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His Excellency Eng. Ahmed bin Sulaiman Al-Rajhi
Minister of Human Resources and Social
Development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Riyadh - Al-Mughrazat District
Al Imam Saud ibn Abdul Aziz Branch Rd Exit 9
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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KSA: JOINT LETTER FROM HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS AND TRADE UNIONS ON INTERNATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKER DAY, CALLING FOR CONCRETE STEPS TO MEANINGFULLY PROTECT THEIR RIGHTS

We write to you on International Domestic Workers Day urging you to recognise and honour the vital role played by the 4 million migrant domestic workers, including 1.2 million women, in sustaining economic, family and social life in Saudi Arabia, and helping to deliver Vision 2030. We call on you to take urgent, concrete measures to grant domestic workers equal protection under the labour law, as a first step towards ending their de facto segregation from Saudi society caused by tight restrictions on their freedom of movement and their resultant isolation.

Many of our organizations support these women - they are our sisters, our friends and our neighbours - once they return from Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf. Too often we hear the same stories of extreme overwork and isolation, of degrading living conditions, and of cruel and criminal abuse – verbal, physical, and sexual – at the hands of private employers behind closed doors. Much of this abuse is rooted in negative stereotypes of Black African, South Asian and South-East Asian women. And these are patterns of abuse, not isolated incidents, as Amnesty International's recent research has shown.

We acknowledge the limited reforms your government has made to the kafala sponsorship system as part of Vision 2030. Nonetheless, many of those reforms did not apply to domestic workers owing to their exclusion from Labour Law protections guaranteed for other workers, so in reality most still need their employer's permission to change jobs or leave the country, compounding the multiple human right risks this feminised workforce is routinely exposed to. Ultimately, the kafala system

remains alive and well, directly enabling forced labour, fostering exploitation and perpetuating systemic racism. When women travel to Saudi Arabia for domestic work today, they enter a lottery hoping for the good fortune of being placed in a household where an employer is willing to show them fairness and respect for their work which exceeds what is currently guaranteed in law.

And while the updated Regulations for Domestic Workers in 2023 do introduce higher standards on working hours and conditions, they still fall short of the labour law protections and without being effectively enforced through monitoring and inspection are likely to remain largely meaningless in practice.

Despite previous outreach - including a letter from Amnesty International highlighting these patterns of abuse and requesting information on relevant legal reforms - no official response was received. The absence of a response is concerning and risks undermining public commitments to advancing the rights of women and migrant workers.

16th June 2025 marks 14 years since the adoption of ILO Domestic Workers Convention no. 189. It is long overdue that Saudi Arabia - which hosts one of the largest populations of migrant domestic workers - ratifies and implements this international standard. This failure demonstrates a lack of serious consideration for the exploitation of migrant domestic workers. The ratification and implementation of ILO Violence and Harassment Convention no. 190 is also fundamental to ensure comprehensive protection of domestic worker rights. While governments in migrants' countries of origin must also do more to protect those who migrate and contribute so much to their country through remittances, the Government of Saudi Arabia bears primary responsibility for the treatment of everyone residing in the Kingdom.

As a starting point and at a minimum, domestic workers must be afforded at least equal legal protection to all other workers, by being brought under the purview of the country's labour law. Additionally, the Saudi government must send a strong message that abuse will no longer be tolerated and help to rebalance the power dynamic between domestic workers and their employers by enforcing strict monitoring and inspection measures and holding perpetrators accountable. Finally, we urge your government to fully abolish the kafala system, guaranteeing all migrant workers liberty to change jobs and leave the country without permission.

Without wholesale reforms and robust implementation, abuses against marginalized domestic workers will continue to go unreported and unchecked, and their living and working conditions in Saudi Arabia will remain dire. Domestic workers may not feature prominently in your government's preparations for the 2034 World Cup, but their labour sustains much of the country behind closed doors. They must not be left behind — they deserve dignity, legal protection, and respect.

Yours sincerely,

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Azadi Foundation
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