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EKIN SNY MUN BACKGROUND GUIDE

Committee: GA3 - SOCHUM

Topic: The Issue of Migrant Workers in
the Countries of the Gulf Cooperation
Council



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Table of contents

Welcome Speech	1
Introduction	3
Background	5
Past International Action	7
Main Problems Facing Migrant Workers	8
Possible Solutions	9
Questions to Consider	10
For Further Research	11



WELCOME SPEECH

Aya, Ali, and Ada would like to extend to you a heartfelt welcome to SOCHUM. All three of us have not only been deeply immersed in the committee's work around social, humanitarian, and cultural issues but we have also pursued the subject at an academic level. We bring you this guide as an information beacon for you to kickstart your research journey and to pinpoint many of the most salient advancements on the social front. We are beyond excited to serve as dais members in facilitating such indispensable discussions about the issue of migrant workers in the GCC region, a topic that not only demands immediate attention but also urgent action.

The General Assembly

The United Nations General Assembly Third Committee (also known as the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, SOCHUM, or C3) is one of six main committees of the General Assembly at the United Nations. It deals with human rights, humanitarian affairs, and social matters.

The Third Committee meets every year in early October and aims to finish its work by the end of November. All 193 member states of the United Nations (UN) can attend. As in previous sessions, an important part of the committee's work will focus on the examination of human rights questions, including reports of the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, which was established in 2006.

The General Assembly of the United Nations was established in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations. It occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprised of all 193 Members, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter. It also plays a central role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law. With the conclusion of the general debate, the Assembly begins consideration of the substantive items on its agenda. Because of the great number of items on the agenda, the Assembly allocates to its six Main Committees items relevant to their work. The Committees discuss matters under the agenda items and recommend draft resolutions and decisions to the Assembly for consideration and action.



The General Assembly of the United Nations has 6 [main committees](#):

- [First Committee \(Disarmament & International Security\)](#).
- [Second Committee \(Economic & Financial\)](#).
- [Third Committee \(Social, Humanitarian & Cultural\)](#).
- [Fourth Committee \(Special Political & Decolonization\)](#).
- [Fifth Committee \(Administrative & Budgetary\)](#).
- [Sixth Committee \(Legal\)](#).

Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Issues (Third Committee)

The Third Committee deals with human rights, humanitarian affairs, and social issues. This includes questions relating to the advancement of women, the protection of children, the treatment of refugees through the elimination of racism and discrimination, the promotion of fundamental freedoms and the right to self-determination, indigenous issues, and a range of social matters such as issues related to youth, family, aging, persons with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and international drug control. The “promotion and protection of human rights” is considered the most important agenda item and makes up about half of the work of the Committee.

At the 2nd plenary meeting of its seventy-ninth session, held on 13 September 2024, the General Assembly took decisions pertaining to the allocation of items to the Third Committee (see [A/79/252](#)). The agenda items allocated by the General Assembly to the Third Committee are issued in document [A/C.3/79/1](#). Background information on those items may be found in the annotations to the agenda (see [A/79/100](#)).



Introduction

For many years, the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) member states have struggled with the issue of migrant labor. Due in great part to the oil boom, the current migratory wave began in the 1960s and grew more intense in the 1970s and 1980s. The majority of those who migrated to the Gulf region during that time were from neighboring Arab nations. However, migrant laborers today are usually from Southeast Asia, including several African nations, and South Asia, especially from Bangladesh, India, or Pakistan.

In fact, migrant laborers make up a sizable portion of each GCC state's total population. For example, almost 90% of people in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are foreigners; in Kuwait, two-thirds, in Bahrain and Oman, half; and in Saudi Arabia, one-third. The GCC countries are therefore characterized by their high levels of remittances; this is the money sent by migrant workers back to their families in their countries of origin.



In addition to the domestic sector, migrant workers are especially involved in the construction, sanitation, transportation, hospitality, and healthcare industries. Despite having low levels of expertise, many of these workers make significant contributions to the economic growth and prosperity of their home nations. The construction of stadiums to host the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the structures for Expo 2020 in Dubai (which is confirmed to have brought about \$33 billion to the United Arab Emirates' economy), and the facilities to host the G20 summit in Riyadh in November 2020 are just a few of the major GCC projects which migrants have been involved in since May 2020.

The Gulf Cooperation Council



In 1981, the leaders of the United Arab Emirates, the State of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, and the State of Kuwait, held a meeting in Abu Dhabi. During this meeting, they reached a cooperative formula that includes their six countries, aiming to achieve coordination. The statute of the Cooperation Council specifies the Council's objectives to enhance coordination, integration, and interconnection among member states in all fields to strengthen their unity and ties between their people and establish similar systems in various economic, financial, commercial, customs, and transportation fields, and in educational, cultural, social, health, media, and tourism affairs. This includes legislative, administrative, scientific, and technical progress in the fields of industry, mining, agriculture, aquatic and livestock resources, creating scientific research centers, establishing joint projects, and encouraging private sector cooperation.



Background

Removing existing restrictions and empowering more migrant workers to change jobs in their country of destination can bring critical benefits to the effective functioning of labor markets, reduce the cost and time required for recruitment, and ensure more effective job matching.

Enabling a more dynamic and fluid labor market has become an ever-greater priority as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a context where some employers had to let go of workers because of financial difficulties, while other employers struggled to

fill vacancies because of restrictions on international recruitment. A number of countries in the region are making deep reforms to achieve more flexibility in their labor markets while also addressing the potential for abuse inherent in an unbalanced employment relationship, but more needs to be done both on the legislative and implementation sides. In particular, there is an urgent need to do away with the 'absconding regime' which gives employers the power to declare their workers as having 'run away', causing automatic termination of their residence and work permits.



The human rights issues associated with the kafala (sponsorship) system, including the operation of the absconding framework, have been highlighted by a number of international labor bodies, such as:

- The International Labor Organization (ILO) Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR);
- The UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Human Rights Committee (HRC), the Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW), and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); and
- The UN Human Rights Council special procedures mandate holders, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons and the human rights of migrants.

These international labor bodies have all drawn attention to the need for urgent reform of the sponsorship system due to the risk to migrant workers of abuse, exploitation, forced labor, and trafficking in persons.

Several recent CEACR comments have reaffirmed the incompatibility of the absconding framework with key ILO Conventions ratified by most Arab States, including two fundamental Conventions: the [Forced Labour Convention, 1930 \(No. 29\)](#), and the [Discrimination \(Employment and Occupation\) Convention, 1958 \(No. 111\)](#).

There are two ILO Conventions concerning migrant workers, which the Arab States have not ratified, and which refer to internal labor market mobility for migrant workers. One of them, the [Migrant Workers \(Supplementary Provisions\) Convention, 1975 \(No. 143\)](#), builds on the equal treatment provisions found in the [Migration for Employment Convention \(Revised\), 1949 \(No. 97\)](#).

In its Part II, [Convention No. 143](#) aims to ensure equal opportunity and treatment of migrant workers in a regular situation through the adoption of a national policy, including affording migrant workers in regular situations free access to the labor market subject to certain conditions related to legal residence and holding a work permit, among others.

The ILO has supported the development of new evidence-based research on the topics of sponsorship reform and internal labor market mobility for migrant workers. This includes the following:

- [Country briefs of the regulatory frameworks governing migrant workers in the Arab States \(2023-2024\)](#).
- Thematic brief (2021): [Promoting internal labor market mobility in the Arab States](#).
- Academic paper (2021): [Reforming the sponsorship system in the Gulf Council Cooperation countries: Opportunities and challenges as a result of COVID-19 and the fiscal crisis](#).
- White paper (2017): [Employer-migrant worker relationships in the Middle East: Exploring scope for internal labor market mobility and fair migration](#).
- Policy brief (2024): [Employer survey of internal labor market mobility: Promoting a more flexible workforce in Kuwait](#).
- Policy brief (forthcoming): Doing away with absconding: A roadmap to a rights-based approach to labor contract termination in the Arab States, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Women, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).
- [Synthesis report \(2023\) Temporary labor migration: Unpacking complexities](#).
- ILO Governing Body [Paper](#) (13 October 2022) and [Decision concerning temporary labour migration](#) (3 November 2022).



Past International Action

In addition to the conventions mentioned above, several attempts have been made to draw attention to and tackle the issue of workers' rights in the region. The list below focuses on the main international actions taken on this issue:

1. The Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD) Summit in 2024: this was one of the most recent summits in which this issue was discussed. During the event, which was organized and led by the International Labor Organization, participants engaged in conversations that suggested pathways to secure workers' rights in line with international labor standards.
2. Amnesty International: the organization focuses on raising awareness and advocating for the rights of workers who suffer from the "kafala system."
3. Human Rights Watch: an important NGO that works on raising awareness around preventing human rights abuse. It also carries out detailed investigations and has done some important work on this topic.
4. ILO advocacy: The International Labor Organization has carried out awareness campaigns as well as dialogues with involved states. Their most recent action on this topic is the 4-year Plan of Joint Activities (2025-2029). This initiative aims to "strengthen cooperation and promote the Decent Work Agenda across the GCC region." The new plan was developed between the ILO Regional Office for the Arab States and the GCC Executive Bureau. The main concerns of the program include new forms of work, resolving labor disputes, future skills forecasting, green jobs and a just transition, gender equality, occupational safety and health, minimum wage systems, prevention of forced labor and trafficking, employment policies, and social protection.



Main Problems Facing Migrant Workers

Key barriers facing migrant workers, as indicated by the ILO, include the design of the migration system, the challenging political economy, and the limited representation and bargaining power of migrant workers. Practical barriers facing migrant workers mainly encompass migrant workers' access to social protection provisions which can be hindered by bureaucracy, geography, affordability, language, and challenges with securing or having ID/documentation. On the flipside, key enablers indicated by the ILO are emerging channels for migrant worker representation, advocacy, and international attention and commitments.

Furthermore, migrant workers' dependence on employers under the kafala system can hinder their access to social protection as well as their ability to make a complaint if this access is restricted. Although immigration sponsorship systems are common in many parts of the world, the type of sponsorship arrangements prevalent in the Middle East, often referred to as the kafala system, severely limits migrant workers' opportunity to leave an employer, creates risks of human rights abuses and labor exploitation, including forced labor, and impedes their internal labor market mobility*.



*Internal labor market mobility can loosely be defined as migrant workers' ability to terminate employment, switch to a different employer, renew their work permit, or leave the destination country without the approval of their employer, including during the contract period.

Possible Solutions

Taking Better Working Conditions Into Account

The GCC nations should endeavor to alter the demands and rights of migrant workers to enhance their rights. Some potential ideas include raising earnings and salaries, compensating for overtime, and prohibiting excessive overtime.

Changing Labor Laws

GCC nations' labor laws might be improved and modified to allow migrant workers to work to achieve greater freedom and rights. Because they would be treated decently, changes would encourage and draw migrant workers with greater skill and experience to work in GCC countries.

Abolishing the Kafala System

Migrant workers may gain more influence if the Kafala system is eliminated, giving people greater authority over their lives and workplaces. Although the kafala system provides a methodical framework for handling migrant labor, it gives employers undue power and limits workers' freedom over important facets of their lives, such as having a passport and choosing when to take time off. In other words, the system eliminates fundamental rights even though it grants migrant workers legal status and makes their admission easier into GCC countries.

Improving the rights and circumstances of migrant workers in the GCC requires the abolition of the kafala system to manage this shift and maintain a balanced regulatory framework without sacrificing the control required for efficient labor management; however, meticulous planning is needed for this to happen.

Encouraging Migrant Workers to Voice Their Concerns and Opinions

One of the most important steps in establishing a safer workplace is allowing foreign workers to express their views and lodge complaints. The GCC nations can create workable procedures for employees to voice issues and look for solutions by taking cues from procedures in areas like Europe, Canada, and the United States of America. Establishing easily available avenues for employee feedback, including support services, internet forums, or dedicated hotlines, guarantees that employees may voice concerns without worrying about retaliation. In the end, this proactive strategy helps to improve working conditions for migrant workers in the GCC by promoting responsibility and transparency.



Questions to Consider

1. Even though eliminating the Kafala System seems like a good idea for the workers, how can we ensure that their rights are preserved during the transition process?
2. Why is empowering workers in the region important, and how can it help with raising awareness?
3. How can we ensure that legislation and frameworks developed to mitigate migrant workers' concerns about their rights under the kafala system are being implemented effectively?
4. How can transparency be ensured during the implementation of the solutions you have developed?





FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Terms and Concepts



- International recruitment
- Absconding regime
- Human rights of migrants
- Sponsorship system reform
- Kafala system
- Internal labor market mobility
- The Global Forum for Migration and Development