or tried to take them to court. While the reasons varied from one case to another, they included fear of arrest, fear of being unable to obtain new employment and fear of

[52] Article 14 – 15 of law no. 15 of 2011 on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings
[53] Two Pakistani citizens received 10-year prison sentences and fine of 200,000 QAR (USD $54,950) each, and both will be deported upon release. US Department of State, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Qatar, https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-inpersons-report/qatar/
[54] US Department of State, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Qatar.
[55] US Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, Qatar. https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/qatar/
[56] Amnesty International, "'Their House is My Prison': Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon" (previously cited)
[57] US Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, Lebanon, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/lebanon/

being falsely accused of theft, and are generally representative of the barriers facing migrant domestic workers' access to justice in Lebanon.[58]

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENTS

- Bring domestic workers under the protection of all relevant national labour laws.
- Develop effective inspection mechanisms that take account of the unique circumstances and specific marginalization of live-in domestic workers, whilst ensuring that the concept of the inviolability of the private home is not seen as an insurmountable barrier to effective monitoring and accountability.
- Fully dismantle the respective kafala sponsorship systems in policy and practice, including by:
    - removing all requirements imposed on foreign nationals to obtain their current employer's permission before changing jobs or leaving the country;
    - fully decriminalizing 'absconding' and refraining from detaining migrant workers accused of being "absent from work";
    - removing the ability of employers to unilaterally cancel workers' residence permits; and
    - allowing migrant workers to renew their own residence permits.
- Identify, and investigate abusive recruitment agencies, prosecuting and enforcing appropriate penalties on those that violate the law.
- Implement proactive screening measures for trafficking among those who flee their workplace, are reported as being 'absent from work', seek police assistance or are arrested for violating residency laws.
- Ensure all identified victims receive appropriate care, shelter and support to pursue justice and remedy.
- Thoroughly investigate, prosecute and penalize abusive employers who violate national domestic workers legislation with deterrent penalties.

[58] Amnesty International, "'Their House is My Prison': Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon" (Index Number: MDE 18/0022/2019), 23 April 2019, (previously cited).

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Index: **IOR 40/9349/2025**
Publication: **February 2025**
Original language: **English**

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