Slaving Away: Migrant Labor & Human Trafficking in the Gulf

The Kafala (Sponsorship) System:
All migrant workers in the Gulf are subjected to the kafala system, a deeply rooted structural system that requires migrant workers to be sponsored by employers in order to live and work in the region. Even before arriving in the Gulf, migrant workers are exploited by the kafala system. Many employers spend substantial money on their workers during the recruitment process, so they tend to view their employees as financial investments rather than human beings. Additionally, many migrant workers are exploited through work contracts, which are sometimes written in an unfamiliar language or do not provide specific information about the workers’ roles, the number of hours and days per week they are expected to work, as well as wage payment. Some may never even see their contracts. Because of this, migrant workers often experience high levels of abuse after they arrive in the Gulf. Employers often confiscate their passports and immigration documents, thereby restricting their mobility. Furthermore, migrant workers are overworked while the payment of their wages are either delayed or withheld completely. Despite facing such hardships and difficulties, migrant workers are unable to voice their frustrations, as the kafala system restricts their rights and power to form a union or go on strike.

Figure 1 describes the proportion of non-nationals (i.e. migrant workers) that comprised the workforce in Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Figure 2 details the breakdown of migrant workers by sectors in Qatar. Though migrant workers occupy different sectors, the majority of migrant workers work in construction and domestic service, where human rights abuses and exploitation often occurred.

Passport Confiscation:
- 90% of migrant workers have their passports confiscated in Qatar

Migrant Workers’ Working Conditions:
- Migrant workers in Bahrain work more than 11 hours a day and are on-call 24 hours per day.
- Domestic migrant workers earn BHD 700 (U.S. $1853) per month, ten times less than the average Bahrain citizen.
- Figure 3 is an example of the wage discrepancy between migrant workers and local Bahrain citizens:

![Average Monthly Wages](image)

- Migrant workers in the construction sector usually work outside, where 122°F temperature is normal.
- There is a lack of safety procedures in Qatar construction sites. Injuries are common with 10% resulting in permanent disability and even death.
- In summer 2013, at least one Nepalese worker died per day working on infrastructure and projects for the FIFA World Cup 2022. Causes of
deaths for these young men in their mid-20s are heart attack, heart failure and workplace accidents.

- Saudi Arabia has laws against forced labor, yet does not enforce legal initiatives to guarantee the protection of migrant laborers’ working rights.

**Migrant Workers’ Living Conditions:**

- Dormitory-style buildings in which many migrant workers live contain fire hazards such as exposed electrical wires. In January 2013, a fire burned down dormitory housing in Manama, Bahrain, injuring 8 workers and killing 13.
- In Qatar, there is a lack of efficient sanitation systems. The lack of sanitation and waste disposal system has led to many problems of pest infestations.
- Domestic workers often are forced to sleep on the kitchen or bathroom floors in Saudi Arabia.
- Migrant laborers, like construction workers, often live 6-10 people in accommodations fit for 3-5.

**Physical Abuses:**

- Employers often punish workers with severe beatings or burnings. Workers often bear scars from the severe punishments they experience.
- Domestic workers in Saudi Arabia endure abuses from their employers that include forced confinement, food deprivation and excessive workload.
- Multiple accounts cite domestic workers’ testimonies of being physically beaten by the children and parents of the families they cared for.

**Sexual Abuses:**

- Domestic workers in Bahrain are vulnerable to sexual abuse, perpetrated by recruitment agents, and employers. However, because domestic workers are completely dependent on their employers, it is extremely difficult for them to leave after abuse has occurred.
- Female domestic workers often experience sexual abuse from men in the families they care for.
- Migrant women who have escaped are often trafficked and coerced into prostitution.
- Civil courts in Saudi Arabia often prosecute the victims who report sexual abuse and impose weak punishments on the perpetrators.

**Human Trafficking:**

- Boys as young as 2 years old are trafficked into the Gulf countries to be camel jockeys. They are intentionally starved to prevent weight gain. Many become impotent due to injuries in the genital area and some boys are killed by stampeding camels during the race.
- Saudi Arabia is one of the leading destination countries where men, women, and children are subjected to human trafficking and forced labor.
- Employment recruiters often deceive prospective domestic laborers about their working conditions or issue fake passports to smuggle workers and pull them into forced labor or prostitution rings.
- Saudi Arabia’s anti-trafficking decree prohibits all forms of trafficking, yet there is no significant effort to implement the decree and comply with international law.
- Many female domestic workers attempt escape from abusive employers. Some are kidnaped or exploited into human and sex trafficking networks.

**Policy Recommendations for Congress:**

- Sign letters voicing recommendations to the Governments of Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These recommendations include (but are not limited to):
  - A need for transparency regarding the migrant workers’ recruitment process and documentations
  - End the kafala system.
- Deliver a short 1-2 minute speech on the floor to other members of Congress
- Conduct calls to the ambassadors from the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Qatar, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to express concerns over migrant workers’ egregious exploitations and human rights abuses.
- Conduct calls to the U.S. ambassadors to the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Qatar, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to express concerns regarding the exploitations and human rights abuses of migrant workers.
- Inform and express concerns about exploitations and human rights abuses of migrant workers in the Gulf to President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry.