A Country Prospering on Abuse: Migrant Worker Exploitation and Labor Reform in Qatar

Emma Towe
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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A Country Prospering on Abuse:
Migrant Worker Exploitation and Labor Reform in Qatar

by

Emma Towe

Advisor: Dr. Rania Mahmoud

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Sam M. Walton College of Business
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Abstract
The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council rely on migrant workers to drive their economies and perform hard labor while simultaneously abusing these workers through the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Qatar is not an exception to this rule, even as labor reforms are being implemented. When Qatar was awarded the responsibility of hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, an international spotlight on labor abuses followed. Although Qatar has responded by enacting labor reforms, strong evidence shows continued abuse and lax enforcement of new polices. While the economy of Qatar thrives, overworked, underpaid migrant workers, who have little to no rights, continue to endure abuse as performative legislation is passed.
2. Introduction

Many gulf countries and their citizens prosper on the abuse of migrant workers through the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Migrant workers leave their own country to work in another with more opportunities. The exploitation of migrant workers via the *kafala* system by governments and companies is a social problem that continues to grow. Qatar has recently received international attention for its efforts to improve infrastructure in preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Despite Qatar’s lauded labor reforms, there are still extensive reports of migrant worker abuse. Qatar has prospered tremendously on mistreated migrant workers for decades, but, due to international pressure, is promising to abolish the *kafala* system and expand labor rights through new legislation. The companies working within Qatar, FIFA, as well as the Qatari government have an ethical responsibility to ensure migrant workers are treated fairly and to put a stop to abuses.

3. High Level Overview

There are many active participants and intricate details that go into understanding migrant worker abuse in Qatar, specifically in preparation for the 2022 World Cup. It is important to understand the history, systems, and projected impact of all facets involved.

3.1 History and Economic Overview of Qatar

Qatar is in the Middle East, more specifically the Persian Gulf region. It has 300,000 citizens but a total population of 2.4 million. It neighbors Saudi Arabia and is a peninsula surrounded by the Persian Gulf. Qatar is 11,586 square kilometers, roughly twice the size of Delaware and slightly smaller than Connecticut. Aside from its coastal areas, it’s mostly flat desert with dry, pleasant winters and scorching, humid summers (“Qatar: CIA”).

Qatar has been an absolute monarchy ruled by the al-Thani family since the mid-1800s. It continued to be under the rule of the Ottoman Empire from the late 19th century until World War I. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI and through the 1960s, Qatar, along with a large part of the Persian Gulf, was a British Protectorate. In 1971, Britain withdrew its troops from the region, officially ending the country’s status as a British protectorate. Qatar, along with Bahrain, considered joining with other emirates to receive help form the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but ultimately decided to be independent. On September 1st 1971, Qatar officially became an independent state (Katzman). Qatar is ruled by an *Amir* (prince) currently Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The Qatari government includes a prime minister, who is also a member of the al-Thani family, and a cabinet containing members of the al-Thani family in addition to other influential families. For the first time, the *Amir* has decided to implement a national legislative body, a *Shura* (consultative) Council with 45 seats of which 30 will be elected officials. The first elections for the *Shura* Council were held October 2021 and 63% of eligible adults voted. To be eligible one must be an “‘original’ Qatari (that is, descending from a family present in Qatar prior to 1930), be born in Qatar and have Qatari grandparents” (Katzman).

Like Qatar’s political history, its economic history underwent drastic changes in the 20th century. The al-Thani family began ruling at a crucial point in time when, like its neighboring country Bahrain, Qatar’s economy was fueled by its pearling industry. Like many industries in the 1920s, the pearl trade collapsed and Qataris suffered as a result. Although oil was discovered in 1939 infrastructure development and further exploration was slowed by WWII. Post WWII, Shell developed the discovered oil fields and explored offshore fields fueling rapid growth in the
early 1950s and bringing immense wealth to al-Thani ruling class and ultimately the citizens of Qatar. In 1972 when Khalifa ibn Hamad of the Al-Thani family deposed his father, he cut some of the extravagant expenditures of the royal family and invested in Qatari social programs, education, and infrastructure. When oil prices crashed in the 1980s, the Qatari leadership, in partnership with international oil and energy companies, began developing the North Dome Gas Condensate field, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) shared with Iran. It was discovered in 1971 but had not been developed due to the lack of demand and infrastructure for LNG. The North Field has resulted in Qatar having the 3rd largest amount of LNG, a resource of growing importance in the energy sector. Qatar has also capitalized on the U.S. presence in the Middle East, as shown by the al-Udeid air base. Qatar has also taken note from the struggling economies of other countries who built their economy too heavily based around their resources, particularly oil, as demonstrated by Venezuela and Iraq. With the large amount of money coming in from the energy sector, Qatar has focused on growing its financial markets, educational centers, and manufacturing. Officials established the Qatar Investment Council (QIA) in 2003 to invest in projects throughout the world continuing to diversify Qatar’s economy. In fact, Qatar is the largest holder of real estate in the city of London and is heavily invested in companies such as Credit Suisse, Barclays Bank, and Volkswagen. An impactful visual of the Qatari economic growth is development of its capital, Doha (Jacobs).
The country’s oil riches have uniquely enabled Qatar to develop at a rate unheard of, only matched by the oil rich states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Qatar’s development and rapid wealth expansion has been dependent on cheap foreign labor. Its economic outlook is promising though double digit gross domestic product (GDP) growth and the rapid economic expansion of the 1970s is unlikely to be replicated. LNG is expected to become an even more vital part of the energy sector in the coming years as the energy transition continues. Qatar LNG reserves account for 13% of the world’s total. Russia and Iran are the only countries with larger LNG reserves at 25% and 18% respectively. Russia and Iran both have had sanctions imposed on them by large groups of countries in the past decade and have volatile relationships with what is often viewed as the Western world. This further solidifies Qatar’s importance as an LNG player. However, as the energy industry has proven volatile, Qatar’s economic diversification will pay off. In recent years Qatar’s non-oil GDP is now over half the total and continues to grow. Qatari citizens benefit from its continued economic success. The real GDP per capita is $90,044, meaning that Qatar ranks 6th in the world for the highest real GDP per capita. In comparison, the US GDP per capita is $62,530 (“Qatar.” CIA).

3.2 Gulf Cooperation Council and Qatar
The GCC is made up of six countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. It was established in 1981 to create a strong alliance between countries of the Persian Gulf post Iran-Iraq War in the interest of security and economic success. The GCC is composed of six government branches each entrusted with different responsibilities that help further the mission of promoting prosperity. Its economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas, as the GCC possess almost half of the world’s oil reserves, however there have been strong efforts by all to diversify into different sectors (Al Jazeera). In more recent history, Qatar has struggled with its GCC partners. Qatar is viewed as an Iranian ally, partially because the two countries share the largest LNG field in the world.
Due to resource allocation, international relations, land mass, wealth, and population, the de facto leader of the GCC - is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). KSA is currently engulfed in what is compared to a modern-day Cold War with Iran. This undeclared war has resulted in proxy wars in both Yemen and Syria as well as strained relations with Qatar. Qatar’s state-sponsored media organization, While Al Jazeera, often publishes critiques of KSA’s human rights abuses and war violence, it fails to address critique Qatar’s kafala abuse. Instead, the media network focuses on other GCC countries when discussing kafala, specifically the UAE and KSA. The rift became so severe that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and non-GCC member Egypt suspended diplomatic and economic relations with Qatar in June 2017. The clash came to an end in January 2021, benefitting all members. Analysts expect that the end of the dispute will result in a boost in Qatar’s tourism sector, improve attendance at the 2022 World Cup in Doha, and advance economic cooperation in the region more generally (Katzman). However, the rift was one of the main focuses of Qatar’s government from 2017 on, pushing labor issues to the margins.

Since its inception, GCC countries have always sought out eager laborers willing to work long hours for low wages, utilizing the kafala system. Lebanon and Jordan also have a kafala system. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimates that about 90% of Qatar’s population are expatriates, with an ethnic breakdown of 40% Arab, 18% Pakistani, 18% Indian, and 10% Iranian. These figures demonstrate how greatly outnumbered native workers are to expatriates. In general, migrant workers in the GCC are from Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and the Philippines, along with other Middle East and North African countries, including Iran and Pakistan, which are often included in both categories (Hamza). Many of the migrant workers’ countries are experiencing economic hardships, while the GCC countries - such as Qatar with its oil and natural gas wealth - have rapidly developing and booming economies. Qatar has spent the last several decades modernizing and developing at a rapid pace. In order to achieve this, Qatar needed- and still needs- migrant workers. Qatar has
only 300,000 citizens yet seeks to be an influential global player. Including migrant workers and expatriates, Qatar’s population is around 2.4 million, demonstrating the dependency on foreign workers (Katzman).

3.3 Migrant Workers in the Arab States

A migrant worker is an individual who moves to a country different from their country of citizenship seeking employment. The International Labour Organization (ILO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, states that “globally migrant workers constitute 4.9 percent of the labor force of destination countries, this figure is highest at 41.4 percent in the Arab States.” For the purpose of the report, the ILO defines the Arab states as “Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.” The Arab states that mainly utilize migrant workers are those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which includes Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as Lebanon. Per the most recent ILO Estimate on Global Migrants, out of the total number of 169 million migrant workers, Arab states host a little over 24 million or 14.3%. Of these, 19.9 million are men while only 4.2 million are women. This is due to limited employment opportunities for women in some Arab states, specifically in physically demanding work such as construction for the World Cup. When looking at the entire workforce of Arab states migrant men constitute 40.4% of the total male workforce while migrant women constitute 46.8% of the total female workforce, an extremely high percentage especially considering that Arab states only have a total of 4.2 million women, or 6% of global female migrant workers (ILO).

3.4 The Kafala System

The kafala system has been in place for decades and results in the systemic exploitation of migrant workers. In the kafala system, migrant workers are permitted to reside in a foreign country based on the sponsorship of their employer. This means that a foreign migrant worker must secure sponsorship from a citizen or company located in the country in which they wish to work to obtain a visa. Therefore, the employer, whether a citizen or a company, determines if the migrant worker may remain in the country or be deported. Despite the abuse they endure, migrant workers are invaluable to most Gulf countries’ economies. Under the kafala system, the threat of deportation is ever constant. The employer can enforce extremely low wages, long hours, and worse onto the migrant worker who has little ability to file formal complaints or seek legal backing. The kafala system in the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC, impacts an estimated 25 million migrant workers, accounting for 70% of the GCC’s workforce (“Reform”). Furthermore, “98% of private sector workers in the UAE and Qatar are non-nationals” (“Reform”). The sheer number of migrant workers demonstrates Qatar’s dependence on them for continued economic development.

To truly comprehend the kafala system and its flaws, one must understand the people it targets. The system targets migrant workers desperate to earn a living wage. Many of these migrant workers leave their home countries to financially support their families, who stay behind. The abuse perpetuated by the kafala system often begins in migrant workers’ native countries. The kafala system is able to continue because of the intense desperation of migrants in poor countries. Even if migrant workers know about the kafala system and the corresponding abuse, it sometimes appears to be a better option than the abuse at home. For example, working conditions in Bangladesh, the home country of many Gulf migrant workers, are unsafe and
continue to be supported by big-name companies. 1,100 Bangladeshis were killed in a factory collapse in 2013 resulting in a public outcry. In response, big U.S. apparel groups, such as Walmart, Target, Costco and Gap, voluntarily joined a safety monitoring group. The safety monitoring group surveys factories and stops members from utilizing factories that violate safety standards, such as broken alarms, missing sprinkles, and dangerous locked doors. Noticeably missing from this list is major online retailer Amazon, who did not join the group. Amazon’s bottom line has momentarily benefited, overtaking Walmart as America’s top apparel seller, but at the cost of human rights and lives. The Wall Street Journal tracked children’s clothes sold on Amazon for $4.99 all the way to a factory in Bangladesh. Workers in the factory attested they work 12 hour days in overcrowded, hazardous conditions. The factory had “no fire alarms” and doors that managers can “lock and keep workers in” (Scheck). This is one example of numerous instances that showcase dangerous working conditions in countries migrant workers originate from.

Agency recruiters target underprivileged natives and offer them a contract in a rich country, while also charging the worker for this process. These charges accumulate, often leaving workers in debt before their contract even begins. Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a study in which, out of 93 migrant workers interviewed, 77 stated that they were in debt due to recruitment fees. These fees ranged from $693 to $2,613, with Bangladeshi workers typically paying the highest amounts (Javaid). Workers arrive in their country of work with a visa sponsored by an individual or company. Frequently, and despite laws against this practice in many Gulf countries, their passports are confiscated upon arrival so that they can no longer leave the country. For instance, Qatari law forbids passport confiscation, yet Amnesty International reported that 90% of Qatar’s low-income workers did not have passports in their possession (“Reform”). Since employers control passports, workers lose the ability to travel and to pursue legal retribution. Workers, who are typically under contract for one to three years with possible extensions, fulfill their contract, underpaid and overworked. When not working in grueling environments, many live in labor camps with horrible conditions. Because of existing kafala system policies, these workers are unable to unionize, seek legal assistance, or contest deportation (Hamza). The kafala system is often compared to a modern form of slavery (Robinson).

3.5 Corporate Social Responsibility

The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) defines Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as “a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders” (“What”). According to UNDIO, CSR goes beyond enchainning “the reputation of a company;” to help it appear more socially conscious. CSR can make an exceptional impact on a global level by helping improve global conditions and by increasing a company’s competitive advantages. This leads to benefits such as increased profit, access to more markets, and an improved reputation for the company. The performance areas of CSR have been diagramed by UNDIO as shown below:
While UNIDO defines CSR as a management concept, there are other views to CSR too. An ILO report defines CSR as “a way in which enterprises give consideration to the impact of their operations on society and affirm their principles and values both in their own internal methods and processes and in their interaction with other actors” (“InFocus”). As companies take on more accountability and focus on bettering the lives of not only its shareholders but its stakeholders, CSR becomes more successful. Around the world, there have been calls for companies to be more accountable for their unethical practices.

3.6 FIFA World Cup
The Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was established in 1904 by seven European countries to promote soccer, or football, and govern over the rules of the sport. Soccer is now the world’s most popular sport with “more than 150 million registered athletes…and [is] viewed by billions of fans in stadiums and on television worldwide” (“FIFA”). FIFA held the first world cup in 1930 and, excluding a hiatus from 1938 to 1950 due to WWII, it has been held every four years since. Thirty-two nations compete at the world cup, after advancing through rounds of qualifying games held throughout the year. Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup in 2010 with the first game slated on the 21st of November and the final on December 18th (“The most”).

While the World Cup is an honor to host and an economic opportunity, the infrastructure needed to host and world spotlight can bring more than just fans to one’s country (Lange). The past world cup, hosted by Russia in 2018, saw 3,031,768 people in attendance while the 2014 World Cup in Brazil saw a total of 3,441,450 in attendance. The largest stadium at the 2014 World Cup had a capacity of 76,804. The massive attendance, which is only likely to increase from 2014 to 2022, demonstrates the need for large stadiums and complex infrastructure required to host, something Qatar had to consider.
There have been long-standing rumors that both Qatar and Russia bribed FIFA officials to win the hosting rights for the World Cup. In October 2021, the U.S. Justice Department laid out a clear indictment of the bribes. After multiple rounds of eliminations, Qatar went head to head with the United States in a runoff vote in 2010 for the 2022 World Cup Host award. The group of FIFA officials had already shrunk after two members were secretly filmed accepting bribes to vote for Qatar. Three officials were listed in the indictment, though none were present for trial in the United States as two have since passed and the third remains in Brazil, which does not have an extradition treaty with the United States. Ties to officials who were bribed to vote for Russia were also traced back to U.S. based companies that contracted with the Russian government in preparation for the 2018 World Cup. Officials were offered sums ranging from 1 million to 5 million U.S. Dollars to vote for Russia and Qatar. Subsidiary executives of 21st Century Fox, which is now owned by Disney and won the rights to televise the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, have also been listed in the recent indictments. The improper business practices exposed in the bidding process has further exasperated the international retribution Qatar is facing as host of the 2022 World Cup (Panja).

4. Kafala and the World Cup

A physical manifestation of the exploitation of migrant workers in Qatar is seen in the construction of the World Cup stadiums. Qatar was chosen to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup in 2010. The stadiums, which are still being built in cities around Qatar, are extravagant and beckon imagery from a futuristic science fiction movie. Those who work to build these fabulous and contemporary stadiums that glisten as a symbol for innovation live in squalor, sometimes unpaid and almost always overworked (“Road”).
The government of Qatar is partially responsible for the lack of laws protecting migrant workers and the limited enforcement. But, it is not just the government of Qatar taking advantage of migrant workers. It is the companies, the individual sponsors, and the agencies preying on desperate migrant workers. Focusing on the 2022 FIFA World Cup, it is important to take a look at the companies that are profiting on the backs of these workers.

When FIFA chose Qatar to host the World Cup, there was immediate international concern on the blatant labor rights issues in the country. Qatar and FIFA jointly established the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (often referred to as the Supreme Committee) whose role was to stage the 2022 World Cup. In 2008 and prior to its selection by FIFA, the Qatari government also established the Aspire Zone Foundation, whose goal was to make Qatar a hub for international sporting events. The Aspire Zone Foundation, a stakeholder in the Supreme Committee, awarded the largest contract for the building of the Khalifa Stadium to Midmac, a Qatari firm, and Six Construct JV, a Belgium firm. Midmac and Six Construct JV in turn have subcontracted work out to numerous companies, including Eversendai Qatar, a subsidiary of the Malaysian company Eversendai, which has conducted some of the most flagrant human rights abuse while constructing Khalifa stadium. Upon the migrant workers’ arrival to the building site their passports were immediately confiscated by Eversendai, who claimed this was for “safekeeping with written consent of each individual worker” (“Ugly” 39). The company also placed migrant workers in labor camps with unfit living conditions, withheld wages, and refused to renew residency permits. Midmac and Six Construct JV should be held accountable for Eversendai’s labor abuses according to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights which states, “A Contractor shall be liable for any non-compliance by its Other Contracting Parties with these Standards, as if such non-compliance was the non-compliance of the Contractor” (“Ugly” 37).

While a company’s main responsibility is economic, meaning to be profitable, the legal responsibilities of a company are of the next utmost importance. Following in importance are
ethical responsibilities. Companies, such as Eversendai, who use the kafala system, are focused on their economic responsibilities, but it is imperative they follow the law in order to operate. The Qatari government should take charge, enforce their laws, and implement more stringent laws, thus punishing Eversendai. Aside from legal duty, it is important that these companies stop utilizing the *kafala* system as part of their ethical duty.

### 4.2 Extent of Abuse

It is nearly impossible to truly imagine the scale of devastation without stories and statistics coming together to paint a graphic, upsetting picture. The Guardian released an article in February 2021 with an estimate of migrant worker deaths in Qatar since the World Cup was awarded. 6,500 migrant workers have died, and this is likely to be an underestimate, due to the lack of death totals from the countries of Kenya, the Philippines, and others who send a large number of workers to Qatar. Qatar does not consider many of the deaths a result of worker abuse. In fact, 80% of the causes of death for Indian migrant workers are categorized as natural causes (Pattisson).

#### Breakdown of Reported South Asian Migrant Worker Deaths in Qatar 2010- Late 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1,018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>557</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lack of investigation into the deaths and shadowy recording standards raise the alarms for more unreported migrant deaths. Amnesty International analyzed 18 death certificates...
of men between 30 to 40 which were issued between 2017 and 2021, years in which many reforms had been enacted. They also interviewed six of the families. 15 of the certificates provided “no information about underlying causes instead using terms such as ‘acute heart failure natural causes,’ ‘heart failure unspecified,’ and ‘acute respiratory failure due to natural causes’” (“Qatar: Failure”). Phrases such as these are further evidence that a lack of meaningful investigations were carried out by Qatari officials. A migrant worker dying of natural causes also means that the family and benefactors of the individual will receive no compensation. When investigating the causes of death of 6 workers in detail, Amnesty International established that none of the workers had underlying health conditions and all had passed medical evaluations before relocating to Qatar. The families of these workers were shocked especially since all believed their relatives to be in excellent health. These are the stories of the 6 workers who all reportedly died of natural causes meaning their family got no compensation:

“Manjur Kha Pathan, 40, worked 12 to 13 hours a day as a truck driver. He had complained that the air conditioning in his cabin was faulty. Manjur collapsed at his accommodation on 9 February 2021, and died before the ambulance arrived. Sujan Miah, 32, worked as a pipe fitter on a project in the desert. His workmates found him dead in his bed on the morning of 24 September 2020. On the four days leading up to Sujan Miah’s death, temperatures had exceeded 40°C. Tul Bahadur Gharti, 34, worked in construction. He died in his sleep on 28 May 2020, after working around ten hours in temperatures that had reached 39°C. Suman Miah, 34, worked in construction. He died on 29 April 2020, after completing a long shift in temperatures that reached 38°C. Yam Bahadur Rana, 34, worked as an airport security guard, a job which involved long hours sitting outside in the sun. He died at work on 22 February 2020. Mohammad Kaochar Khan, 34, worked as a plasterer. He was found dead in his bed on 15 November 2017.” (“Qatar: Failure”)

Many of the deaths appear to be partially induced by the extreme heat of Qatari summers. The heat is so intense that FIFA opted to postpone the World Cup to November rather than its traditional summer schedule. The move begs the question that if world class soccer players should not be subjected to the intense Qatari heat, how is it ethical to subject migrant workers to long, grueling days for over a decade as they prepare for the World Cup. The company abuse is clear and abundant. The question that presents itself to FIFA, Qatar, and the greater international community is what will be done about it.

5. International Response

Qatar, FIFA, and many organizations who are participating in the World Cup are garnering negative international attention. The attention has come from consistent intensive investigations by a variety of groups and media organizations in addition to international bodies such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. Those involved in the World Cup, particularly Qatar, need to take actionable steps as soon as possible to lessen the injuries and deaths of migrant workers as well as to lessen the negative spotlight shown on their country or organization. The reforms Qatar is currently acting on are not enough to stop the abuse of migrant workers or minimize the negative response from the world.

5.1 Investigations

Groundbreaking investigations by groups like HRW and Amnesty International have taken place in Qatar. These investigations have led to publications that have placed substantially
more international pressure on Qatar. “The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game: Exploitation of Migrant Workers on a Qatar 2022 World Cup Site” published in 2016, is an example. In 2021 Verite, Norway’s Wealth Fund’s Watchdog council with a whopping 1.3 trillion in funding, launched a massive “probe covering a broad geographical area stretching from the Gulf states to the electronics industry in Malaysia,” all due to findings related to the 2022 Qatar World Cup (Taraldsen). Due to the mounting pressure, Qatar began rolling out numerous reforms and continues to do so. For instance, in 2017, in partnership with the ILO, Qatar committed to abolishing the kafala system and replacing it with a fairer system of contracts (“Qatar: Little”). While there has been some progress, the kafala system’s flawed remnants still infiltrate Qatar’s society.

5.2 Attempted Reforms

One example of attempted reform is the implementation of a monthly minimum wage which started at 750 Qatari riyals (the equivalent of 206 U.S. dollars) in 2017, and increased to 1,000 Qatari riyals (275 U.S. dollars) in 2021. Minimum food and housing allowances were added if the sponsoring company does not provide either (“Qatar: Migrant”). On the surface, this seems to be important, positive change, and it is to an extent. However, Amnesty International’s Head of Economic and Social Justice stated, “While the new minimum wage will boost the incomes of some of Qatar’s lowest-paid workers, the level set remains low. To truly make a difference it will need to be regularly reviewed and progressively increased to secure just and favorable conditions for workers” (“Qatar: Migrant”). This apparent window dressing shows that the deeper one dives, the more the reforms seem performative rather than actionable change.

Another reform is the abolishment of the no-objection certificate, which makes it legal for migrant workers to change employers without the permission of their original employer. This allows migrant workers to transfer jobs, as long as they provide a one-month or two-month notice to the original employer, depending on their work tenure.

While this is a positive reform, it is often counteracted by kafala-system-era rules that remain in place, such as absconding. Absconding, or leaving the employer without notification, still holds strict penalties, such as fines, jail time, and deportation, keeping migrant workers under the power of the employer. Employers also retain the responsibility of renewing residence permits, which gives them the power to cancel residency permits at will, placing migrant employees in considerable and constant danger (“Qatar: New”).

Another seemingly important step is the Wage Protection System (WPS), whose foundations were set in Qatar in 2015. The purpose of the WPS is to help guarantee that migrant workers are paid fairly, fully, and on time. The WPS is a software that tracks workers’ wages, drawing attention to discrepancies (Javaid). According to HRW in 2019, “1.3 million workers and over 50,000 companies have been registered with the software. However, roughly 700,000 workers remain unprotected.” Workers remain unprotected when companies and individuals do not enter worker names into the database, negating the purpose of the WPS. Not only do the workers not accounted for in WPS remain at risk of abuse, overall Qatar’s WPS has proven to be ineffective. Due to the deficiencies of the WPS, Qatar established the Labour Dispute Resolution Committees in 2018 with the purpose of accelerating the process so that workers are able to seek retribution and gain wages. The committees also oversee disputes regarding “breach of contract and the failure of employers to renew workers’ residence permits” (Javaid). Unfortunately, Amnesty International reported in 2019 that the process of receiving wages and rectifying disputes between migrant workers and their employers continues to be slow and unfair.
Furthermore, a study of 1,620 workers who followed the process of reporting unpaid wages to the Labour Dispute Resolution Committees showed that most of the workers remained unpaid, and none received compensation from the committees (Javaid 34). Not only are the Labour Dispute Resolution Committees ineffective, but many migrant workers fear negative consequences from relying on them. Threats of deportation and false absconding accusations keep many migrant workers from engaging with the Labour Dispute Resolution Committees (Javaid).

While the instituted reforms were already inadequate, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened working conditions for migrant workers in Qatar. According to the U.S. State Department during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Qatar gave the private sector the right to alter employee contracts without legal consequences. This resulted in companies forcing workers to take a combination of unpaid leave, decreased salaries, or premature contract terminations. This negatively affected tens of thousands of workers. The government also instructed state employers to reduce costs for non-Qatari employees by 30%, either by cutting salaries or laying off workers with a two-month notice, essentially forcing already low salaries to decrease for migrant workers (State).

5.3 Next Steps for Image Control

Companies need to utilize CSR to gain competitive advantage and to lessen the abuses of the kafala system. Both FIFA and Qatar, along with its involved entities, need to follow a crisis management plan. By dismissing, denying, and downplaying the labor rights crisis at hand, Qatar has caused internal chaos, deception, and heightened scrutiny. First, Qatar and FIFA need to locate areas of vulnerability. In other words, Qatar needs to figure out how regulation loopholes and lack of follow-through are allowing for migrant worker abuse. Second, they need to plan on how to fix the mistreatment of migrant workers by hiring groups that can help address this issue, or utilizing partnerships with groups such as ILO. Last, Qatar and FIFA need to learn from experience and not fall back into similar patterns when international attention wanes following the 2022 World Cup (“Creating).

6. Conclusion

The actions that Qatar have taken are simply put, not enough. None of Qatar’s reforms will be effective if they are not enforced. It is imperative that more is done before the FIFA 2022 World Cup, and that positive change endures after. There are only six months remaining until the first game of the FIFA World Cup in November 2022. This allows time for action to be taken prior to the World Cup, and if not prior, action should be taken after. HRW has listed out recommendations to Qatar’s Shura Council and the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour, and Social Affairs, Qatar’s Ministry of Interior, Qatari banks, and companies operating in Qatar. These recommendations include fully abolishing the kafala system, creating an efficient WPS, enforcing present laws, and imploring collaboration between companies and the government to better protect migrant workers. HRW also released recommendations to FIFA that include holding Qatar responsible for migrant worker abuse, establishing a regulatory group that confirms labor is fair, and raising public awareness on the labor issues at hand to (Javaid). While Qatar continues to garner praise for attempting to become a more progressive and modern society, migrant workers are still likely to be exploited. To truly make an impact on migrant worker rights and living conditions, Qatar must start enforcing and
drafting more impactful legislation while holding companies accountable for their abuses and violations.
Works Cited


