

MODERN SLAVERY: ISSUES FACED BY THE MIGRANT WORKERS UNDER THE KAFALA SYSTEM IN GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COUNTRIES

WATHSALA ANURADHI¹

Abstract

The issues migrant workers face under the Kafala system in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries remain an under-researched area in international migration literature. To better understand and address these issues, the Rubicon model provides a useful framework by dividing the migration process into four key stages: the pre-decisional, pre-actional, actional, and post-actional phases (Heckhausen, 1991; Gollwitzer, 1996). Integrating safe migration strategies into each of these phases is essential for effectively protecting workers' rights and well-being. Therefore, this study examines the issues faced by international migrant workers in GCC countries under the Kafala system.

This study is based on a comprehensive desk review of 34 diverse sources concerning international migrant workers in GCC countries. Spanning nearly two decades, from 2007 to 2025, the research draws from a wide range of materials, including journal articles, policy briefs, books, working papers, and official reports.

The literature survey reveals that the issues faced by migrant workers are deeply interconnected, often occurring simultaneously. At the core of these issues is the Kafala system, which grants employers excessive power over workers. The literature indicates that vulnerability is further intensified by the migrants' own characteristics and worsened by systemic gaps, such as inadequate international labour protections, a lack of legal literacy regarding local laws, and limited awareness of the destination country.

From the literature, diverse forms of harassment, including physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal abuse, were identified. It is also evident

¹ Lecturer (Probationary), Department of Demography, University of Colombo

from the literature that migrant workers often endure exploitative working conditions characterized by excessive hours, inadequate rest, and wage-related issues such as non-payment, delays, or unauthorized deductions. Furthermore, substandard housing, lack of access to healthcare, and unhealthy food options were identified as key issues associated with poor living conditions at the destination.

Studies also highlight that discriminatory practices based on gender, race, ethnicity, skin colour, and national origin are highly significant. While psychological isolation is frequently noted, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the broader social exclusion of these workers. Notably, the research links these hardships to extreme outcomes, including human trafficking (particularly sex trafficking), suicidal ideation, and migrant deaths.

These findings underscore the urgent need to promote safe migration frameworks throughout the entire migration process.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council Countries, Kafala System, Migrant Workers

Introduction

The continuous and gradual increase in migrant workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries can be considered one of the most significant trends in contemporary international migration. This phenomenon reflects broader patterns of labour migration and economic integration within the region, highlighting the GCC's role as a pivotal destination for migrant workers globally. The Kafala system, which emerged widely in the 1950s in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with some variations across countries, serves as a legal framework that establishes contractual agreements between employers and employees for a specified duration. The Kafala system was established during the oil boom in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, a period characterized by substantial economic growth that attracted a significant inflow of migrant workers seeking various employment opportunities. Furthermore, this system facilitates the recruitment of labour migrants from a diverse array of countries worldwide, thereby contributing to the region's labour market dynamics and population composition.

It is revealed that 47 percent of the population in GCC countries consists of non-nationals, with the highest stock of labour migrants originating from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (Shah, 2013). Asian migrants are often more attractive to employers because they tend to have lower wage expectations compared to migrants from other regions (Alzahrani, 2014). This results in them earning, on average, about 50% less than the local wage levels in the countries they move to (Mechale et al., 2021). Among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Saudi Arabia stands out as a unique case due to hosting a substantial influx of Asian workers (International Labour Organization, 2014).

The word *Kafala* has different meanings in Arabic. The concept of “Kafala” is mentioned in Islamic jurisprudence, with the simplest meaning being “to be responsible for” or “guarantee” (Azhari, 2016/17). There are two parties in the Kafala system: the sponsor and the sponsored person. However, there is a different application of the Kafala system in GCC countries. The purpose of applying the Kafala system is to secure workers' rights regarding residence, ensure employment, and protect their

earnings (Malaeb, 2015). When the migrant worker signs the agreement, the Kafeel, who is recognized as the employer, becomes the legal manager of the contract migrant during the contract period. According to the agreement, the Kafeel has several responsibilities. They are responsible for altering the contract, deportation of employees in the event of premature termination, and other responsibilities, including payment of salaries to their employees (Alzahrani, 2014). According to those responsibilities relating to migrant domestic workers, there are some key features, including that the Kafala system is valid for a minimum contract period of two years, while the legal status of the visa and the economic and legal responsibilities and mobility of domestic workers are handled by the sponsors (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012). Due to these regulations, the Kafala system is often criticized as an unfavourable system for workers. Moreover, it is regarded as a form of slavery (Malaeb, 2015). In recent years, the Kafala system has garnered international attention due to numerous complaints from migrant workers regarding violations of their human rights (Columbia Political Review, 2025).

Sustainable Development Goal 8 addresses the importance of promoting decent work and economic growth (UNDP, 2024). Also, ensuring safe migration is a primary component of the 2030 Agenda for Migration and Sustainable Development, as pointed out by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, Target 10.7, which calls for policies to promote orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people (United Nations, 2020). International migration is a process with several stages, and the action phases of the Rubicon model include the pre-decisional phase, pre-actional phase, actional phase, and post-actional phase. It also includes a repetitive process (Heckhausen, 1991; Gollwitzer, 1996). Therefore, promoting safe migration should involve all stages of international migration.

However, it is questionable whether GCC countries achieve these SDG targets under the Kafala system because the Kafala system has generated considerable debate regarding its classification and implications for migrant workers. In addition, it is also questionable how far migrant workers are safe throughout the migration process. While some argue that it does not constitute a form of slavery, a significant number of critics assert that it represents a modern form of slavery that should be

abolished completely from the GCC countries (Columbia Political Review, 2025).

Several issues have been identified, particularly in relation to recruitment, that migrant workers face. These issues include fees and costs, vague recruitment practices and employment conditions, worse terms and conditions of employment contracts, discrimination and harassment, poor accommodation, restrictions or limitations on movement, including withholding of identity documents or lack of opportunity to leave employment, poor working conditions, and lack of access to grievance mechanisms and remedies (International Organization for Migration, 2024). In addition to these issues, mistreatment and exploitation of migrant workers, physical and sexual violence, and unfair and unsafe employment practices can be observed under the Kafala system in GCC countries (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Although the existing literature on international labour migration has highlighted a variety of issues, challenges, trends, and patterns from multiple perspectives, a significant and often overlooked concern remains regarding labour migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly in relation to the Kafala system. The existing literature indicates a notable deficiency in attention towards understanding the specific ways in which the Kafala system in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries contributes to a range of issues and challenges faced by migrant workers from different migrant-sending countries around the world (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In addition, there is a handful of scientific studies on the negative consequences faced by migrant workers under the Kafala system.

Objective

Therefore, studying the Kafala system is crucial for understanding the negative impacts it has on labour migrants. Therefore, this study examines the issues faced by international migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries under the Kafala system.

Methodology

The study was based on comprehensive desk research using literature related to international migrant workers in the GCC countries. This study explores the experiences of migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast

Asia, and Africa, specifically focusing on individuals from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Kenya. The literature was reviewed under two primary themes: the Kafala system and the issues faced by migrant workers under the Kafala system in GCC countries.

A total of 34 literature sources were used to gather information from reports, journal articles, websites, policy briefs, books, and working papers. The literature covers the period from 2007 to 2025, spanning nearly two decades. This study focuses only on the issues faced by migrant workers under the Kafala system in GCC countries.

The analysis of the literature was conducted thematically. The themes for the analysis were identified by examining the nature of the Kafala system and the issues faced by migrant workers under five main domains. The first theme relates to the nature of the Kafala system, which grants excessive power to employers and creates vulnerable groups. The second theme focuses on the lack of protection provided by national and international institutions. The third and fourth themes focus on the vulnerability of migrant workers under the Kafala system arising from their lack of legal literacy regarding labour laws and regulations and their limited awareness of destination countries. The fifth theme focuses on the various issues faced by migrant workers under the Kafala system, such as harassment, exploitative working conditions, poor living conditions, discrimination, social exclusion, isolation, human trafficking, suicidal intentions, and migrant deaths.

Analysis of literature

The literature review investigates the implications of the Kafala system on migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. It underscores the considerable issues faced by migrant workers, which are apparent in diverse forms. Furthermore, the analysis delves into the underlying causes of these issues and examines the diverse impacts experienced by migrant workers in different countries. Table 1 below provides a summary of the findings derived from the comprehensive literature review.

Table 1: Synthesis Matrix for Literature Review

Literature sources	Main points derived from the Kafala system	Number of sources
(Human Rights Watch, 2021) (Robinson, 2022), (El-Dekmak, 2025), (International Labour Organization, 2025), (Aslam, 2025).	Excessive power	05
(Fargues & Shash, 2018), (International Labour Organization, 2016), (Alzahrani, 2014), (Malaeb, 2015), (International Organization for Migration, 2024), (Human Rights Watch, 2024), (Human Rights Watch, 2007), (ADHRB,2025)	Vulnerable groups	08
(Alzahrani, 2014)	The inadequate international labour right protection	01
(Aljazeera, 2024), (BBC, 2020), (Kagan & Cholewinski, 2022), (International Labour Organization,2015)	Lack of legal literacy on labour laws and regulations	04
(Isabekova-Landau, 2025), (International Labour Organization, 2017).	Lack of awareness on the destination country	02
(Fargues & Shash, 2018), (Sönmez et al., 2011), (Human Rights Watch, 2007), (Lee,2024)	Diverse forms of harassments	04
(Malaeb, 2015), (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012), (Sönmez et al., 2011), (Fargues & Shash, 2018), (Amnesty International, 2025), (Bouri, 2023), (Human Rights Watch, 2024)	Exploitative working conditions	07
(Amnesty International, 2025), (Human Rights Watch, 2007), (Shlala & Jayaweera, 2016)	Poor living conditions	03
(Varia, 2011), (Álvarez, et al., 2022), (Amnesty International, 2025), (The Global Slavery Index, 2023), (Koch & Vora, 2015)	Discrimination	05
(Isabekova-Landau, 2025).	Social exclusion	02
(Sinha, 2021), (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012)	Isolation	02
(Harroff-Tavel & Nasri, 2013), (The Exodus Road, 2024), (Human Rights Foundation, 2021), (Walk Free, 2023)	Human trafficking	04

(Amnesty International, 2025), (MRRORS,2015)	Suicide intention and death	02
---	--------------------------------	----

Source: Author prepared table based on literature, 2007-2025

Excessive Power of Employers

The literature reveals that the Kafala sponsorship programme gives employers undue authority in all aspects of migrant workers' lives. Migrant workers face increased vulnerability because of this overwhelming control (Human Rights Watch, 2021). According to Nepalese migrant workers, the Kafala system grants sponsors excessive power over employees by regulating their legal status, including their right to work and remain in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Since workers' visas are linked to their sponsors, employees from Africa, South Asia, Indonesia, Kenya, and Nepal often cannot change jobs or leave without permission, making them susceptible to exploitation and abuse (Robinson, 2022).

This power imbalance restricts workers' freedom and hampers their ability to defend their rights or seek assistance when subjected to unfair treatment. Although countries like Saudi Arabia have introduced several labour reforms, migrant workers still have limited opportunities to change jobs without their employer's consent. Therefore, the literature points out that Saudi Arabia has one of the most oppressive Kafala systems in the GCC countries (Robinson, 2022). Therefore, the literature often identifies the Kafala system as a modern-day form of slavery (El-Dekmak, 2025).

The concentration of power worsens the situation, as workers from Asian and African countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Ethiopia have their jobs and residency visas interconnected, and only their sponsors can renew or cancel them; private individuals, rather than the government, control the workers' legal status (International Labour Organization, 2025). This grants sponsors excessive authority, which may be abused against migrant workers. Studies conducted in South Asian and African countries further show that these power imbalances lead to additional problems and challenges faced by migrant workers (Aslam, 2025).

Vulnerable Groups and Their Characteristics

As pointed out by the literature, the primary motivation for migrant workers, especially those in the domestic and construction sectors from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, is to escape extreme poverty and achieve a better standard of living. However, they encounter numerous challenges in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Moreover, the literature indicates that the Kafala system significantly impacts Indian blue-collar or low-skilled migrant workers, who are often regarded as one of the most vulnerable groups among migrant workers (Fargues & Shash, 2018). Furthermore, the literature points out that Asian women employed as housemaids, elderly caregivers, and child caregivers in GCC domestic work are particularly at risk under the Kafala system, as they often work alone in private homes. Also, the literature related to migrant workers in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh reveals that isolation makes them more vulnerable and that gender, race, and nationality increase marginalization (ADHRB, 2025). The same fact is supported by another study, which indicates that vulnerability is further heightened by gender (Alzahrani, 2014).

Furthermore, studies highlight that female domestic workers from Sri Lanka are particularly vulnerable under the Kafala system in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for gender-sensitive Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to address these issues. Also, many migrants work in construction or domestic roles and are often uninformed about their contract terms. For instance, in Bahrain, domestic workers are excluded from labour protection laws, which affects their rights to rest days, minimum wages, and limits on working hours (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Furthermore, the literature indicates that vulnerabilities increase due to the lack of awareness regarding labour migration contracts, agreements, laws, and policies. Additionally, studies suggest that the Kafala system is frequently associated with human trafficking (Malaeb, 2015).

The Inadequacy of International Labour Rights Protections

Literature related to Asian migrant workers indicates that when they file complaints about their working conditions or report abusive practices by their employers, such actions are often viewed as being against the Kafeel (Alzahrani, 2014). Moreover, it indicates that some Kafeels may modify the signed agreements after migrant workers arrive at their destination. Additionally, many migrants find it difficult to contact their embassies to voice their grievances. Consequently, migrant workers frequently find themselves at risk. On one hand, they encounter a lack of legal protections and regulations from both national and international authorities. According to the experiences of Asian countries, migrant workers are not afforded the same protections as expatriate workers due to differing labour laws, and they often fall outside legal frameworks (Alzahrani, 2014). However, there is very limited literature addressing the inadequacy of international labour rights protection for migrant workers.

The Lack of Legal Literacy on Labour Laws and Regulations

According to the literature on Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, many workers in Middle Eastern countries are not well informed about labour laws and regulations. As a result, their lives become very complicated in GCC countries. It can be seen from the literature that the Human Resources and Social Development Ministry in Saudi Arabia has updated the rules, laws, and regulations governing workers (Aljazeera, 2024). However, the lack of legal literacy leads to numerous issues for migrant workers. Some sponsors in Saudi Arabia still retain their labourers' passports to restrict their mobility until the end of the contract period. This detrimental practice creates numerous challenges for employees. These Kafeels exploit the situation by holding the legal documents of migrant workers, making it easier for them to transfer employees without consent, as workers lack access to their legal documentation (BBC, 2020).

Even though some GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait have introduced several reforms to their Kafala systems, these labour migration reforms are not equally applied to all migrant workers (Kagan & Cholewinski, 2022). Additionally, many employees are unaware of the recently updated labour laws and regulations, and awareness-

raising is essential for migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2015).

The Lack of Awareness of the Destination Country

According to the literature, migrant workers often find themselves in vulnerable situations due to a lack of understanding of their destination countries. Awareness of the destination country is crucial for migrant workers as it directly affects many aspects of their lives. The literature also indicates that Sri Lankan migrant workers typically migrate through connections established by both formal and informal recruitment agencies, making awareness of the destination country's language, culture, regulations, and conditions essential to avoid exploitation and better prepare for the challenges they may face upon arrival (Isabekova-Landau, 2025).

However, the literature indicates that a lack of awareness causes migrant workers to fall into irregular situations during the migration process (International Labour Organization, 2017). Therefore, awareness-raising programmes and training programmes conducted prior to migration should cover topics related to labour rights and human rights to reduce these issues. Proper mechanisms to overcome language barriers are also needed.

Diverse Forms of Harassment Faced by Migrant Workers

The literature indicates that abuse faced by Indian and Philippine migrant workers is a significant issue and a negative consequence of the Kafala system in GCC countries (Fargues & Shash, 2018). These forms of harassment include physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal harassment. The literature also highlights how construction workers and domestic workers are abused in different ways and the negative impacts this has on their health in the UAE (Sönmez et al., 2011). However, literature related to Sri Lanka indicates that some agents have forced female domestic workers to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy during their employment contract period (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

According to the literature, sexual harassment can occur in many ways. It includes staring at or looking at someone in a sexual manner, making sexual comments, jokes, or name-calling, and asking offensive questions about a person's private life or body. It also involves exposing private

parts, being naked in an offensive manner, unwanted touching, hugging, or kissing, and sending sexual calls or messages. Other examples include repeatedly asking someone on dates when such attention is unwelcome, sharing sexual pictures or posters, and serious acts such as rape or sexual assault. Taking videos or photographs of someone in a sexual manner, pressuring someone for sex, and other similar actions are also forms of sexual harassment (Lee, 2024). Most African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian migrants, including those from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, face sexual harassment in GCC countries (Lee, 2024).

Exploitative Working Conditions

The literature clearly demonstrates that the Kafala system engenders challenging and unsatisfactory working conditions for employees, characterized by harsh and oppressive environments. As a result of these unreasonable working conditions, workers are often required to work more than eight hours per day. Prolonged working hours without adequate rest or days off constitute a form of labour exploitation (Malaeb, 2015; Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012; Sönmez et al., 2011). As pointed out by the literature, this situation is much worse in GCC countries such as Kuwait and the UAE because migrant workers do not receive adequate rest and have to endure long working hours. One of the main problems that migrant workers face in these countries is labour exploitation (Fargues & Shash, 2018). However, this is identified as a human rights violation.

It is important to note that all these unfavourable conditions represent various forms of labour exploitation. Some migrant workers endure hardships due to non-payment of their monthly salaries and are forced to return to their host countries to renew their legal documentation (Amnesty International, 2025). The literature also reveals that non-payment, late payment, and salary deductions are other forms of exploitative working conditions (Amnesty International, 2025). A Nepali migrant worker in Saudi Arabia had to work 14 hours a day without receiving salaries on time (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In addition to these issues, hazardous work conditions also arise from exploitative working environments. As indicated by the literature, migrant workers who migrate temporarily are often employed in what are commonly referred to as "three D jobs." This term refers to jobs that are

considered dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. Lack of safety is a major issue they face at work (Bouri, 2023).

Poor Living Conditions at the Destination

The literature related to Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia indicates that employers provide their employees with unhealthy food options and substandard living conditions. In addition, workers do not receive adequate sleeping facilities (Amnesty International, 2025).

Furthermore, lack of access to health facilities is another major issue faced by migrant workers. The literature also reveals that many domestic workers from different labour-sending countries undergo pre-departure medical tests to prove their suitability for employment in a foreign country, yet these migrants are often unaware of why they are tested or what the results of those medical tests mean. The riskiest aspect of this practice is that, at times, agents disclose the test results exclusively to employers (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

In addition, literature related to Sri Lankan migrant workers reveals that the restrictive nature of the Kafala system does not provide them with relief from long working hours, adequate access to medical facilities, or protection from employers, and these negative experiences adversely affect their health and well-being. The literature further indicates that lack of access to health care and poor mental and psychosocial well-being are significant issues among migrant workers in GCC countries (Shlala & Jayaweera, 2016).

Discrimination Against Migrant Workers

As revealed by the literature, discrimination is another issue faced by migrant workers. Literature related to Asian migrants reveals that they are discriminated against based on skin colour and are often subjected to longer working hours without days off or proper payment. The literature also highlights that discrimination occurs on the basis of characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and national origin (Varia, 2011).

One of the most severe consequences of discrimination is the marginalization of workers. As revealed by the literature, ethnic discrimination against Kenyan labourers occurs in GCC countries (Álvarez et al., 2022). Racial discrimination against non-nationals is also visible in GCC countries (Koch & Vora, 2015). Moreover, the literature shows that

African migrant workers in Saudi Arabia experience discrimination based on skin colour. They are often referred to as "Black animal," and children of employers sometimes point at them, laugh, and compare them to monkeys. Some migrant workers are also called "hayawana" (animal), "khaddama" (servant), and "sharmouta" (prostitute) (Amnesty International, 2025).

According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, GCC countries rank among those with the highest prevalence of modern slavery as follows: Saudi Arabia (1st), the UAE (2nd), and Kuwait (3rd), followed by Qatar (7th), Bahrain (8th), and Oman (9th) (The Global Slavery Index, 2023).

Social Exclusion of Migrant Workers

As shown by the literature, social exclusion is another issue faced by migrant workers from different countries around the world. However, most of the literature discusses how Sri Lankan labour migrants are excluded from labour laws in destination countries. In addition, the Kafala system significantly limits migrant workers' autonomy and freedom of social and physical mobility (Isabekova-Landau, 2025). However, it is notable that the existing literature is not sufficient to reveal how migrant workers are socially excluded under the Kafala system.

Isolation of Migrant Workers

When employers prevent domestic migrant workers from going anywhere without permission, they experience isolation. Most migrant workers in different countries have limited opportunities to establish meaningful connections with the existing diaspora from their home countries. Migrant workers often have no opportunity to visit or maintain contact with friends, family, or other known persons in their destination countries.

As explained in the literature, migrant workers are psychologically isolated. They feel like slaves who have no freedom under the authority of their employers. The Kafala system is recognized as a modern-day form of slavery (Sinha, 2021). Some country-specific literature related to Nepal also shows that certain migrant workers are not allowed to contact their families (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012).

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is another significant issue observed in GCC countries. The literature shows that the Kafala system recruits migrant workers either through direct recruitment or intermediaries, and the limited autonomy afforded to migrant workers often contributes to human trafficking and forced labour. Furthermore, the literature reveals that women and girls have been forcibly employed in the sex industry and domestic work, while men and boys have been employed in the construction industry and farm work (Harroff-Tavel & Nasri, 2013).

Moreover, the literature highlights how the Global Slavery Index identifies forced labour in different industries in the Middle East, including domestic work (housekeeping, nannying, cleaning), construction, agriculture (including farming and animal herding), manufacturing, seafaring (including fishing), and security services (Harroff-Tavel & Nasri, 2013).

Sex trafficking often occurs in isolated situations, making it easier for employers to sexually assault women who have been trafficked for labour. Sometimes, women begin the domestic work for which they were hired, but an employer may later sell their contract to another person who sexually exploits them. However, migrant workers often do not disclose these experiences due to social stigma and concerns about honour.

In some cases, the Kafala system is also used to enforce coercive marriages involving migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, where migrant workers have experienced marital rape and other forms of abuse (The Exodus Road, 2024; Human Rights Foundation, 2021; Walk Free, 2023). The literature also indicates that social media platforms such as Instagram, Google Play, and the Mobile App Store are used to buy and sell migrant domestic workers employed under the Kafala system in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Walk Free, 2023).

Suicidal Intentions and Deaths of Migrant Workers

Literature related to Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia reveals that migrant workers are often confined to their employers' houses. They do not have the freedom to leave or maintain companionship with friends or others. As a result of this stressful living environment, some migrant workers attempt suicide. In addition, exploitation, abuse, isolation, and

other poor working and living conditions cause emotional distress among workers. Consequently, these factors may lead migrant workers to commit suicide (Amnesty International, 2025).

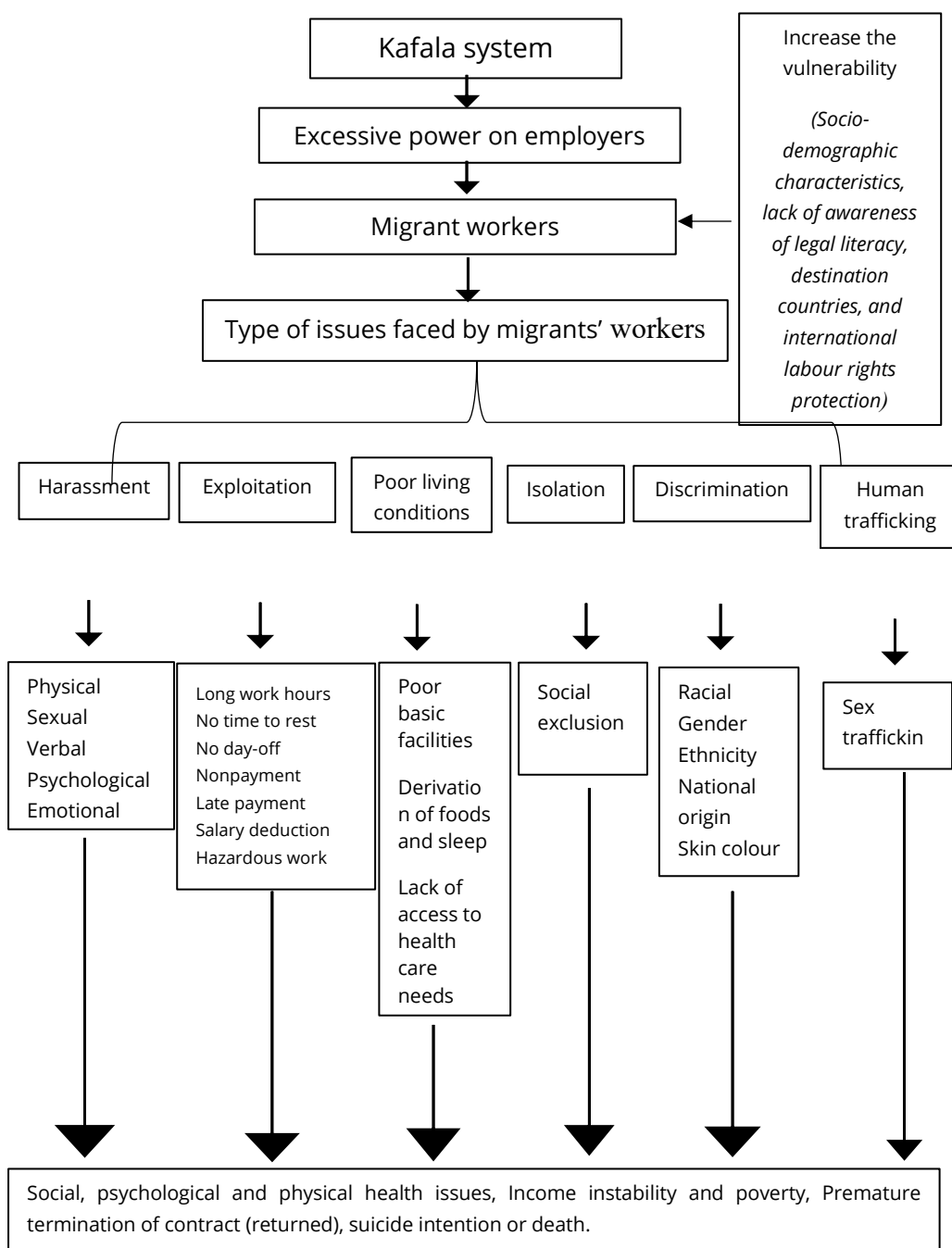
Literature related to Kuwait indicates that migrant workers attempt suicide every two days. Most reported suicide cases in Kuwait involve Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Indian migrant workers. Literature also reveals cases of Sri Lankan domestic workers attempting suicide by jumping from buildings (MRRORS, 2015).

Conceptualization of Issues Faced by Migrant Workers

The following Diagram 1 shows the issues faced by migrant workers due to the Kafala system. The excessive power given to employers becomes the root cause of all issues. The excessive power of employers makes employees more vulnerable based on their characteristics, while the lack of awareness related to legal literacy, destination countries, and international labour rights protection further increases their vulnerability. As a result, migrant workers face diverse forms of issues in the areas of discrimination, harassment, isolation, exploitation, poor living conditions, and human trafficking.

These issues affect migrant workers in different ways. Also, these issues cause social, psychological, and physical health problems for migrants. Even though there are different forms of exploitation, the literature has identified various types of labour exploitation that directly affect income stability and increase poverty among migrant workers. These issues may ultimately result in the premature termination of contracts, suicide attempts, or death. However, these issues are intricately linked, and migrants may experience several of them simultaneously.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework of migrant workers' issues under the kafala sponsorship system in GCC Countries



Source: Author prepared Figure based on literature from 2007 - 2025

Conclusion

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work) promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Target 8.8 highlights the importance of protecting labour migrants' rights and promoting a safe and secure working environment for migrant workers, with special attention to women and those in precarious employment (UNDP, 2024). Similarly, SDG Goal 10, Target 10.7 indicates the need for policies that promote orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people (United Nations, 2020). Therefore, this literature review highlights issues that require greater attention in achieving these development goals.

This article demonstrates that many of the problems faced by migrant workers stem from the excessive authority granted to employers under the Kafala system. The analysis of the existing literature has shown that the primary challenges encountered include discrimination, harassment, isolation, exploitation, poor living conditions, and human trafficking. Furthermore, it appears that these issues are interconnected and may contribute to the emergence of additional problems. Studies generally highlight the broader issues faced by migrants without giving much attention to the Kafala system. However, the root cause of most migrant workers' issues is the excessive power granted by the Kafala system. Therefore, it is important to further explore how country-specific labour laws, bilateral agreements, and memoranda of understanding can address these issues and make such interventions more gender-sensitive.

The literature analysis suggests that the necessary mechanisms to promote safe migration should be developed at each stage of the labour migration process. Strengthening pre-departure training programmes, expanding awareness programmes on labour laws and regulations, conducting language programmes to improve language skills, and increasing awareness of the context of destination countries are essential to minimize the diverse issues faced by migrant workers. Health care and counselling facilities for migrant workers should also be made accessible, and migrants' grievances should be adequately addressed by relevant embassies and local authorities.

References

- ADHRB. (2025, June 11). *Trapped in the system: Women domestic workers and Kafala in the Gulf States*. <https://www.adhrb.org/2025/06/trapped-in-the-system-women-domestic-workers-and-kafala-in-the-gulf-states/>
- Álvarez, C., Ali, A., Barton, C., Jacquemet, S., Maquitico, A., & Misra, N. (2022). *Spotlight report on global migration*. Global Coalition on Migration.
- Al Jazeera. (2024, January 5). *Saudi Arabia to remove key restrictions on foreign workers*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/11/4/saudi-arabia-plans-to-remove-key-restrictions-on-foreign-workers>
- Alzahrani, M. M. (2014). The system of kafala and the rights of migrant workers in GCC countries with specific reference to Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of Law Reform*, 16(2), 377–400.
- Amnesty International. (2025, May 13). *Saudi Arabia: Migrant domestic workers face severe exploitation, racism and exclusion from labour protections*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/saudi-arabia-migrant-domestic-workers-face-severe-exploitation-racism-and-exclusion-from-labour-protections/>
- Aslam, M. (2025). Kafala system and migrant workers: A critical analysis of labor exploitation in the Middle East. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL*, 8(1), 1549–1557.
- Azhari, A. (2016/17). The Kafāla 'sponsorship' system in Saudi Arabia: A critical analysis from the perspective of international human rights and Islamic law. *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 10, 61–80.
- Bajracharya, R., & Sijapati, B. (2012). *The Kafala system and its implications for Nepali domestic workers*. Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility.
- BBC. (2020, November 4). *Saudi Arabia eases 'kafala' system restrictions on migrant workers*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54813515>
- Bouri, C. (2023, September 17). *The Kafala system is facilitating labor abuses in the Middle East*. Lawfare. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-kafala-system-is-facilitating-labor-abuses-in-the-middle-east>
- Columbia Political Review. (2025, January 21). *Killing Kafala: Modern slavery and abolition in the Middle East*.

<https://www.cpreview.org/articles/2023/2/killing-kafala-modern-slavery-and-abolition-in-the-middle-east>

El-Dekmak, N. (2025, March 21). *Reforming the Kafala system: Persistent violations of the rights of migrant domestic workers and the role of private recruitment agencies*. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/03/21/reforming-the-kafala-system-persistent-violations-of-the-rights-of-migrant-domestic-workers-and-the-role-of-private-recruitment-agencies/>

Fargues, P., & Shash, N. M. (2018). *Migration to the Gulf: Policies in sending and receiving countries*. Gulf Research Center.

Gollwitzer, P. M. (1996). The volitional benefits of planning. In P. M. Gollwitzer & J. A. Bargh (Eds.), *The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior* (pp. 287–312). Guilford Press.

Harroff-Tavel, H., & Nasri, A. (2013). *Tricked and trapped: Human trafficking in the Middle East*. International Labour Organization.

Heckhausen, H. (1991). *Motivation and action*. Springer.

Human Rights Foundation. (2021, June 17). *Is Saudi Arabia's Kafala system truly reformed?* <https://archive.hrf.org/is-saudi-arabias-kafala-system-truly-reformed/>

Human Rights Watch. (2007). *Exported and exposed: Abuses against Sri Lankan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates*. Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch. (2021, March 25). *Saudi Arabia: Labor reforms insufficient*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/saudi-arabia-labor-reforms-insufficient>

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024*. Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch. (2024, December 4). *Die first, and I'll pay you later: Saudi Arabia's giga-projects built on widespread labor abuses*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/12/04/die-first-and-ill-pay-you-later/saudi-arabias-giga-projects-built-widespread>

International Labour Organization. (2014). *Realizing a fair migration agenda: Labour flows between Asia and Arab States*. International Labour Organization.

International Labour Organization. (2015). *Protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers: Good practices and lessons learned from the Arab region*. International Labour Organization.

International Labour Organization. (2016). *Gender sensitivity in labour migration-related agreements and MOUs*. International Labour Office.

International Labour Organization. (2017). *Employer-migrant worker relationships in the Middle East: Exploring scope for internal labour market mobility and fair migration*. International Labour Organization.

International Labour Organization. (2025, March 20). *Domestic workers in the Arab States*. <https://www.ilo.org/regions-and-countries/arab-states/domestic-workers-arab-states>

International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World migration report 2024*. International Organization for Migration.

International Organization for Migration. (2024, January 18). *Interviewing migrant workers about their recruitment and employment experiences*. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/IOM-Tool-2.pdf>

Isabekova-Landau, G. (2025, May 23). *The Kafala system and Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers*. Social Policy Worldwide. <https://socialpolicyworldwide.org/post/the-kafala-system-and-sri-lankan-migrant-domestic-workers-44>

Kagan, S., & Cholewinski, R. (2022). *Reforming the sponsorship system in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Opportunities and challenges as a result of COVID-19 and the fiscal crisis*. Gulf Research Centre.

Lee, S. (2024). *The hidden atrocity of the Kafala system: Addressing the domestic and sexual abuse against female migrant workers in Qatar* (Capstone project).

Malaeb, H. N. (2015). The “Kafala” system and human rights: Time for a decision. *Arab Law Quarterly*, 29(4), 307–342.

Mechale, A., Montes, C., Mpundu, G., Napolitano, N., & Sliney, C. (2021). *Reducing precarity for female domestic migrant workers in the Kafala system*. University of Pennsylvania.

MRRORS. (2015, February 6). *Every two days a migrant worker attempts or commits suicide in Kuwait*. <https://www.mrrors.org/2010/03/every-two-days-a-migrant-worker-attempts-or-commits-suicide-in-kuwait/>

Koch, N., & Vora, N. (2015). Everyday inclusions: Rethinking ethnocracy, Kafala, and belonging in the Arabian Peninsula. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15(3), 540–552.

Robinson, K. (2022, November 18). *What is the Kafala system?* Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>

Shah, N. M. (2013). Labour migration from Asian to GCC countries: Trends, patterns and policies. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 5(1–2), 36–70.

Shlala, E. H., & Jayaweera, H. (2016). The right to health: Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the GCC. *Middle East Women's and Gender History*.

Sinha, M. (2021). Treatment of migrant workers in the Middle East: Modern-day slavery? *ANU Undergraduate Research Journal*, 11(1), 144–154.

Sönmez, S., Apostolopoulos, Y., Tran, D., & Rentrop, S. (2011). Human rights and health disparities for migrant workers in the UAE. *Health and Human Rights*, 13(2), 17–35.

The Exodus Road. (2024, March 22). *Human trafficking in the Middle East*. <https://theexodusroad.com/human-trafficking-middle-east/>

United Nations. (2020). *SDG indicator 10.7.2*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

United Nations Development Programme. (2024, January 10). *What are the Sustainable Development Goals?* <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

Varia, N. (2011). Sweeping changes: A review of recent reforms on protections for migrant workers in Asia and the Middle East. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 23(1), 265–288.

Walk Free. (2023). *Global Slavery Index 2023*. Minderoo Foundation.

Walk Free. (2023, May 23). *Modern slavery on social media*.
<https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/spotlights/modern-slavery-on-social-media/>