



Inputs for report on migrants' contributions from a human rights-based approach: a discussion on facilitating and hindering factors

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About Migrant-Rights.Org

Migrant-Rights.org is a research and advocacy organisation that aims to advance the rights of migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. For over 15 years, we have documented and spotlighted emerging migrant rights issues and abuses across the GCC; worked closely with key stakeholders across the ecosystem, supporting them to implement our recommendations in their unique contexts; and nurtured interregional networks of migrant rights organisations, to strengthen solidarity, knowledge sharing and community support.

Migrant-Rights.org works closely with migrant workers, non-governmental organisations, activists, civil society organisations across the region. The information and analysis provided in this report are based on our reporting on the country and our engagement with the above stakeholders.

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Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States comprising Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain are home to over 30 million (comprising between 40% and 90% of the population)¹ labour migrants, mainly from Arab, South and South East Asian countries, and increasingly from East and West African nations.

The majority of migrants are low-income male migrant workers who spend extended periods of time separate from their families, with no recourse for family unification as long as they live and work in the GCC states. The region is also home to millions of female migrants, a large majority of whom are in the domestic work sector.

The contributions of migrant workers is critical to national building, operation of the private sector economy, providing essential services in healthcare and education sectors, as well as care work. Migrant workers are an invaluable and indispensable part of the social and economic fabric of the Gulf states, and the dependency on their labour is permanent. Yet, they are in a perpetual state of temporariness, with their residency tied to often precarious employment under the Kafala system.

The Kafala system is a complex of laws that control migration and the labour market. While some of its facets have been dismantled, the essence of the system that keeps migrants completely dependent on their employers/sponsors remains steadfast. The costs of bringing migrants' families with them is both prohibitively expensive (eg. dependent's [taxes in Saudi](#) and high minimum salary requirement to sponsor them in almost all the GCC states) and legally restricted for migrants in many sectors of work. This separation from loved ones adds further strain and vulnerability to their circumstances.

Almost all of lower-income migrant workers' earnings are sent back to their countries of origin as remittance, funding directly and indirectly the social welfare of those countries. Remittances not only alleviate poverty of the immediate family of the workers, but also improve facilities in the surrounding communities, while bringing in much-needed forex to the developing nations. Yet, origin countries continuously fail their citizens, pre-departure, in transit, at destination and on their return. Often this lack of strong policies results in a re-migration cycle throughout the productive lifespan of the migrant, while they continue to be separated from their families. This separation has a devastating impact on spouses and children left behind.

¹<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/migration-data-western-asia>



Contributions

Some **key contributions of migrants to various aspects of society and economy** include but are not limited to:

Construction: Migrant workers in the Gulf comprise 95% of the total construction workforce in the region² and play a vital role in building infrastructure projects that lay the basis for nearly all cultural events in the region. For example, in Qatar, migrant workers comprised virtually the entire construction workforce responsible for building the infrastructure and stadiums for hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022 final. In 2019, the construction sector employed [44.2%](#) of the total migrant workforce in Qatar,³ yet their contributions are not only unrecognised, but their [grievances are ignored as well](#).⁴ Beyond major events, migrant workers in the Gulf also contribute to the construction of museums, art centres, and religious, and cultural buildings.

Healthcare: The healthcare systems of the Gulf also heavily rely on a migrant workforce, with many serving as doctors, nurses, and care assistants. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants played a crucial role in combating the virus and providing care to the sick, fulfilling roles as both healthcare professionals and cleaners. Notably, a significant majority of nurses in the Gulf are migrants. [In 2017](#), 47% of all nurses in Bahrain's public healthcare sector were migrants⁵, while in Saudi Arabia, 91.9% of physicians and 95.1% of nurses in the private healthcare sector were migrants in 2018.⁶ In Kuwait, 96% of nurses registered with the Ministry of Health were migrants in 2018.⁷

Care work: Outside the official healthcare sector, the Gulf region's care economy relies heavily on over 5 million migrant domestic workers who offer a low-cost alternative to the state's provision of care services for elderly and disabled members of households. In certain Gulf States like Kuwait, the government goes as far as allocating specific [allowances](#) to households with disabled members,

² "The effect of heat stress on productivity and decent work - ILO." 1 Jul. 2019, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_711919/lang--en/index.htm. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

³ "Construction sector emerges as largest job creator in Qatar." 21 Sep. 2020, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/21/09/2020/Construction-sector-emerges-as-largest-job-creator-in-Qatar>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

⁴ "Testimonies of Qatar World Cup workers allege labour abuse and" 16 Jun. 2023, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2023/06/testimonies-of-qatar-world-cup-workers-allege-labour-abuse-and-lack-of-justice/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

⁵ "المحتويات - وزارة الصحة." https://www.moh.gov.bh/Content/Files/Publications/statistics/HS2017/PDF/Chapters/Human%20Resources_MoH%202017.pdf. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

⁶ "23" الكتاب الإحصائي السنوي - وزارة الصحة." Oct. 2019, <https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Ministry/Statistics/book/Documents/book-Statistics.pdf>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

⁷ "Kuwaitis make up four percent of health ministry's nurses | kuwaittimes." 30 Jan. 2018, <https://kuwaittimes.com/kuwaitis-make-four-percent-health-ministrys-nurses>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.



to hire personal migrant domestic workers or drivers to provide care.⁸ Migrant domestic workers are also key drivers of social reproduction, as child caretakers, cooks, and cleaners.

Food & agriculture: The Gulf's local food systems rely almost entirely upon migrants through their agricultural labour. Migrants make up almost the entire agricultural workforce in the Gulf, serving as [farmers](#)⁹, [fishermen](#),¹⁰ and [livestock herders](#).¹¹ They often work under harsh conditions, sometimes outside the purview of labour laws.

Culture: Beyond their economic contributions, migrants, particularly from the Indian subcontinent and the Levant region, have significantly influenced the Gulf states' food, craft, culture, sartorial choices and music. For example, the popular Karak Chai, a sweet, spiced tea originating from India, has become an iconic beverage widely enjoyed across the Gulf. Similarly, Shawarma, originating from the Levant, is a widely popular food consumed by Gulf residents.

Migrants have made significant contributions to the cultural diversity of the Gulf and are an essential part of the region's history. [For example](#), Indian retail merchants and artisans across the Gulf offer a wide array of goods imported from India, including crafted jewellery, furniture, and clothing that are regularly used by the local population. [Furthermore](#), the Gulf's renowned musical and dance traditions, known as Al-Liwa, owe much to the influence of African artists in the region. Liwa performances remain integral to annual festivals across the Gulf and are featured in popular tourist areas in major cities like Dubai.

⁸ "Driver or Servant Allowances - E-Services."

<https://www.pada.gov.kw/en/e-services/medical-requests/lmstndt-lmtlob-lmkhss-lsk-ao-lkhdm/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

⁹ "The Forgotten Farmers of Bahrain - Migrant-Rights.org." 24 Sep. 2019,

<https://www.migrant-rights.org/2019/09/the-forgotten-farmers-of-bahrain/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹⁰ "In Troubled Waters: The Fishing Sector in the GCC - Migrant-Rights.org." 5 Jan.

2020, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/01/in-troubled-waters-the-fishing-sector-in-the-gcc/> Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹¹ "Death and Desolation: Shepherds and Farmworkers in Saudi Arabia - Migrant-Rights.org." 16 May. 2018,

<https://www.migrant-rights.org/2018/05/death-and-desolation-shepherds-and-farmworkers-in-saudi-arabia/> Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.



Obstacles

Key obstacles that hinder the realisation and recognition of migrants' contributions in destination include: [the employer-tied visa \(kafala\) systems](#)¹², which render workers dependent on their employers and on employment for residence; [the lack of social protection](#)¹³; [low wages](#),¹⁴ and the [inability to live with their families](#).¹⁵ All of these issues are particularly severe for migrant women [domestic workers](#).¹⁶

Countries of origin also view return and reintegration in narrow terms, with citizens often undertaking several cycles of migration, repeatedly on temporary or short term contracts. The turnover is not beneficial for origin or destination states. The latter keep losing trained workers, who when they attain a level of affluence, move on to nations with better labour and immigration policies. The lack of commitment to establishing a transnational judicial mechanism by both origin and destination states not only denies migrants justice and due wages, but also deprives origin countries of much-needed remittances.

The narrative on migrants and migration is currently very polarised. In some countries in the region (Bahrain, Kuwait, KSA specifically) the narrative on migrants is increasingly negative and driving policy proposals that further discriminate against them and violate key rights.

It is imperative to raise awareness on the contributions made by migrants, and how migration is crucial for development and evolution of both origin and destination states. To this end, it is important to support both a free media and vibrant civil society –to push back against and counter negative narratives. There are few initiatives, such as Migrant-Rights.Org's youth fellowship Ensaniyat and migrant-led movements in Kuwait and Bahrain, that work at the grassroots level on awareness raising. However, there are risks involved, and these initiatives need support and protection.

¹² "Reform the Kafala System - Migrant-Rights.org." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/campaign/end-the-kafala-system/>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2024.

¹³ "Social protection in the Gulf countries: what rights do migrant" 1 Sep. 2023, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2023/09/social-protection-in-the-gulf-countries-what-rights-do-migrant-workers-have/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹⁴ "Minimum wage, maximum adjustment - Migrant-Rights.org." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/10/minimum-wage-maximum-adjustment/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹⁵ "Minimum Salary Threshold and Qualifications Raised After Hiatus." 4 Feb. 2024, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2024/02/kuwait-resumes-family-visa-applications-minimum-salary-threshold-and-qualifications-raised-after-hiatus/>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2024.

¹⁶ "A Comparison of End-of-Service Benefits For Domestic Workers In" 26 Sep. 2023, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2023/09/a-comparison-of-end-of-service-benefits-for-domestic-workers-in-the-gulf/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For GCC States

1. GCC states must provide universal healthcare to all migrant workers. States have increasingly been pushing for private insurance coverage, paid for by employers, which risks less than desirable coverage.¹⁷
2. Sexual and reproductive healthcare in particular is inadequate.¹⁸ GCC states must revisit laws on children born to single mothers, and the risk of rendering them stateless.
3. Absconding regimes, which are reminiscent of the times of slavery, must be abolished. Absconding (runaway) laws give undue power to the sponsor, and make workers evermore vulnerable, at risk of criminalisation, detention, and deportation.¹⁹ No GCC state has abolished this system.
4. Social welfare schemes, where they exist, like UAE's new unemployment insurance provisions, do not place enough emphasis on employer or state responsibility.²⁰ This must change, along with portability of benefits.
5. Climate change and rising temperatures have the greatest impact on migrant workers. States must not only combat climate change through change in policies and practices, but more immediately ensure workers receive adequate protection.^{21 22}
6. The contributions of women migrants, especially in the domestic work sector, is often invisible due to the nature of their work. It is imperative to include them fully

¹⁷ "Comparison of Health Care Coverage for workers in the GCC." 2 Mar. 2020, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/03/comparison-of-health-care-coverage-for-workers-in-the-gcc/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹⁸ "Pandemic aggravates the woes of migrant mothers and their newborns." 26 Aug. 2020, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/08/born-into-uncertainty-pandemic-aggravates-the-woes-of-migrant-mothers-and-their-newborns/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

¹⁹ "Huroob cases on the rise as Saudi's Kafala reforms off to a shaky start." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2022/04/huroob-cases-on-the-rise-as-saudis-kafala-reforms-off-to-a-shaky-start/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

²⁰ "The Cost of Good Health for Kuwait's Migrant Workers." 12 Feb. 2023, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2023/02/the-cost-of-good-health-for-kuwait-s-migrant-workers/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

²¹ "Fossil fuels and climate change: migrant workers take the heat." 16 Aug. 2023, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2023/08/fossil-fuels-and-climate-change-migrant-workers-take-the-heat/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

²² "Summer midday work ban fails to adequately protect workers." 14 Jun. 2021, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/06/summer-midday-work-ban-fails-to-adequately-protect-workers/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.



in the labour laws of the country, extending all protections available to workers in the private sector.²³

7. Many migrants in the Gulf have been victims of nonpayment of wages, delayed payment of wages, and withholding of End-of-Service benefits due to weak regulatory and enforcement mechanisms, as well as inadequate redress mechanisms. The Gulf States must improve their regulatory mechanisms and establish emergency funds to pay workers their dues, which the government can collect later from the employer.²⁴
8. In the Gulf, national social protections and safety nets [primarily cater to citizens](#), leaving migrants either excluded or not granted access to pension systems, unemployment benefits, and employment injury coverage on par with citizens. Ensuring that migrants are fully integrated into these social protection systems is crucial for fostering healthy social and economic outcomes. In some instances, like in [Bahrain](#), migrants unjustly contribute to unemployment insurance without receiving any benefits in return.

For Origin and Destination States

1. Recruitment corruption is not a problem of origin states alone. Even if the workers are charged money at home, research shows that a bulk of the bribes come back to actors at destination.²⁵ Cleaning up this sector, in order to eliminate debt-bondage, must be the responsibility of both states.
2. In addition, Gender-Based Violence in the workplace (including households of employers) must be addressed appropriately with national legislation. The lack of such laws hinders women migrants meaningful participation in socio-economic spheres.
3. In extension of Recommendation 8 for the Gulf states, origin countries must also push for and establish transnational justice mechanisms, ensuring their diplomatic missions are equipped to facilitate this.
4. Social protection where it exists and when introduced must be portable.

²³ "The Wide Gap Between C189 and Laws Pertaining to Domestic" 16 Jun. 2021, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/06/the-wide-gap-between-c189-and-laws-pertaining-to-domestic-workers-in-the-gcc/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

²⁴ "Act against wage theft, ensure workers are not denied their dues." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/campaign/act-against-wage-theft-ensure-workers-are-not-denied-their-dues/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

²⁵ "Huge recruitment fees charged for jobs in the Gulf." <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/huge-recruitment-fees-charged-for-jobs-in-the-gulf-qatar-recruiters-accused-of-demanding-the-highest-commissions/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.; "Exorbitant fees entrap Ugandan workers in the GCC - Migrant Rights." 15 Sep. 2022, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2022/09/exorbitant-fees-entrap-ugandan-workers-in-the-gcc/>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.