

The Workers Behind the Growth & Glamour of the Arabian Gulf

The megacities of the Persian Gulf—Dubai, Riyadh, and Doha—are bustling hubs for entertainment, finance, and international travel. However, just a century ago these places were nowhere near as developed or geopolitically significant as they are today. How did this transformation occur?

In the mid to late 20th century, independence from British rule and the discovery of oil catapulted the new Gulf states into wealth that was used to rapidly modernize. The system of *kafala*—an Arabic word meaning sponsorship or guardianship—was implemented to bring migrant workers to the region substituting for the states' low labor pools. The true scale of this system can be seen in the demographic makeup of these states today. In the United Arab Emirates, 88% of the population are migrant workers¹ and in Qatar, migrant workers make up 95% of the population.²

The kafala system allows citizens and businesses the ability to hire migrant workers acting as their sponsor for the duration of their employment. By providing a steady stream of cheap labor, Gulf citizens can employ domestic servants and hire migrant workers to do housework or care for their children. Outside of the home, migrant workers occupy the '4-D' jobs, referring to dirty, demeaning, dangerous, and difficult jobs in the construction, sanitation, and agriculture industries.³ In this aspect, the kafala system also works as a regime security strategy; by maintaining a high quality of life, opposition to the various rulers is less likely.⁴

The kafala system has been condemned internationally by human rights groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. International organizations like the United Nations and the International Labour Organization have even explicitly called for the systems' abolition, yet the kafala system continues to this day. Investigative journalism and interviews with migrant

¹ Kini, Narayan. 2020. "A Cycle of Slavery: Migrant Labor and Human Rights Violations in the United Arab Emirates." *International Social Science Review* 96 (4): 1–18.

² "World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Qatar." Human Rights Watch, February 3, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/qatar>.

³ Fernandez, Bina. 2021. "Racialised Institutional Humiliation through the *Kafala*." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47 (19): 4344–61. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2021.1876555.

⁴ Matsuo, Masaki, and Shingo Hamanaka. 2025. "How Immigration Policies Sustain Authoritarian Regimes in Saudi Arabia." *Third World Quarterly* 46 (8): 874–95. doi:10.1080/01436597.2025.2517759.

workers detail the abuses and exploitation despite the—although limited—existence of labor laws.⁵ Recently, the 2022 Qatar World Cup focused international criticism on the practice of kafala within Qatar after reports of migrant laborers dying in unsafe worker conditions prompted investigations from human rights groups.⁶ Passport confiscation, wage withholding, restricted movement, starvation, physical and sexual violence all go largely unpunished, and migrants fear retaliation should they voice their concerns to labor agencies or consult help.

Integral to the Gulf economies and their political dynamics, yet socially and politically disenfranchised, migrant workers exist in an extralegal limbo where they are subject to exploitation. The kafala system has been criticized internationally by human rights organizations and governments; however, states have resisted international pressure to reform the kafala system. So, what avenues of change are possible for the advancement of human and worker rights in the region?

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⁵ Dahir, Abdi Latif, and Justin Scheck. 2025. “Why Maids Keep Dying in Saudi Arabia.” New York Times, March 16, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/16/world/africa/saudi-arabia-kenya-uganda-maids-women.html>.

⁶ Ashok, Mule Rohit. 2025. “Reforming the Kafala System: An Unfinished Agenda.” *ICFAI Journal of International Relations* 19 (1): 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.71329/IUPJIR/2025.19.1.56-67>.