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THE KAFALA SYSTEM AND MIGRANT WORKERS' RIGHTS IN THE GULF COUNTRIES

A report by the Gulf Centre for
Human Rights (GCHR)

The Kafala System and Migrant Workers' Rights in the Gulf Countries

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Introduction

The awarding of the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Saudi Arabia has reignited concerns that had already emerged during the preparation and organisation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. While the Qatari tournament was presented by both FIFA and Qatari authorities as an opportunity to improve labour standards and modernise the treatment of migrant workers, numerous human rights organisations have argued that many of the structural factors enabling exploitation remained largely intact despite a series of widely publicised reforms¹. The decision to award another World Cup to a Gulf State where migrant labour continues to play a central role in ambitious development projects has therefore raised fears that the lessons of Qatar have not been fully learned².

These concerns extend beyond the field of sport. Across the Gulf region, governments are currently investing billions of dollars in large-scale infrastructure and urban development projects. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 programme, including the NEOM megacity project and the expansion of transport infrastructure³, relies heavily on migrant labour⁴. Similarly, Qatar continues to pursue major economic projects, notably through the North Field gas expansion programme, which remains dependent upon a large migrant workforce. In this context, the treatment of migrant workers during the preparation of the 2022 World Cup cannot be understood as an isolated issue. Rather, it raises broader questions regarding the sustainability of labour exploitation patterns within Gulf economies and the ability of international actors to prevent their recurrence.

This report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) aims to address the issue of the migrant rights and the continued abuses faced by migrant workers in the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar - despite new legal reforms introduced since the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the partial dismantling of key components of the kafala system. Many of the human rights violations documented before the tournament - including passport confiscation, recruitment debt, restrictions on freedom of association, barriers to justice, inadequate living conditions and failures to investigate worker deaths - continue to be reported, in conditions that amount to forced labour.

¹ Amnesty International, Reality Check: The State of Migrant Workers' Rights with Less Than Four Years to Go Until the Qatar 2022 World Cup, 2019 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/9758/2019/en/> and Human Rights Watch, Qatar: Significant Labor and Kafala Reforms, 2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/24/qatar-significant-labor-and-kafala-reforms>

² GCHR, Award of 2034 Men's World Cup to Saudi Arabia Risks Lives and Exposes FIFA's Empty Human Rights Commitments, 2024 <https://www.gc4hr.org/award-of-2034-mens-world-cup-to-saudi-arabia-risks-lives-and-exposes-fifas-empty-human-rights-commitments/> and GCHR, Human rights groups, football supporters, worker organisations express "deep concern" at global law firm's flawed World Cup 2034 assessment <https://www.gc4hr.org/deep-concern-at-global-law-firms-flawed-world-cup-2034-assessment/>

³ Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia: Migrant Workers Behind the Riyadh Metro System Subjected to Decade of Devastating Abuse, 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/11/saudi-arabia-migrant-workers-behind-the-riyadh-metro-system-subjected-to-decade-of-devastating-abuse/>

⁴ Human Rights Watch, The Man Who Bought The World Rights Abuses Linked to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and Its Chairman, Mohammed bin Salman, 2024 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/11/20/man-who-bought-world-rights-abuses-linked-saudi-arabias-public-investment-fund>

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Background

The centrality of migrant labour within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is not a recent phenomenon. Since the oil boom of the second half of the twentieth century, Gulf economies have relied extensively on foreign workers originating primarily from South Asia, Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. To regulate this migration, most Gulf countries developed sponsorship systems commonly known as *kafala*. Although the practical implementation of the system varies from one country to another, its defining characteristic is the dependency of migrant workers upon a sponsor, usually their employer, for their legal residence and employment status⁵. This dependence has long been criticised for facilitating labour exploitation, restricting labour mobility and creating conditions conducive to forced labour and other serious human rights violations⁶.

International scrutiny intensified following Qatar's selection as host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in December 2010. Investigations by journalists, trade unions and human rights organisations documented widespread abuses affecting migrant workers employed on construction sites and in related sectors, including passport confiscation, recruitment debt, wage theft, restrictions on freedom of movement, excessive working hours and unsafe working conditions⁷. Particular attention was also drawn to the issue of worker deaths and the repeated failure of Qatari authorities to conduct adequate investigations into fatalities frequently classified as resulting from "natural causes" or "cardiac arrest" without further examination⁸.

Within the framework of this report, several concepts require clarification. The term migrant worker refers to a person who migrates from one State to another for the purpose of employment, regardless of migration status, in accordance with internationally-recognised definitions contained in the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and related international instruments⁹. The kafala system refers to sponsorship arrangements linking a migrant worker's legal residence and employment status to a specific employer or sponsor, thereby restricting labour mobility and increasing vulnerability to abuse¹⁰.

⁵ ILO, Sponsorship Reform and Internal Labour Market Mobility for Migrant Workers in the Arab States <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/sponsorship-reform-and-internal-labour-market-mobility-migrant-workers-arab>

⁶ Ibid., 1

⁷ Amnesty International, Abuse of World Cup Workers Exposed, 2016 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/03/abuse-of-world-cup-workers-exposed/> and Amnesty International, They Think That We're Machines, 2022 https://amnestyfr.cdn.prismic.io/amnestyfr/c23f1273-d863-4031-a482-489d3ce32ecd_MDE_22_5388_2022_They+think+that+we're+machines_final+formatted.pdf and GCHR, GCHR Mission to Qatar Finds Grave Violations Against Migrant Workers, 2022 <https://www.gc4hr.org/gchr-mission-to-qatar-finds-grave-violations-against-migrant-workers/>

⁸ Amnesty International, In the Prime of Their Lives: Qatar's Failure to Investigate, Remedy and Prevent Migrant Workers' Deaths, 2021 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/4614/2021/en/>

⁹ United Nations Convention on Migrant Workers, 1990

¹⁰ Ibid., 6

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The concept of forced labour will be understood according to Article 2 of ILO Convention No. 29 as work or service exacted from a person under the menace of any penalty and for which that person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily. Similarly, the notion of trafficking in persons will be understood according to the Palermo Protocol and subsequent UNODC and United States State Department definitions, encompassing the recruitment, transportation or harbouring of persons through force, coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation¹¹.

This report deliberately focuses on the Gulf region, and particularly on Qatar and Saudi Arabia. While labour exploitation affecting migrant workers is a global phenomenon, the Gulf States present specific characteristics that justify a dedicated analysis. Their economies remain heavily dependent on foreign labour, sponsorship systems have historically structured labour migration across the region, and several of the world's largest ongoing infrastructure projects are concentrated within these countries. Furthermore, the transition from the Qatar 2022 World Cup to the Saudi Arabian 2034 World Cup provides a unique opportunity to assess whether structural problems identified during one mega-event have been effectively addressed or merely transferred to another context.

The relevance of this report extends beyond questions of labour law. At stake are issues relating to the protection of fundamental rights, including the rights to life, health, decent working conditions and access to effective remedies. The subject also intersects with broader debates concerning corporate accountability, state responsibility and the governance of global sporting events. As Gulf countries continue to attract migrant labour on a massive scale while simultaneously pursuing ambitious environmental, urban and economic transformation projects, the consequences of regulatory failures may affect millions of workers and their families¹². Moreover, the continued awarding of prestigious international events to countries where such concerns remain unresolved raises questions regarding the legitimacy and credibility of global governance actors, particularly FIFA.

Several theoretical approaches have sought to explain these dynamics. The concept of mega-event exceptionalism¹³ suggests that major sporting events often generate extraordinary political and economic pressures that justify exceptional governance arrangements and weaken ordinary accountability mechanisms. Similarly, the literature on the mega-event syndrome highlights recurring patterns whereby large-scale events produce cost overruns, governance failures and social harms while benefiting powerful political and economic actors¹⁴.

¹¹ UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons; U.S. Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, 2025 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

¹² UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, 2011 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf and Amnesty International, Corporate Accountability <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/corporate-accountability/>

¹³ Poynter et al., Urban Infrastructure in the Framework of Mega-Event Exceptionalism, 2021 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02723638.2021.1880696>

¹⁴ Flyvbjerg et al., The Mega-Event Syndrome, 2015 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2015.1038292>

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These approaches can be combined with the notions of governance gap and accountability gap, which describe situations where existing legal and institutional frameworks fail to effectively regulate corporate and state conduct or provide remedies for victims of abuse.

Against this background, this report seeks to answer the following question: To what extent did the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar reinforce rather than dismantle the structural mechanisms of migrant worker exploitation associated with the kafala system, and what precedent does this set for future mega-events and infrastructure projects in the Gulf region? To answer this question, the report will first examine the extent to which the reforms introduced in Qatar before and during the World Cup period altered - or failed to alter - the structural conditions enabling labour exploitation. It will then analyse how the limited accountability of state authorities, international institutions and private actors has contributed to the persistence and possible reproduction of these dynamics in future Gulf mega-projects and sporting events.

I. The persistence of migrant workers' exploitation despite extensive reforms

The extensive international scrutiny generated by the preparation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup placed unprecedented pressure on Qatari authorities to address longstanding concerns regarding the treatment of migrant workers. Faced with growing criticism from international organisations, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and United Nations bodies, Qatar launched a series of reforms that were presented as a fundamental transformation of its labour migration system. These measures, frequently described as dismantling the kafala system and modernising labour protections, were welcomed by several international actors as significant progress. However, assessing the true impact of these reforms requires first understanding the structural role historically played by the kafala system and the objectives pursued by the reform process itself before examining whether these changes effectively altered the realities experienced by migrant workers.

A. Reforming the kafala system: promises of change

For decades, labour migration throughout the Gulf region has been governed by systems commonly referred to as kafala, or sponsorship systems. While the specific legal arrangements vary among Gulf States, the underlying principle remains largely the same: the legal residence and employment status of migrant workers are linked to a specific sponsor, usually their employer, who exercises significant control over the worker's ability to enter, remain in, change employment within, or leave the host country¹⁵. As Gulf economies became increasingly dependent on foreign labour throughout the second half of the twentieth century, sponsorship systems evolved into a central mechanism regulating migration flows and labour markets.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5

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Although governments often justified kafala as a tool for managing migration and ensuring labour market stability, international organisations and human rights groups progressively identified serious structural flaws within the system. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), sponsorship arrangements prevalent in the Gulf severely restrict migrant workers' labour mobility, create dependency relationships between workers and employers, and facilitate conditions conducive to labour exploitation and forced labour¹⁶.

The ILO has repeatedly emphasised that mechanisms requiring employer consent to change jobs, renew permits, or leave the country are incompatible with the principles underlying several international labour standards, including Convention No. 29 concerning Forced Labour and Convention No. 111 concerning Discrimination in Employment and Occupation¹⁷.

In Qatar, the kafala system became increasingly controversial during the years preceding the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Under the sponsorship framework introduced by Law No. 4 of 2009, migrant workers could neither change employment nor leave the country without obtaining authorisation from their employer¹⁸. This dependence generated significant power imbalances and exposed workers to a wide range of abuses. International investigations documented recurring practices such as passport confiscation, recruitment debt, delayed or unpaid wages, excessive working hours, restrictions on freedom of movement and threats of retaliation against workers attempting to leave abusive employment situations¹⁹. These concerns were particularly acute because migrant workers represented the overwhelming majority of Qatar's workforce, making labour migration an essential component of the country's economic model.

International criticism intensified considerably after Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The unprecedented global visibility associated with the tournament transformed labour rights concerns into an international political issue. Throughout the following decade, journalists, trade unions, United Nations experts and human rights organisations repeatedly called for the abolition of the kafala system. Amnesty International documented widespread abuse within the construction sector and described the sponsorship system as one of the primary factors facilitating exploitation. In 2014, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants formally called for the abolition of the sponsorship system in Qatar, arguing that the legal framework itself contributed to migrant workers vulnerability²⁰. The same year, delegates to the International Labour Conference, supported by international trade union organisations, submitted a complaint under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution alleging that Qatar had failed to comply with the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and other international labour standards²¹.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5

¹⁷ Idem

¹⁸ Ibid., 1

¹⁹ Ibid., 7

²⁰ François Crépeau, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Addendum: Mission to Qatar, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/26/35/Add.1, 23 April 2014.

²¹

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_459148.pdf

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Faced with mounting international pressure and growing reputational concerns linked to the World Cup, Qatari authorities gradually initiated a series of labour reforms. A decisive turning point occurred in October 2017 when Qatar and the International Labour Organisation signed a technical cooperation programme designed to support comprehensive labour market reforms. This agreement sought to address several longstanding concerns relating to labour mobility, working conditions, wage protection and access to justice. The establishment of an ILO office in Doha in 2018 further institutionalised cooperation between Qatar and the organisation and signalled a commitment to pursuing reforms through internationally-recognised frameworks.

The reform process accelerated between 2018 and 2020. One of the most significant changes concerned restrictions on workers' freedom of movement. In 2018, Qatar partially abolished exit permit requirements, allowing most migrant workers to leave the country without employer authorisation, although important categories of workers, including many domestic workers, remained excluded from the reform. Additional reforms followed in August 2020 with the adoption of Law No. 19 of 2020, which removed the requirement for most migrant workers to obtain employer consent before changing jobs. Simultaneously, Law No. 17 of 2020 introduced the region's first non-discriminatory minimum wage, set at 1,000 Qatari Riyals per month, while Law No. 18 of 2020 further regulated labour mobility and employment transitions²².

These measures were widely portrayed as historic. The ILO described the reforms as marking the beginning of a new era for Qatar's labour market and highlighted their potential to transform labour relations across the region. Human Rights Watch similarly acknowledged that the abolition of the No Objection Certificate (NOC) requirement represented one of the most significant labour reforms ever undertaken in the Gulf region, potentially enabling migrant workers to change employers without obtaining permission from their sponsor²³. Such reforms appeared to directly address one of the core mechanisms through which the kafala system had historically restricted labour mobility.

The reform agenda also extended beyond labour mobility. In 2017, Qatar adopted Law No. 15 on Domestic Workers, providing legal recognition of domestic work and introducing protections relating to working hours, leave entitlements and contractual obligations²⁴. The Ministry of Labour subsequently developed standardised employment contracts, established Qatar Visa Centres in major labour-sending countries, and launched awareness campaigns aimed at informing workers of their rights prior to departure and upon arrival in Qatar. Labour dispute committees, wage protection mechanisms and workers' support funds were also created in an effort to improve access to remedies and strengthen enforcement mechanisms.

²² ILO, *Le démantèlement du système de la kafala et l'introduction d'un salaire minimum marquent le début d'une ère nouvelle pour le marché du travail au Qatar* <https://www.ilo.org/fr/resource/article/le-démantèlement-du-système-de-la-kafala-et-l'introduction-d'un-salaire>

²³ Ibid., 1

²⁴ ILO, *Labour Law Reforms Advancing Decent Work for Domestic Workers in Qatar* <https://webapps.ilo.org/globalcare/south-4-care/23?language=en>

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Taken together, these reforms allowed Qatari authorities to present the World Cup period as a catalyst for modernisation and progress. Official discourse increasingly portrayed Qatar as a regional leader in labour reform and emphasised the dismantling of the kafala system as evidence of its commitment to international labour standards. Yet while these measures undoubtedly altered important aspects of the legal framework governing migrant labour, questions remained regarding their implementation, their scope, and their capacity to eliminate the structural forms of dependency that had historically characterised the sponsorship system. These concerns would become central to assessing whether the reforms represented a genuine transformation or merely a partial reconfiguration of existing power relations.

B. Persistent abuses and the limits of reform

Although the reforms adopted between 2017 and 2020 were widely presented as a historic dismantling of the kafala system, evidence collected by international organisations suggests that many of the abuses traditionally associated with migrant labour in Qatar persisted throughout the World Cup period and, in some cases, continue today. While the legal framework evolved, the structural relationship of dependence between migrant workers and employers was not entirely eliminated. As a result, numerous workers remained exposed to exploitation, forced labour, restrictions on fundamental freedoms and barriers to effective remedies²⁵.

One of the most persistent problems concerns restrictions on labour mobility despite the formal abolition of the No Objection Certificate (NOC). Prior to the reforms, migrant workers generally required their employer's consent to change jobs, making it extremely difficult to escape abusive working conditions. The 2020 reforms officially removed this requirement and were widely celebrated as one of the most significant changes ever implemented in the Gulf labour market. However, Amnesty International and other organisations have documented that, in practice, many employers continued to exercise considerable influence over workers' ability to change employment. Amnesty reported that authorities and employers frequently continued to operate according to practices inherited from the sponsorship system, creating what has been described as a "silent requirement" whereby workers remained reluctant to change jobs due to fears of retaliation, visa cancellation or administrative obstacles. Consequently, although the legal obligation to obtain employer consent was removed, the unequal power relationship that originally justified criticism of the kafala system often remained intact.

²⁵ Amnesty International, *Inaction by Qatar and FIFA a Year on from the World Cup Puts Legacy for Workers in Peril*, 2023 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/qatar-inaction-by-qatar-and-fifa-a-year-on-from-the-world-cup-puts-legacy-for-workers-in-peril/>

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Similarly, the confiscation of passports, despite being prohibited under Qatari law, continues to be regularly reported. Passport confiscation represents one of the clearest indicators of coercive labour practices because it restricts freedom of movement and increases workers' dependence on their employers. Amnesty International's investigations among workers employed on World Cup-related projects documented numerous cases in which employers retained passports for prolonged periods, despite the existence of legal prohibitions against the practice²⁶. Human Rights Watch likewise noted that passport confiscation remained widespread and was rarely sanctioned effectively by authorities, illustrating the gap between legal reform and practical enforcement²⁷. From a legal perspective, such practices raise concerns under international standards relating to freedom of movement and may constitute indicators of forced labour under ILO Convention No. 29 when combined with other coercive measures.

The persistence of forced labour indicators further demonstrates the limitations of the reform process. Amnesty International's investigation into security guards employed in Qatar shortly before the World Cup provides a particularly illustrative example. Based on interviews with 34 security guards employed by eight different companies, Amnesty documented excessive working hours, mandatory overtime, seven-day work weeks and situations in which workers were forced to work outdoors for prolonged periods in extreme temperatures without adequate rest or access to water²⁸. Several workers reported working twelve-hour shifts every day for months without a weekly rest day. Under ILO standards, such practices may amount to forced labour when workers are unable to refuse work due to threats of financial penalties, loss of employment or immigration consequences (ILO Convention No. 29). The significance of these findings lies not only in the severity of the abuses themselves but also in the fact that they occurred after many of the reforms praised by international actors had already entered into force.

Beyond labour mobility and working conditions, serious concerns persist regarding the treatment of domestic workers, a category that remains particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Despite the adoption of Law No. 15 of 2017 on Domestic Workers, Amnesty International and other organisations have repeatedly documented situations involving excessive working hours, restrictions on movement, denial of rest periods, physical abuse and sexual violence²⁹. Domestic workers often remain excluded from protections available to other categories of workers and continue to live within their employers' households, creating conditions that facilitate isolation and abuse.

²⁶ Ibid., 7

²⁷ Ibid., 1

²⁸ Amnesty International, *They Think That We're Machines*, 2022 https://amnestyfr.cdn.prismic.io/amnestyfr/c23f1273-d863-4031-a482-489d3ce32ecd_MDE_22_5388_2022_They+think+that+we're+machines_final+formatted.pdf

²⁹ GCHR, *GCHR Mission to Qatar Finds Grave Violations Against Migrant Workers*, 2022 <https://www.gc4hr.org/gchr-mission-to-qatar-finds-grave-violations-against-migrant-workers/>

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Amnesty's recent submissions to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons concluded that migrant domestic workers in Qatar continue to face indicators associated with forced labour and human trafficking, despite the reforms introduced over the previous decade³⁰.

The continued vulnerability of migrant workers to trafficking and forced labour is particularly significant because it highlights the structural dimensions of exploitation. The sponsorship system may have evolved legally, but its underlying logic continues to create profound dependency relationships between workers and employers. Similar conclusions are reached by academic analyses examining the persistence of abuses despite reform efforts.

Research on migrant domestic workers has demonstrated that reforms frequently leave intact the broader structures through which employers and recruitment agencies exercise control over migrant workers. Recruitment debt, document confiscation, misleading recruitment practices and barriers to accessing justice continue to expose workers to forms of exploitation that may meet international definitions of forced labour or trafficking in persons³¹.

Another area where reforms have proven insufficient concerns workers' access to collective representation and freedom of association. Qatar continues to prohibit migrant workers from forming or joining trade unions, despite ratifying key international human rights instruments in 2018. Human Rights Watch has noted that workers remain unable to organise collectively, strike freely or establish independent representative structures capable of defending their interests³². The practical consequences of this restriction became visible in August 2022 when migrant workers protesting unpaid wages in Doha were reportedly arrested and deported after participating in demonstrations³³. From the perspective of international labour law, the inability of workers to organise collectively significantly weakens the effectiveness of labour protections because it deprives workers of one of the principal mechanisms available to challenge exploitation and demand accountability.

³⁰ Amnesty International, *Migrant Domestic Workers and Trafficking in Persons*, 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/IO4093492025ENGLISH.pdf>

³¹ Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, *Reforming the Kafala System: Persistent Violations of the Rights of Migrant Domestic Workers and the Role of Private Recruitment Agencies* <https://gja.georgetown.edu/human-rights-development/reforming-the-kafala-system-persistent-violations-of-the-rights-of-migrant-domestic-workers-and-the-role-of-private-recruitment-agencies/>

³² *Ibid.*, 1

³³ *Ibid.*, 29

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Perhaps the most emblematic illustration of the limitations of Qatar's reform process concerns the issue of migrant worker deaths. In its landmark report *In the Prime of Their Lives*³⁴, Amnesty International examined the deaths of numerous migrant workers whose death certificates routinely attributed their deaths to vague causes such as "natural causes", "acute heart failure" or "cardiac arrest" without conducting adequate investigations. Amnesty found that a significant proportion of deaths among relatively young and otherwise healthy workers were never properly examined despite growing evidence linking extreme heat exposure and strenuous working conditions to fatal health outcomes. Families were frequently denied meaningful explanations regarding the circumstances of death and often received no compensation. The report argued that this failure to investigate potentially work-related deaths constituted a breach of Qatar's obligations under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which protects the right to life, as well as its obligations under domestic labour legislation.

Taken together, these examples reveal a recurring pattern. While Qatar undoubtedly introduced significant legal reforms under intense international scrutiny, many of the underlying mechanisms facilitating exploitation remained operational. Legal protections frequently suffered from weak enforcement, legal loopholes - such as the informal persistence of the abolished No Objection Certificate (NOC) and the exclusion of domestic workers from ordinary labour protections - and limited access to effective remedies.

As a result, the reforms often transformed the legal architecture of the sponsorship system without fully dismantling the structural conditions that had enabled abuses in the first place. The persistence of passport confiscation, barriers to labour mobility, restrictions on trade union rights, indicators of forced labour, risks of trafficking and unresolved worker deaths therefore raise broader questions regarding the effectiveness of reform strategies that prioritise legislative change without addressing the deeper political, economic and social dynamics sustaining migrant worker vulnerability.

The persistence of many of the abuses traditionally associated with the kafala system, despite extensive legal reforms and unprecedented international scrutiny, suggests that the limitations of Qatar's reform process cannot be explained solely by shortcomings in implementation. While weak enforcement, institutional inertia and employer resistance undoubtedly played an important role, a broader analytical framework is required to understand why major structural problems survived a decade of international pressure. In this regard, the literature on mega-events offers valuable insights.

³⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/4614/2021/en/>

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A growing body of scholarship has highlighted the phenomenon of "mega-event exceptionalism", referring to the extraordinary political, economic and regulatory conditions created by large-scale international events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup³⁵. Under this framework, governments are often granted exceptional legitimacy to accelerate infrastructure projects, modify regulatory procedures and mobilise significant financial and human resources in order to meet fixed deadlines imposed by international sporting organisations. Mega-events therefore create a sense of urgency that frequently prioritises delivery and visibility over long-term governance concerns.

Closely related to this concept is what scholars have described as the "mega-event syndrome", namely the tendency of major sporting events to generate recurring patterns of cost overruns, weak accountability mechanisms, exceptional decision-making processes and insufficient scrutiny of social impacts³⁶. Because success is generally measured by the ability to complete projects on time and preserve the event's international image, human rights concerns may become secondary objectives, addressed only to the extent necessary to protect the legitimacy of the event itself.

Applied to Qatar, this perspective suggests that labour reforms may have been driven not only by a genuine desire to improve workers' rights but also by the need to manage mounting international criticism threatening the reputation of both Qatar and FIFA. From this viewpoint, the reforms introduced between 2017 and 2022 can be interpreted as part of a broader process aimed at preserving the viability and legitimacy of the World Cup project. The adoption of legal reforms undoubtedly generated tangible improvements for many workers. However, the persistence of widespread abuses raises the question of whether these reforms primarily transformed the underlying structures of labour exploitation or merely reduced the most visible manifestations of abuse during a period of exceptional international attention.

This interpretation becomes particularly relevant when considering developments beyond the 2022 World Cup. If labour reforms were largely conditioned by the exceptional visibility of a mega-event rather than by a lasting commitment to structural change, then the absence of meaningful accountability after the tournament may create conditions for similar patterns to emerge elsewhere in the Gulf region. The question therefore extends beyond Qatar itself. It concerns the extent to which international institutions, states and private actors have been willing - or unwilling - to impose consequences for past abuses and whether this lack of accountability risks facilitating the reproduction of comparable violations in future mega-events and large-scale infrastructure projects.

³⁵ Legacy et al., *Urban Infrastructure in the Framework of Mega-Event Exceptionalism*, 2021

³⁶ Ibid., 14

II. Structural impunity and the reproduction of exploitation

The persistence of labour exploitation despite extensive reforms raises a fundamental question: how could such widespread and well-documented abuses continue for years under the scrutiny of international organisations, civil society actors, the media and sporting institutions? Beyond the shortcomings of domestic reforms, the answer may lie in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms capable of preventing, sanctioning and remedying violations. Indeed, while a dense framework of international human rights standards, labour norms and corporate responsibility principles exists, their practical implementation remains fragmented and often ineffective when confronted with the political and economic interests surrounding major development projects and sporting events. This situation has contributed to what can be described as an accountability gap, reinforced by broader governance failures and the influence exercised by powerful public and private actors over regulatory processes.

The consequences of this deficit extend far beyond Qatar. As new mega-projects and international sporting events emerge across the Gulf region, concerns are increasingly being raised that the conditions which enabled abuses in the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup are not disappearing but rather being reproduced in new forms and on an even larger scale. Examining these dynamics therefore requires, first, an assessment of the limitations of existing accountability mechanisms and, second, an analysis of how the lessons of Qatar are shaping the future of labour governance in the Gulf.

A. The accountability gap: why existing mechanisms failed

The abuses documented before, during and after the 2022 FIFA World Cup did not occur in a legal vacuum. On the contrary, the international legal framework governing labour rights, human rights and corporate responsibility is extensive as well as established. Migrant workers in Qatar were protected not only by domestic legislation but also by a wide range of international norms relating to the right to life, the prohibition of forced labour, freedom of movement, access to justice, decent working conditions and protection from exploitation. The persistence of serious violations despite the existence of these standards therefore raises a fundamental question: why did existing accountability mechanisms fail to prevent, sanction or adequately remedy these abuses?

At the level of international human rights law, several of the practices documented throughout the World Cup preparation period appear incompatible with obligations recognised under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both ratified by Qatar in 2018. The failure to adequately investigate potentially work-related deaths among migrant workers raises concerns under Article 6 of the ICCPR, which protects the right to life.

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Similarly, restrictions on workers' ability to leave abusive employment situations, confiscation of passports and limitations on labour mobility have implications for freedom of movement and personal liberty. Delayed wages, unsafe working conditions, excessive working hours and inadequate housing conditions may also engage rights protected under the ICESCR, including the right to just and favourable conditions of work, the right to health and the right to an adequate standard of living.

Labour rights protections are further reinforced through the international labour standards developed by the International Labour Organisation. The practices documented in Qatar bear particular relevance to Convention No. 29 concerning Forced Labour and Convention No. 105 concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour. According to the ILO, labour mobility restrictions associated with sponsorship systems can facilitate situations in which workers are unable to leave abusive employment relationships, thereby creating conditions conducive to forced labour³⁷.

The ILO has repeatedly stressed that sponsorship mechanisms requiring employer authorisation to change jobs are difficult to reconcile with fundamental labour rights and have highlighted their incompatibility with key international labour standards.

Other ILO conventions are equally relevant. Convention No. 97 concerning Migration for Employment establishes protections for migrant workers and seeks to ensure equality of treatment. Convention No. 95 concerning the Protection of Wages provides safeguards against wage-related abuses, a recurrent issue documented in Qatar. Convention No. 155 concerning Occupational Safety and Health imposes obligations relating to workplace safety and the prevention of work-related injuries and deaths. Convention No. 189 concerning Domestic Workers establishes minimum protections for one of the categories of workers most vulnerable to abuse under sponsorship systems. Finally, Conventions No. 87 and No. 98 concerning freedom of association and collective bargaining remain particularly significant given Qatar's continuing prohibition on migrant workers forming independent trade unions. While Qatar has not ratified all of these conventions, they nevertheless constitute important international benchmarks against which labour practices can be assessed.

The issue of trafficking and labour exploitation also falls within the scope of international criminal law. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, commonly known as the Palermo Protocol, define trafficking broadly enough to encompass situations involving recruitment through deception, coercion, abuse of vulnerability or exploitation for labour purposes. Numerous reports concerning recruitment debt, document confiscation, restrictions on movement and exploitative working conditions among migrant workers in the Gulf have led international organisations to identify indicators commonly associated with forced labour and trafficking in persons³⁸.

³⁷ Ibid., 5

³⁸ Ibid., 11

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Alongside state obligations, contemporary international law increasingly recognises the responsibilities of non-state actors, particularly business enterprises. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, unanimously endorsed by the Human Rights Council in 2011, are built around three interconnected pillars: the state's duty to protect human rights, the corporate responsibility to respect human rights and the right of victims to access effective remedies³⁹. Under this framework, companies involved in major construction projects are expected to conduct human rights due diligence, identify risks, prevent abuses and provide remediation where harm occurs.

These principles are particularly relevant in Qatar, where large infrastructure projects depended upon extensive networks of contractors, subcontractors and recruitment agencies. Yet numerous investigations revealed that recruitment fees, passport confiscation, wage abuses and unsafe working conditions persisted despite these internationally-recognised expectations⁴⁰.

FIFA itself cannot be excluded from this discussion. In 2017, the organisation adopted a formal Human Rights Policy committing it to respect internationally-recognised human rights and to prevent or mitigate adverse impacts linked to its activities⁴¹. These commitments were incorporated into FIFA's broader human rights strategy and were intended to guide decision-making processes relating to tournaments and commercial partnerships. However, human rights organisations have increasingly questioned the effectiveness of these commitments.

The award of the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Saudi Arabia has generated particular criticism, with 21 human rights, migrant rights and sports organisations including GCHR arguing that FIFA relied upon flawed assessments that underestimated foreseeable risks relating to labour exploitation and human rights abuses. Similar concerns have been raised regarding FIFA's refusal to establish a comprehensive compensation programme for migrant workers and families affected by abuses linked to the 2022 World Cup⁴².

The coexistence of extensive legal standards and persistent violations reveals what many scholars and practitioners describe as an accountability gap. An accountability gap exists when legal obligations formally exist but are not accompanied by mechanisms capable of effectively enforcing them or providing meaningful remedies to victims. Amnesty International has repeatedly referred to such a gap in the context of corporate accountability, emphasising that corporations frequently operate in environments where enforcement remains weak and where victims encounter substantial obstacles when seeking justice⁴³.

³⁹ Ibid., 12

⁴⁰ GCHR, GCHR Mission to Qatar Finds Grave Violations Against Migrant Workers, 2022 <https://www.gc4hr.org/gchr-mission-to-qatar-finds-grave-violations-against-migrant-workers/>

⁴¹ <https://inside.fifa.com/human-rights/strategy>

⁴² GCHR, Award of 2034 Men's World Cup to Saudi Arabia Risks Lives and Exposes FIFA's Empty Human Rights Commitments, 2024 <https://www.gc4hr.org/award-of-2034-mens-world-cup-to-saudi-arabia-risks-lives-and-exposes-fifas-empty-human-rights-commitments/>

⁴³ Amnesty International, Corporate Accountability <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/corporate-accountability/>

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The situation in Qatar illustrates this dynamic particularly well. Although labour reforms created new complaint procedures and dispute resolution mechanisms, many workers continued to face practical barriers relating to language, legal representation, retaliation and immigration status⁴⁴.

This accountability gap is reinforced by a broader governance gap. The concept refers to situations in which economic activities operate across jurisdictions while regulatory and enforcement mechanisms remain fragmented or insufficient. As noted by human rights organisations, multinational corporations may benefit from weak governance environments in which oversight is limited and responsibilities are dispersed among multiple actors⁴⁵. In the Gulf context, accountability is frequently divided among governments, recruitment agencies, employers, subcontractors, sporting institutions and investors. This fragmentation makes it difficult to identify responsibility when abuses occur and often enables each actor to shift responsibility onto another.

Although the legal framework governing migrant workers' rights appears comprehensive, its enforcement remains fragmented. International human rights bodies possess significant monitoring functions but limited coercive authority. United Nations treaty bodies may issue recommendations and Special Rapporteurs may expose violations, yet they cannot compel states to comply or impose sanctions.

Similarly, the ILO's supervisory system is primarily designed to encourage dialogue and technical cooperation rather than punitive enforcement. Qatar itself illustrates this approach: following the 2014 complaint alleging widespread forced labour indicators, the ILO ultimately pursued a programme of technical cooperation instead of initiating more confrontational measures. While this strategy facilitated important legislative reforms, it also depended heavily on the political will of the Qatari authorities.

Beyond these mechanisms, migrant workers face an additional obstacle: the absence of an international judicial forum competent to hear most labour rights claims. Neither the International Court of Justice nor the International Criminal Court provides an effective avenue for individual workers seeking redress, leaving domestic courts and non-binding international procedures as the principal available mechanisms. These structural limitations are further reinforced by geopolitical and economic considerations. As a major energy producer and strategic partner for many states, Qatar has often been approached through diplomatic engagement rather than coercive pressure. The result is a system in which international norms exist and violations are extensively documented, but enforcement remains weak, fragmented and largely dependent on voluntary compliance.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25

⁴⁵ <https://www.mindthegap.ngo/governance-gaps/>

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Finally, elements of regulatory capture⁴⁶ further help explain why accountability remains limited. Regulatory capture occurs when institutions responsible for oversight become excessively influenced by the interests of the actors they are supposed to regulate. Although the concept is traditionally applied to state regulatory agencies, similar concerns have emerged regarding the governance of international sporting events. Criticism surrounding FIFA's reliance on assessments commissioned or influenced by actors with direct interests in hosting future tournaments has led several organisations to question the independence of human rights evaluations conducted during bidding processes⁴⁷. Such concerns do not necessarily imply corruption but rather illustrate how institutional incentives may favour the successful delivery of mega-events over rigorous accountability for human rights risks.

Ultimately, the failure of accountability mechanisms in the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup cannot be attributed to the absence of legal standards. International human rights law, international labour law, anti-trafficking instruments, corporate responsibility frameworks and FIFA's own policies all provided normative foundations capable of addressing many of the abuses documented in Qatar. The central problem instead lies in the limited capacity - or willingness - of institutions to translate these norms into effective enforcement, meaningful remedies and credible consequences. This accountability deficit is particularly significant because its effects extend beyond the Qatari context. As new mega-events and large-scale development projects emerge across the Gulf region, the absence of meaningful accountability risks transforming exceptional failures into a normalised model of governance.

B. The normalisation of exploitation beyond Qatar

The consequences of the accountability deficit identified in the Qatari context extend far beyond the 2022 FIFA World Cup. When large-scale human rights violations are documented over many years, yet result in limited sanctions, incomplete remediation and few structural consequences for the actors involved, a powerful signal is sent to governments, investors, sporting institutions and corporations operating in similar environments. The concern is therefore not only that abuses occurred in Qatar, but that the absence of meaningful accountability may contribute to the normalisation of governance models in which labour exploitation is treated as a manageable risk rather than an unacceptable outcome. In this sense, the legacy of the 2022 World Cup must be understood not only through the reforms it generated but also through the precedent it established for future mega-events and infrastructure projects across the Gulf region.

⁴⁶ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/regulatory-capture.asp#:~:text=>

⁴⁷ GCHR, Human rights groups, football supporters, worker organisations express “deep concern” at global law firm’s flawed World Cup 2034 assessment, 2024 <https://www.gc4hr.org/deep-concern-at-global-law-firms-flawed-world-cup-2034-assessment/>

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Saudi Arabia provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this emerging dynamic. Over the past decade, the Kingdom has launched an unprecedented programme of economic transformation under “Vision 2030”⁴⁸, relying heavily on large-scale construction projects, foreign investment and international sporting events. Human Rights Watch has warned that several of these initiatives are being developed under conditions that raise serious human rights concerns, particularly regarding the treatment of migrant workers and the concentration of economic power within institutions such as the Public Investment Fund⁴⁹. According to the report, many of the governance challenges previously observed in Qatar - including weak transparency, limited accountability mechanisms and restrictions on civil society oversight - remain present within the Saudi context. Consequently, the structural conditions that facilitated labour exploitation in preparation for the 2022 World Cup cannot be regarded as unique to Qatar but rather as characteristics shared by a broader regional development model.

The most ambitious example of this model is undoubtedly NEOM, the futuristic city currently under construction in north-western Saudi Arabia. Marketed as a symbol of innovation and sustainable development, NEOM represents one of the largest infrastructure projects ever undertaken globally. Yet the project’s extraordinary scale depends upon the recruitment and mobilisation of vast numbers of migrant workers. Human rights organisations have expressed concerns not only regarding labour rights protections but also regarding broader issues of forced displacement and related human rights violations – including against protestors, some of whom have been sentenced to death⁵⁰; as well as transparency and accountability associated with the project⁵¹.

While NEOM differs substantially from the World Cup in its objectives and duration, both projects share several characteristics associated with mega-event exceptionalism: compressed timelines, immense political prestige, significant financial investment and a strong incentive to prioritise project delivery. The experience of Qatar demonstrates that such conditions can generate heightened risks of labour exploitation unless accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms.

⁴⁸ <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4

⁵⁰ GCHR, Human rights groups, football supporters, worker organisations express “deep concern” at global law firm’s flawed World Cup 2034 assessment <https://www.gc4hr.org/deep-concern-at-global-law-firms-flawed-world-cup-2034-assessment/>

⁵¹ Idem

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Similar concerns emerge from recent investigations into the Riyadh Metro project. In 2025, Amnesty International documented what it described as a decade of abuse affecting migrant workers involved in the construction of the metro system⁵². Amnesty reported recurring patterns including recruitment debt, wage-related abuses, unsafe working conditions and barriers to obtaining effective remedies. Particularly significant is the fact that many of these allegations closely resemble practices previously documented in Qatar during preparations for the World Cup. Amnesty concluded that systemic reforms and enhanced human rights due diligence remained urgently necessary, suggesting that lessons from Qatar have not yet been fully translated into structural safeguards capable of preventing similar abuses elsewhere.

The risks associated with this model are not limited to Saudi Arabia. Qatar itself continues to rely heavily on migrant labour for major industrial and energy projects. The North Field Expansion, one of the largest liquefied natural gas developments in the world, is expected to remain a cornerstone of Qatar's economic strategy for years to come⁵³. Although the project differs from the World Cup in nature, it nevertheless involves large-scale construction activities and a substantial migrant workforce operating within many of the same labour governance structures that existed during the tournament period. The persistence of unresolved questions regarding worker protection, access to remedies and corporate accountability therefore remains highly relevant. Without stronger safeguards, there is a risk that labour issues identified during the World Cup era may simply be transferred to new sectors rather than resolved.

Perhaps the most significant test of the lessons supposedly learned from Qatar will be the 2034 FIFA World Cup in Saudi Arabia. Human rights organisations, including the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), have repeatedly warned that awarding the tournament to Saudi Arabia risks reproducing many of the same labour and human rights concerns that surrounded Qatar's hosting of the 2022 competition⁵⁴. These concerns are reinforced by criticism directed at the human rights assessments used during the bidding process. Several organisations argued that the evaluations underestimated foreseeable risks relating to labour exploitation and failed to adequately address structural human rights concerns, leading some observers to characterise the process as a form of institutional whitewashing rather than a genuine assessment of potential impacts. Such criticisms are particularly troubling given FIFA's repeated commitments to respect and promote internationally-recognised human rights.

⁵² Ibid., 3

⁵³ Qatar to push LNG expansion plans to 2027 after Iran drone attack Qatar's project is part of a record wave of new supply set to flood the market <https://energynow.com/2026/03/qatar-said-to-push-lng-expansion-to-2027-after-iran-drone-attack/>

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42

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Beyond football, Saudi Arabia's growing investment in global sport raises similar questions. Recent proposals to create a major international tennis tournament, sometimes described as a "Wimbledon of the Desert", illustrate the Kingdom's broader strategy of positioning itself as a leading host of global sporting events. While these initiatives are often discussed primarily in terms of economic diversification or international influence, they also imply substantial infrastructure development and an increased demand for migrant labour. If the accountability shortcomings identified in Qatar remain unresolved, there is a legitimate concern that future sporting projects could reproduce familiar patterns in which labour rights protections lag behind the pace of development.

Taken together, these examples suggest that the principal risk emerging from the Qatari experience is not merely the continuation of specific abuses but the normalisation of a broader model of development. In this model, ambitious projects are delivered successfully, international criticism generates limited consequences and reforms are frequently evaluated according to their formal adoption rather than their practical effectiveness. The danger of such a precedent lies in its capacity to transform exceptional failures into accepted governance practices. As new mega-projects and sporting events continue to reshape the Gulf region, the challenge is therefore no longer simply to identify violations after they occur, but to ensure that the lessons of Qatar lead to meaningful accountability before similar harms are repeated.

Conclusion

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was frequently presented as a catalyst for labour reform and a turning point in the protection of migrant workers' rights. There is no doubt that the unprecedented international attention generated by the tournament contributed to important legal changes, including reforms to labour mobility, the introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage and the partial dismantling of key components of the kafala system. Yet, as this report has demonstrated, these reforms did not fundamentally eliminate the structural mechanisms that have historically facilitated the exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf. Many of the abuses documented before the tournament - including passport confiscation, recruitment debt, restrictions on freedom of association, barriers to justice, inadequate living conditions and failures to investigate worker deaths - continued to be reported despite the existence of new legal protections.

The central issue therefore lies not in the absence of legal norms but in the weakness of the mechanisms designed to enforce them. International human rights law, ILO conventions, anti-trafficking instruments, FIFA's own human rights commitments and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights all provided a framework capable of addressing many of the violations documented in Qatar. However, these standards were too often undermined by weak enforcement, fragmented responsibility, limited access to remedies and the absence of meaningful consequences for powerful actors. The result is an accountability gap that has allowed serious abuses to persist despite widespread international awareness.

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In this respect, the legacy of the 2022 World Cup extends beyond Qatar itself. The tournament did not create the structural conditions that enabled labour exploitation. Those conditions predated the competition and were deeply rooted in regional labour migration systems. However, by allowing the event to proceed without comprehensive accountability for the harms suffered by many workers and their families, the international community contributed to the normalisation of a model in which large-scale development projects can continue despite unresolved human rights concerns. In this sense, the World Cup did not create the system. It legitimised it.

This conclusion is particularly significant as the Gulf region enters a new phase of rapid development. Projects such as NEOM, the North Field Expansion, the Riyadh Metro and the 2034 FIFA World Cup in Saudi Arabia will require the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers. Without stronger safeguards, these initiatives risk reproducing many of the same vulnerabilities that emerged in Qatar. Preventing such an outcome requires moving beyond a reform-based approach towards a genuine accountability-based model.

Several measures could contribute to this objective. First, labour reforms must be accompanied by independent monitoring mechanisms capable of conducting inspections, receiving complaints and publishing transparent findings without political interference. Second, effective remedies must be guaranteed for victims of labour exploitation, including compensation mechanisms for workers and families affected by injury, death, wage theft or forced labour. Third, greater emphasis should be placed on freedom of association and collective representation, as workers cannot effectively defend their rights when independent trade unions remain prohibited. Fourth, international sporting organisations such as FIFA should make human rights compliance a continuing condition of hosting rights rather than a requirement limited to the bidding process. Finally, businesses, investors and contractors involved in major infrastructure projects must be held to higher standards of human rights due diligence, consistent with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Ultimately, the future of migrant workers' rights in the Gulf will depend not on the adoption of additional commitments but on the willingness of states, corporations and international institutions to transform existing norms into enforceable obligations. The true test of the lessons learned from Qatar will not be found in official reform announcements or policy statements. It will be measured by whether future mega-events and infrastructure projects are able to develop without relying upon the same patterns of vulnerability, exploitation and impunity that have defined so much of the region's recent history.

About Us

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit NGO founded in 2011 that provides support and protection to human rights defenders (HRDs) in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

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