

Structural Drivers and Ongoing Prevalence of Labor Rights Violations in Qatar: Late Wage Payments, Passport Confiscation, and Enforcement Gaps

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Contents

1. Introduction: Structural Conditions Behind Persistent Labor Rights Violations in Qatar	2
1.1 The Strategic Imperative of Qatarization: Context, Goals, and Progress	2
1.1.1 Demographic and Economic Context	3
1.1.2 The Kafala System and the Foundation for Reform	3
1.1.3 A Landmark Legislative Reform Agenda	4
1.2 The Duality of Reform: Persistent Violations	5
1.2.1 Late or Non-Payment of Wages (Wage Theft)	5
1.2.2 Passport Confiscation and Document Retention	5
1.2.3 Coercion and Retaliation: The Persistence of Kafala-like Controls	6
1.2.4 Barriers to Redress	6
1.3 The Central Problem: A Persistent Gap Between Law and Practice	6
1.3.1 Recruitment Debt as a Core Driver of Exploitation	7
1.3.2 Subcontracting and the Diffusion of Responsibility	7
1.3.3 The Legacy of Kafala and a Climate of Fear	7
2. Key Drivers of Violations: Employer Motivations and Worker Vulnerabilities	8
2.1 The Psychological Contract: Expatriate Expectations vs. Organizational Realities	8
2.1.1 The Mechanics of Deception and Debt	8
2.1.2 The Cycle of Debt and Dependency	8
2.2 The Labyrinth of Subcontracting: Diffusing Responsibility for Wages	8
2.2.1 Employer control over residency, housing, and documents	9
2.2.2 Enforcement Gaps and Slow Dispute Resolution	9
2.2.3 Worker awareness, language access, and trust	10
3. Prevalence of Key Violations: Data and Systemic Indicators	11

3.1 Wage Theft and Late Payment: Evidence of a Systemic Crisis	11
3.1.1 The Scale of Labor Complaints	11
3.1.2 Centrality of Wage-Related Grievances	12
3.1.3 A Financial Indicator of Systemic Abuse	12
3.2 Passport Confiscation: A Persistent Tool of Control	13
3.2.1 The Legal Framework versus The Reality on the Ground.....	13
3.2.2 A Tool of Coercion and Control	13
3.2.3 Nuances in Passport Retention	13
4. Policy and Enforcement Landscape: State Mechanisms and Their Limitations	15
4.1 The Wage Protection System (WPS): Design, Progress, and Loopholes	15
4.1.1 Design and Mandate	15
4.1.2 Documented Impact and Progress	15
4.2 State Institutions: Key Policy Levers for Change	17
4.2.1 The Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs): A High-Volume System Under Strain.....	17
4.2.2 The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF): A Vital but Limited Safety Net.....	18
5. Conclusion.....	20
Key Takeaways:.....	21
6. References	21

1. Introduction: Structural Conditions Behind Persistent Labor Rights Violations in Qatar

This introduction establishes the fundamental context of Qatar's labor market, outlining the strategic reforms undertaken and defining the persistent gap between legal frameworks and on-the-ground realities for migrant workers.

1.1 The Strategic Imperative of Qatarization: Context, Goals, and Progress

Qatar's strategic goal of developing a competitive and diversified economy under its National Vision 2030 is fundamentally shaped by the unique structure of its labor market (General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP) 2008). This market is defined by one of the world's most pronounced demographic asymmetries, a condition that has both enabled rapid economic growth and created structural challenges for labor rights enforcement.

1.1.1 Demographic and Economic Context

The Qatari economic boom, fueled by its vast hydrocarbon wealth, created a demand for labor that far outstripped the capacity of its small national population. This necessitated a massive importation of foreign workers, which has been a core policy response to an expanding labor market (Wagle 2024). This demographic imbalance has been a consistent feature for years, establishing a structural reliance on migrant labor. The table below illustrates the composition of the economically active population from 2018 to 2023, highlighting the scale of this dependency.

Table 1: Economically Active Population (15 Years and Over) in Qatar by Nationality (2018-2023)

Year	Qatari Labor Force	Non-Qatari Labor Force	Total Labor Force	% of Non-Qataris in Total Labor Force
2018	106,262	1,990,285	2,096,547	94.9%
2019	107,772	2,002,128	2,109,900	94.9%
2020	110,781	2,020,949	2,131,730	94.8%
2021	115,865	1,908,052	2,023,917	94.3%
2022	121,196	2,011,492	2,132,688	94.3%
2023	124,665	2,057,606	2,182,271	94.3%

Note: Data is compiled from Qatar’s official data portal (“Economically Active Population (15 Years & Above) by Nationality & Gender”). The ‘Total Labor Force’ and ‘% of Non-Qataris in Total Labor Force’ columns are calculated by the author. The economically active population includes all persons aged 15 and over who are either employed or unemployed (National Planning Council (NPC) 2025b).

As the data demonstrates, the proportion of non-Qataris in the economically active population has consistently remained around 94% in recent years, underscoring the structural nature of this dependency. Latest figures from the fourth quarter of 2024 confirm this trend, with non-Qataris constituting approximately 94.4% of the total economically active population (NPC 2025a). This demographic reality is even more pronounced in the private sector, where non-nationals accounted for 99.4% of the employed population in 2023 (NPC 2025c; Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM) 2024).

This reliance on foreign labor is coupled with a deep segmentation of the workforce. The vast majority of migrant workers are employed in lower-wage sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic work (De Bel-Air 2017). Conversely, the Qatari workforce is primarily concentrated in the public sector, with 82% of the total Qatari labor force employed there (NPC n.d.). The national strategy of “Qatarization” is therefore aimed at increasing the participation of Qatari citizens in the private sector, a goal that requires addressing complex economic and social incentives.

1.1.2 The Kafala System and the Foundation for Reform

Historically, the relationship between employers and migrant workers in Qatar was governed by the kafala (sponsorship) system. This framework, common across the Gulf region, legally bound

a foreign worker's employment and residency status to a single, specific sponsor known as a kafeel, who was typically their employer (Alkhaled 2023; Wagle 2024). This system granted sponsors significant control over workers, creating a power imbalance that was widely identified as a key driver of labor rights violations, including exploitation and forced labor (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2022a; De Bel-Air 2017).

Recognizing these structural challenges, and in alignment with its National Vision 2030, Qatar has, over the last decade, embarked on a comprehensive and ambitious legislative reform agenda. This agenda, developed in close cooperation with the ILO and other international partners, has aimed to dismantle the most problematic aspects of the kafala system and establish a modern labor market framework that protects workers' rights (ILO 2022a; ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). The country's Third National Development Strategy (2024-2030) explicitly acknowledges this "notable progress... towards a more fair and equitable labour market, with the introduction of reforms that set a minimum wage and improve worker mobility and protection" (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025; Planning and Statistics Authority (PSA) 2024).

1.1.3 A Landmark Legislative Reform Agenda

The strategic reforms undertaken, particularly in the years surrounding the 2022 FIFA World Cup, represent a significant overhaul of Qatar's legal framework for labor. Key pillars of this agenda include:

- **Enhanced Labor Mobility:** The "No Objection Certificate" (NOC), a requirement for workers to get their employer's permission to change jobs, was abolished. This has fundamentally transformed labor mobility. Between September 2020 and October 2023, authorities approved 669,198 job change applications, a stark contrast to the pre-reform era (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). In addition, exit permit requirements were eliminated for the vast majority of workers, including domestic workers, allowing them to leave the country without employer permission.
- **Wage and Wage Protection:** Through Law No. 17 of 2020, Qatar became the first country in the region to introduce a non-discriminatory minimum wage, which entered into force in March 2021 (State of Qatar 2020a). The law mandates a minimum monthly basic wage of QAR 1,000, plus allowances for food (QAR 300) and housing (QAR 500) if not provided by the employer (State of Qatar 2020a). This reform directly benefited over 400,000 workers, or 20% of the private sector workforce (ILO 2021). Compliance is monitored through the **Wage Protection System (WPS)**, an electronic salary transfer system in which 96% of eligible workers are registered (Ministry of Labour (MoL) 2021).
- **Dispute Resolution and Worker Support:** To accelerate the adjudication of labor complaints, specialized **Labour Dispute Settlement Committees** were established. To provide a safety net for workers whose employers fail to pay wages due to insolvency or other issues, the **Workers' Support and Insurance Fund** was created. As of August 2023, the fund had disbursed approximately QAR 2.3 billion, with direct payments reaching more than 70,000 workers (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023).

This comprehensive suite of reforms establishes a new legal foundation for labor relations in Qatar, shifting from a sponsorship-based model to one centered on a regulated contractual relationship.

1.2 The Duality of Reform: Persistent Violations

Despite Qatar's ambitious labor reforms, a significant gap between law and practice persists. International human rights organizations, United Nations bodies, the U.S. State Department, and academic researchers continue to document serious and systemic labor rights violations (U.S. Department of State 2025a). While legal frameworks have been modernized, their implementation and enforcement remain inconsistent, allowing foundational problems to endure (Calo 2023).

1.2.1 Late or Non-Payment of Wages (Wage Theft)

Wage theft remains the most common and persistent form of exploitation faced by migrant workers in Qatar (Amnesty International 2022b). This includes employers delaying wages for weeks or months, paying less than the contractually promised amount, or imposing arbitrary deductions. The U.S. Department of State's 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report noted that in a single year, Qatari prosecutors classified 8,199 cases of non-payment of wages as administrative violations under residency and labor laws, rather than pursuing them as potential criminal trafficking offenses, which weakens deterrence (U.S. Department of State 2025b).

The consistent availability of official data, while highlighting the scale of the problem, is a critical element for data-driven policy analysis and tracking long-term trends (Ewers 2016). More recent data from the Qatari Ministry of Labour and the ILO show that wage-related grievances continue to be the primary cause for complaints. The Ministry of Labour's own statistical bulletins consistently illustrate this high volume. For instance, in February 2023, the Labour Disputes Department received 2,374 complaints, with 1,480 remaining under consideration by the end of the period (MoL 2023). This trend continued, with another 2,212 new complaints filed in February 2024 (MoL 2024b).

Highlighting the sheer scale of the issue, the bulletin for the second quarter (Q2) of 2025 reported that while 1,844 new worker complaints were received, a total of 4,951 cases were handled (3,358 settled amicably and 1,593 referred to committees), indicating a significant ongoing backlog from previous periods. During that quarter alone, 1,593 cases were escalated to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees, which in turn issued 1,484 rulings (MoL 2025b). These figures demonstrate that thousands of workers continue to experience wage disputes severe enough to require formal intervention each quarter. This data aligns with reports suggesting the post-World Cup economic slowdown has exacerbated the problem, with some employers telling workers to wait indefinitely for new projects without pay, leaving them in a precarious situation (Human Rights Watch 2023).

1.2.2 Passport Confiscation and Document Retention

Qatari law prohibits employers from confiscating workers' passports. However, the practice remains widespread and is a significant tool of control. A major survey by Gardner et al. (2013) found that an overwhelming 90% of low-income migrant workers reported that their employer possessed their passport. The U.S. State Department has repeatedly identified this practice as a core trafficking risk, noting in its 2024 and 2025 reports that "the vast majority of expatriate workers' passports were in their employers' possession" (U.S. Department of State 2025a; 2025b).

This assessment is corroborated by the Qatari government itself. The 2024 National Report on Combating Human Trafficking explicitly lists the “possession of fraudulent identity documents or cases where documents are withheld by employers” as a key indicator for first responders to identify potential victims of human trafficking (MoL and National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking (NCCHT) 2024). While some workers may voluntarily hand over their passports for safekeeping due to a lack of secure storage in their accommodations (Gardner et al. 2013), the practice is a key indicator of forced labor as it severely restricts a worker’s ability to leave the country, change jobs, or even file official complaints without fear of immediate retaliation (Amnesty International 2022b).

1.2.3 Coercion and Retaliation: The Persistence of Kafala-like Controls

While the legal requirement for workers to obtain a No-Objection Certificate (NOC) to change jobs has been abolished, its use persists in practice, representing a significant remnant of the previous sponsorship (*kafala*) system (Jureidini 2019). This environment enables employers to use a range of retaliatory and coercive tactics against workers who try to assert their rights.

Such tactics include filing false “absconding” charges, which can lead to a worker’s arrest and deportation, or unilaterally cancelling a worker’s Residence Permit (QID), rendering them undocumented (ILO 2025). Employer control also extends to housing for many low-wage workers, particularly in construction and domestic work. This arrangement gives employers immense leverage, as a worker who files a complaint can be instantly evicted, leaving them without shelter or income (Kalush and Saraswathi 2024). Despite legal standards, reports persist of workers being housed in crowded, unsanitary, and hazardous labor camps, sometimes with dozens of people to a single room and inadequate access to clean water or electricity (N. H. Nasir, Haque, and Awang 2023).

These practices, controlling a worker’s legal status and their basic housing, effectively recreate the power imbalances of the older *kafala* system, where the employer maintains excessive control over a worker’s life and freedom of movement (Offia 2023).

1.2.4 Barriers to Redress

Qatar established specialized Labour Dispute Settlement Committees in 2018 to accelerate the adjudication of labor complaints. However, workers continue to face significant barriers to accessing justice. Reports from the U.S. State Department and academic analysis note that complaint resolution often involves “onerous, six-month-plus timelines,” undermining the intended purpose of a “fast-track” mechanism (U.S. Department of State 2025a; Calo 2023).

For low-wage workers who are already indebted and not receiving a salary, such lengthy delays are devastating (Amnesty International 2023a). Furthermore, even when workers receive a favorable ruling from the committees, they often struggle to collect compensation, as some employers refuse to comply or have become insolvent. This often forces workers to accept settlements for far less than they are owed or abandon their cases entirely and return to their home countries empty-handed (Human Rights Watch 2023).

1.3 The Central Problem: A Persistent Gap Between Law and Practice

The central problem in Qatar’s labor market is not the absence of legal reforms but the persistence of structural conditions that allow labor rights violations to endure. Key drivers, combined with the lingering power imbalances of the *kafala* system, create an environment

where exploitation is profitable for employers and challenging for workers to contest (Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).

1.3.1 Recruitment Debt as a Core Driver of Exploitation

A primary structural driver of violations is the pervasive issue of recruitment debt. Many migrant workers arrive in Qatar already indebted, having mobilized significant resources, often at exorbitant interest rates, to cover migration costs (Raj and Rahman 2023). While Qatari law prohibits charging recruitment fees to workers, the practice continues through informal and unregulated networks that operate outside its jurisdiction (Aslam 2025; Khan 2022). This systematic cost-shifting is often driven by an “inverted payment chain,” where recruitment costs are passed down to workers through a network of sub-agents, inflating the final amount with kickbacks for visas and other illicit charges (Starbird 2017).

An investigation by The Guardian revealed the scale of these costs, finding that migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal typically pay fees of \$3,000 to \$4,000 and \$1,000 to \$1,500, respectively. For many low-wage workers earning as little as \$275 a month, this means working for at least a year just to pay off these fees (Pattisson and Acharya 2023).

This pre-migration debt is a foundational element of modern bonded labor, fundamentally restricting a worker’s bargaining power. Workers burdened by loans are more likely to tolerate abusive conditions, such as delayed or unpaid wages, for fear of losing their jobs before they can repay their debts. This dynamic gives employers significant leverage, knowing that indebted workers are desperate to avoid deportation (Mottaz 2023).

1.3.2 Subcontracting and the Diffusion of Responsibility

The structure of Qatar’s large-scale infrastructure projects often relies on multi-layered subcontracting, which diffuses responsibility for wage payments and worker welfare. The challenges posed by these complex supply chains are well-documented, with the ILO identifying the construction sector’s reliance on “often long and complex sub-contracting and supply chains” as a key source of worker vulnerability in Qatar (ILO and Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs of Qatar (ADLSA) 2021). In this system, a major firm contracts a primary supplier, which then outsources labor to smaller subcontractors. When financial problems arise, it is typically the subcontractors at the bottom of the chain who stop paying wages, while the main contractor and the client often deny responsibility, stating that the affected workers are not their direct employees.

This multi-tiered system creates significant barriers for workers seeking redress. They often cannot identify, let alone sue, the financially stronger entities higher up the contracting chain. This structure allows wage theft to persist even with the Wage Protection System (WPS) in place, as the system can detect late payments but cannot ensure wages are paid when a subcontractor collapses or defaults. As a result, even with reforms like the WPS, enforcement remains weak and the system’s effectiveness is undermined (Aslam 2025).

1.3.3 The Legacy of Kafala and a Climate of Fear

Despite significant legal reforms, remnants of the kafala system persist in practice, as outlined in Section 1.2.3. This persistent power imbalance, rooted in employer control over a worker’s legal residency and housing, fosters a climate of fear that deters workers from reporting violations

(Babar and Vora 2022). This fear, combined with a lack of awareness of their rights and limited access to legal support, creates significant barriers to justice.

2. Key Drivers of Violations: Employer Motivations and Worker Vulnerabilities

This section dissects the structural forces that make violations like wage theft and passport confiscation both profitable for employers and difficult for workers to challenge.

2.1 The Psychological Contract: Expatriate Expectations vs. Organizational Realities

Many migrant workers arrive in Qatar with a set of expectations that are often broken upon arrival. This disconnect is rooted in a recruitment system where significant costs and risks are shifted onto the workers.

2.1.1 The Mechanics of Deception and Debt

As outlined in Section 1.3.1, most low-wage migrant workers arrive already indebted due to recruitment fees passed down through informal agent chains; this debt amplifies the impact of later contract substitution and delayed payment. This financial burden is compounded by deceptive practices like contract substitution, where the terms of employment change between the initial offer and the final contract signed upon arrival (Jayaprakash 2024). A 2019 survey confirmed that 32% of workers in Qatar received a lower salary than what they were originally promised (Fargues, Shah, and Brouwer 2019). This discrepancy represents a fundamental breach of the psychological contract, leaving workers with less income to repay the debts they incurred.

2.1.2 The Cycle of Debt and Dependency

This pre-migration debt is a cornerstone of modern bonded labor, creating a cycle of dependency with several cascading consequences:

- **Tolerance for Abuse:** Indebtedness forces workers to accept harsh working conditions they might otherwise refuse (Alowais and Suliman 2025). This situation creates a “sunk cost effect,” a psychological trap where the worker feels compelled to continue in an exploitative situation to justify the initial financial sacrifice (Babbitt et al. 2023).
- **Leverage for Employers:** Employers can delay wage payments, knowing that workers are “powerless to challenge them” under the threat of deportation (Amnesty International 2022a).
- **Passport and ID Control:** The practice of employers holding workers’ passports or residence cards is a key tool of control, preventing workers from leaving the country or seeking other employment (Gardner et al. 2013).

2.2 The Labyrinth of Subcontracting: Diffusing Responsibility for Wages

Large infrastructure, hospitality, logistics, delivery, and private security operations in Qatar often rely on tiered subcontracting: a major firm (or event organizer) contracts a primary supplier, which in turn outsources to secondary or tertiary subcontractors that directly employ the workers.

When cash-flow problems appear at the bottom of this chain, the worker's practical access to wages often depends on state intervention through the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF), whose role and limitations are analyzed in Section 4.2.2, rather than direct corporate accountability.

2.2.1 Employer control over residency, housing, and documents

As detailed in Sections 1.2.3 and 1.3.3, employer control over residency, housing, and documents continues to function as a kafala-like lever. Here we focus on how that interacts with multi-tier subcontracting to trap workers in wage disputes by creating significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles to changing jobs (Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).

2.2.2 Enforcement Gaps and Slow Dispute Resolution

Qatar has made visible investments in monitoring and enforcement, reflected in the high volume of activity reported throughout the latter half of 2024. For instance, the Ministry of Labour's inspection teams conducted 12,816 visits in the second quarter, 8,045 in the third, and 8,057 in the fourth, filing thousands of violation reports in the process (MoL 2024c-d; 2025a). Alongside these inspections, the Labour Disputes Department has been consistently active, addressing 6,849 worker complaints in Q2, 8,027 in Q3, and 6,316 in Q4 (MoL 2024c-d; 2025a). However, despite this sustained enforcement activity, multiple sources point to persistent issues that create a significant gap between the law and its practice:

- **Delays in adjudication:** A primary challenge is the slow pace of the dispute resolution process. The International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that a quarter of all worker complaints are referred to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs), which “leads to a long period for workers to wait to have their cases heard” (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). Academic analysis describes these timelines as “onerous, six-month-plus,” which undermines the system's purpose as a fast-track mechanism (Calo 2023). For low-wage workers, such delays are devastating, often forcing them to abandon their cases or accept settlements for far less than they are owed (Human Rights Watch 2023; Calo 2023).
- **Difficulty collecting awards:** Even when workers win their cases, employers may refuse to comply, become insolvent, or shut down operations to evade payment (Calo 2023). The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF), established by Law No. 17 of 2018, is designed to pay these awards and then recover the funds from the employer (State of Qatar 2018; ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2019). The scale of non-payment is evidenced by the Fund's disbursements, which reached QAR 2.3 billion to over 70,000 workers by August 2023 (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). While the Fund provides a critical safety net, it remains a reactive solution to employer non-compliance rather than a preventative one (Farbenblum and Berg 2021).
- **Fear of retaliation.** Workers continue to report that filing a complaint can trigger retaliatory actions, including threats of deportation or false “absconding” accusations (Coalition on Labor Justice for Migrants in the Gulf 2024). This fear creates a significant chilling effect that deters workers from reporting violations. While the number of retaliation cases received by the ILO has “declined substantially compared to previous years,” the threat remains a tangible barrier for workers seeking justice (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).

2.2.3 Worker awareness, language access, and trust

Effective labor law enforcement in Qatar hinges on three key factors: worker awareness of their rights, the ability to navigate language barriers, and trust in the system. While authorities have made efforts in outreach, significant gaps in these areas persist, enabling continued labor rights violations.

A critical lack of awareness prevents many workers from exercising their rights. A 2021 survey found 32% of low-income workers were “not at all familiar” with recent labor law changes (Diop et al. 2021). This information deficit allows exploitative practices, such as employers demanding a “No-Objection Certificate” (NOC) for job changes despite its legal abolishment, to endure (ILO 2024). In response, the MoL and the ILO have increased engagement with migrant community leaders to disseminate information on rights and complaint mechanisms (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).

Language barriers present a more fundamental obstacle. The multilingual nature of the workforce means many workers cannot understand contracts, safety instructions, or legal procedures, which are often in Arabic or English (Sweet et al. 2025). This can lead to contract deception, workplace accidents, and an inability to access justice. Recognizing this, an early ILO report recommended that the Ministry “ensure that adequate interpretation and translation services are available” across all dispute resolution bodies (Fino and Pintado 2019).

Finally, a climate of fear and a deficit of trust deter workers from reporting violations. Many fear employer retaliation, such as the filing of false “absconding” charges, cancellation of residency permits, or eviction from housing (ILO 2023a). While the threat of retaliation has reportedly “declined substantially,” it “remains a tangible barrier for workers seeking justice” (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). Building trust is essential, and one proven strategy is leveraging credible community leaders to disseminate information, a tactic used successfully during public health campaigns (Ahmad and Hillman 2021). Without trust that the system will protect them, workers will remain hesitant to come forward, and the gap between law and practice will persist.

Table 2: Structural drivers and how they enable specific violations

Structural Driver	Mechanism of Control	Resulting Violation(s)
Recruitment fees / debt	Workers, often on low wages (e.g., QAR 1,000/month minimum), arrive indebted from paying high recruitment fees.	Tolerance for unsafe work, wage theft, and contract substitution to avoid deportation before repaying debt.
Multi-tier subcontracting	Wage liability is diffused down to smaller, financially insecure subcontractors, obscuring accountability.	Systematic late or non-payment of wages and overtime, with workers unable to identify a financially responsible entity.
Employer control of documents, housing, legal status	Control over ID renewals and housing ties the worker’s legal and residential status directly to the employer.	Workers cannot leave jobs, complain, or seek help without risking homelessness or

		detention; their status is handled in “intricately handled requests.”
Enforcement gaps and dispute delays	A gap between announced reforms and on-the-ground reality weakens deterrence.	Employers can gamble that wage theft is cheaper than compliance, as penalties may be delayed or unenforced.
Legacy of kafala power imbalance	Despite legal reforms, the underlying power dynamic persists, where employers’ control over a worker’s presence in the country remains.	Continued threats, forced overtime, and coercive control, showing that new rules “are not enough if they are not put in practice.”

Note: This table synthesizes the primary structural drivers of labor rights violations and their enabling mechanisms as identified in the literature reviewed for this report. The sources cited represent examples of the broader evidence base supporting the analysis. Sources for the drivers include: Recruitment fees / debt (ILO 2021); Multi-tier subcontracting (MRRORS 2013); Employer control of documents, housing, legal status (Court Cast 2024); Enforcement gaps and dispute delays (Mendoza 2013; BBC 2022); and Legacy of kafala power imbalance (MRRORS 2013; Global Detention Project 2024).

3. Prevalence of Key Violations: Data and Systemic Indicators

Measuring prevalence is challenging because transparent, disaggregated public data across all sectors do not exist. We must rely on a mosaic of official bulletins, inspection figures, compensation fund payouts, and investigations by NGOs, media, and international organizations. Still, taken together, the available indicators show that wage theft and passport confiscation remain widespread as of 2024-2025.

3.1 Wage Theft and Late Payment: Evidence of a Systemic Crisis

The available data from both Qatari government sources and international observers indicates that wage theft is not an anecdotal or historical problem but a systemic and ongoing crisis. The sheer volume of labor complaints filed, the persistence of wage-related grievances as the primary issue, and the scale of disbursements from the state’s compensation fund collectively demonstrate that late and non-payment of wages remains the most common and persistent form of exploitation faced by migrant workers in Qatar as of 2024-2025 (Amnesty International 2023a).

3.1.1 The Scale of Labor Complaints

The Ministry of Labour’s (MoL) own statistical bulletins paint a clear picture of the scale of labor disputes in Qatar.

- **A Consistently High Volume:** The data reveals a significant and continuous stream of worker complaints. Between Q2 2024 and Q2 2025, the Labour Disputes Department consistently handled an average of over 6,500 complaints each quarter (MoL 2024b-c; MoL 2025a-b).

- **Variable Mediation Success:** Many of these complaints are first addressed through internal mediation at the Ministry. However, the effectiveness of this initial stage varies dramatically. Official reports show that the proportion of complaints settled directly by the department can fluctuate from as low as 18% in some months to as high as 63% in others (MoL 2024b; MoL 2024d). This wide variability indicates that a large and unpredictable number of cases are not resolved amicably and must proceed to formal adjudication.
- **A Congested Pipeline to Formal Adjudication:** Cases that are not resolved through initial mediation are referred to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs), the formal judicial bodies for labor issues. This pipeline is constantly fed by a substantial number of unresolved disputes. On average, more than 1,700 cases were escalated to the LDSCs each quarter between Q2 2024 and Q2 2025 (MoL 2024c-d; MoL 2025a-b). This steady flow, amounting to hundreds of cases every month, underscores the sheer volume of disputes that are complex or contentious enough to require a formal ruling, highlighting the systemic pressure on Qatar's labor justice system.

These figures demonstrate that thousands of workers continue to experience wage disputes severe enough to require formal intervention each quarter. This data aligns with reports from human rights organizations suggesting that a post-World Cup economic slowdown has exacerbated the problem, with some employers telling workers to wait indefinitely for new projects without pay (Human Rights Watch 2023).

3.1.2 Centrality of Wage-Related Grievances

International labor and human rights organizations consistently identify wage theft as the leading cause of complaints. A 2023 report from Amnesty International, published one year after the World Cup, reaffirmed that wage theft “remains the most common form of exploitation facing migrant workers in Qatar,” with many continuing to experience delayed or unpaid wages, unpaid overtime, and arbitrary deductions (Amnesty International 2023a). This includes workers across various sectors, from construction and security to the growing food delivery industry (Amnesty International 2023a; Human Rights Watch 2023). The primary causes of complaints lodged with the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees consistently concern the non-payment of wages and end-of-service benefits, and the denial of annual leave (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2021).

3.1.3 A Financial Indicator of Systemic Abuse

The scale of wage theft is so significant that it necessitates a dedicated national fund to act as a safety net. The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF) was established to compensate workers when employers default on payments (State of Qatar 2018). The magnitude of its disbursements serves as a clear indicator of the systemic nature of wage non-payment.

As of August 2023, the Fund had disbursed approximately QAR 2.3 billion to over 70,000 workers (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). This figure, which has been restated in early 2025 reports, confirms that the non-payment of wages is neither a minor nor an exceptional issue; it is a contemporary and structural crisis requiring a substantial, ongoing state-funded remedy (The Peninsula 2025c). The very existence and extensive use of this multi-billion riyal fund underscores that direct wage recovery from employers frequently fails, making state intervention a crucial, albeit reactive, solution for tens of thousands of workers.

3.2 Passport Confiscation: A Persistent Tool of Control

The confiscation of passports and other identity documents is a primary mechanism of control within the Kafala system, severely restricting worker mobility and enabling other rights violations. While Qatari law explicitly prohibits the practice, multiple sources indicate it remains a persistent and widespread challenge, representing a critical gap between law and practice (Coalition on Labor Justice for Migrants in the Gulf 2024; U.S. Department of State 2025b).

3.2.1 The Legal Framework versus The Reality on the Ground

Qatari law provides a clear legal stance against passport confiscation. Law No. 21 of 2015 requires employers to return passports to workers after residency procedures are complete and specifies that they can only be kept with the worker's written consent, carrying a penalty of up to QAR 25,000 for violations (NCCHT 2020; ILO 2023b). The Qatari government itself, in its 2024 National Report on Combating Human Trafficking, identifies "cases where documents are withheld by employers" as a key indicator for first responders to identify potential victims of trafficking (MoL and NCCHT 2024).

Despite this legal framework, the U.S. Department of State's 2024 and 2025 Trafficking in Persons Reports have repeatedly stated that "passport confiscation remained a widespread problem with insufficient enforcement of penalties" and that "the vast majority of expatriate workers' passports were in their employers' possession" (U.S. Department of State 2024b; U.S. Department of State 2025). This assessment is supported by long-term survey data. A 2014 survey found that 76% of blue-collar workers had surrendered their passport to their employer (Ewers 2016). More recent survey data collected between 2017 and 2021 indicates that while the situation may be improving, the practice persists, with approximately 32% of migrant workers reporting their passport was held by their employer or a recruitment agency (Ewers et al. 2023).

3.2.2 A Tool of Coercion and Control

The practical effect of passport confiscation is the severe restriction of a worker's freedom. Without a passport or a valid Qatar ID (QID), a worker cannot easily change jobs, open a bank account, rent housing, or safely approach authorities (Migrant-Rights.Org n.d.). This creates a power imbalance that employers can exploit. For instance, if a worker complains about unpaid wages, an employer can threaten to file a report for "absconding", which could lead to detention and deportation (Amnesty International 2022b). This practice is a key indicator of forced labor, as it severely curtails a worker's ability to leave an abusive employment situation or file official complaints without fear of retaliation (Amnesty International 2022b; MoL and NCCHT 2024).

The 2025 U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report highlighted a significant enforcement gap, noting that Qatari prosecutors classified 154 cases of passport confiscation as administrative violations under residency and labor laws, rather than pursuing them as potential criminal trafficking offenses, which weakens deterrence (U.S. Department of State 2025b).

3.2.3 Nuances in Passport Retention

While often a tool for exploitation, research reveals a more complex picture where not all instances of passport retention are coercive. Surveys have found that a significant number of workers voluntarily hand over their passports to employers for safekeeping (Ewers 2016). A 2014 survey found that of the workers who did not have their passport, 36% had given it to their employer by choice, citing a lack of secure storage in their shared accommodations (Ewers 2016).

This finding highlights that the lack of secure, personal storage space in labor camps contributes to the continuation of the practice. Although employers are legally required to provide lockable storage for workers' personal belongings, this is not always implemented (ILO 2023b).

Table 3: Indicators of prevalence and enforcement (2023-2025)

Indicator	Snapshot / Figure	Source / Period
Worker Complaints Received by MoL	February 2024: 2,212 complaints received; 390 settled; 172 referred to Labour Dispute settlement Committees (LDSCs).	MoL 2024b
Worker Complaints Received by MoL	Q2 2024: 6,849 total complaints; 2,228 settled.	MoL 2024c
Worker Complaints Received by MoL	Q3 2024: 8,027 complaints; 5,062 resolved.	MoL 2024d
Inspection Activity	January 2024: 4,367 inspection visits; 863 violation reports filed. February 2024: 4,599 inspection visits; 717 violation reports filed.	MoL 2024a-b
Time to Resolve Many Disputes	Cases reportedly took “onerous, six-month-plus timelines”.	U.S. Department of State 2025a
Scale of Wage Non-Payment Requiring State-Backed Compensation	~QAR 2.3 billion disbursed by the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund to >70,000 workers (as of August 2023).	U.S. Department of State 2024b
Ongoing Passport Confiscation	U.S. Trafficking in Persons reporting states that the “vast majority of expatriate workers' passports were in their employers' possession.”	U.S. Department of State 2024b; 2025b
Continued Reports of Excessive Working Hours	Widespread reports of 12+ hour shifts, limited rest days, and unpaid overtime in sectors like private security, construction, and domestic work.	Amnesty International 2023; Migrant-Rights.Org n.d.; U.S. Department of State 2024b

Note: This table synthesizes recent data from official Qatari government sources, such as the Ministry of Labour's monthly and quarterly statistical bulletins, alongside reports from international observers, including the U.S. State Department and human rights organizations. The figures collectively illustrate the high volume of labor disputes and the persistent nature of specific violations as of 2024, providing a snapshot of the enforcement challenges on the ground.

The data presented above illustrates a persistent and high-volume crisis. The sheer number of labor complaints filed, the scale of state-backed compensation required, and the consistent findings from international observers demonstrate that violations like wage theft and passport confiscation are systemic. Because official complaint volumes are so high and state payouts are

so large, we must now look critically at how the current enforcement and remediation instruments, namely the Wage Protection System, the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees, and the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund, actually operate on the ground.

4. Policy and Enforcement Landscape: State Mechanisms and Their Limitations

This section evaluates the main tools Qatar has introduced to address these problems and the limits of those tools as described by official sources, international organizations, and rights groups.

4.1 The Wage Protection System (WPS): Design, Progress, and Loopholes

The Wage Protection System (WPS) is a cornerstone of Qatar's labor reform agenda and a primary tool for addressing wage theft. As an electronic salary transfer mechanism, it was designed to increase transparency and ensure that workers are paid correctly and on time, as stipulated by their contracts and Qatari Labour Law (M. Nasir 2025). While the system has fundamentally increased state visibility over private sector wage payments, its practical limitations and enforcement gaps mean that wage theft remains a persistent challenge (Richardson 2024).

4.1.1 Design and Mandate

Introduced in 2015 through amendments to the Labour Law, the WPS mandates that all employers pay their workers via authorized Qatari banks (Commercial Bank of Qatar n.d.). This process creates a digital audit trail, allowing the Ministry of Labour (MoL) to monitor payments electronically. The system's stated objectives are to:

- Protect workers from employers manipulating their financial entitlements.
- Minimize labor disputes related to wages.
- Provide an official data source for the judiciary to use in resolving disputes.
- Promote financial inclusion by enabling all workers, regardless of income level, to open bank accounts (Fino and Pintado 2019).

Employers are required to submit a monthly Salary Information File (SIF) to their bank, detailing each employee's basic salary, overtime, allowances, and deductions. This data is then transmitted to the Qatar Central Bank and the MoL's WPS Unit for monitoring (Fino and Pintado 2019). Failure to comply can trigger penalties, including fines of up to QAR 6,000 per violation and a temporary suspension of business operations (Kreston SVP 2025).

4.1.2 Documented Impact and Progress

The WPS has had a measurable positive impact on the labor market. Its implementation has significantly reduced the proportion of workers paid in cash and has led to more timely wage payments (Fino and Pintado 2019). By 2020, 96% of eligible workers were covered by the WPS, a substantial increase from previous years, demonstrating enhanced compliance (ILO 2022a). The

system has undeniably served as an essential tool for the Labour Inspection Department and the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees, providing clear electronic evidence in cases of non-payment and helping to resolve disputes more efficiently (The Peninsula 2025b). Furthermore, authorities have used WPS data to launch targeted inspections and block non-compliant companies from accessing government services, such as the issuance of new work permits (MoL 2025a).

4.1.3 Persistent Gaps and Loopholes

Despite its progress, the WPS is characterized by significant loopholes and enforcement deficiencies that savvy employers exploit, allowing wage theft to persist. International organizations and government reports consistently highlight that the system is more of a monitoring tool than a preventative one (Richardson 2024; Amnesty International 2019).

- **Data and System Limitations:** The system's effectiveness is fundamentally limited by its reliance on employer-submitted data. The WPS can flag non-payment or late payment, but it cannot easily detect underpayment of overtime or unauthorized deductions, as it does not typically reconcile payments against the worker's original contract terms (Richardson 2024). An ILO assessment noted that key details like overtime and allowances are often bundled under a single "Additional Income" category in the data file, making it impossible to verify correct calculations (Fino and Pintado 2019).
- **Employer Coercion and System Circumvention:** The system is vulnerable to offline circumvention. Rights groups and the U.S. Department of State report that some employers confiscate workers' ATM cards, withdraw their salaries, and pay them a reduced amount in cash, rendering the digital trail meaningless (U.S. Department of State 2025a; Amnesty International 2019). Furthermore, employers may coerce workers into signing false payslips to present to labor inspectors as proof of payment (The Arab Weekly 2023).
- **Subcontracting and Insolvency:** The WPS is weakest in complex subcontracting chains, which are common in Qatar's construction sector (Jayaprakash 2024). When a subcontractor defaults or becomes insolvent, the WPS can detect the non-payment but cannot compel a bankrupt company to pay. This leaves workers unpaid and reliant on the state's Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF), shifting the WPS from a tool of proactive enforcement to a reactive data source for subsequent remediation efforts (The Peninsula 2025a; The Peninsula 2025c).
- **Inconsistent Enforcement:** The government does not always effectively enforce the law, and penalties are often less severe than for comparable financial crimes (U.S. Department of State 2025a). While thousands of violation reports are filed annually, the threat of penalties is not always a sufficient deterrent for non-compliant companies, who may be given multiple warnings and opportunities to rectify abuses before serious action is taken (The Peninsula 2021; Amnesty International 2023b). This gap between detection and meaningful punishment undermines the system's deterrent effect.

In conclusion, while the WPS is a critical component of Qatar's labor governance framework, its structural limitations and inconsistent enforcement mean it is not a comprehensive solution to

wage theft. The system is vulnerable to offline circumvention precisely because the structural conditions outlined in this report, worker indebtedness and power imbalances, make it low-risk and profitable for employers to exploit these loopholes. It serves primarily as a reactive tool that flags violations after they occur, rather than a proactive system that prevents them (ILO 2022b).

4.2 State Institutions: Key Policy Levers for Change

In response to persistent labor rights violations, the State of Qatar has established several key institutional mechanisms designed to provide more accessible and effective redress for workers. These policy levers, primarily the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs) and the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF), represent a significant state investment in a framework for enforcement and remediation.

The establishment of such systems is critical, as labour disputes are characterized by a fundamental inequality between employee and employer, difficulties in gathering evidence, and a need for promptness to ensure workers' livelihood (Shen 2024). An effective system should be independent, accessible, and efficient (International Training Centre of the ILO (ITCILO) 2013). While Qatar's institutions demonstrate high capacity in processing a large volume of cases, a closer examination reveals a system struggling with enforcement gaps, procedural delays, and structural barriers that limit its overall effectiveness.

4.2.1 The Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs): A High-Volume System Under Strain

Established by Law No. 13 of 2017, the LDSCs were created to replace the country's notoriously slow labour courts and accelerate the adjudication of disputes. The system is designed as a two-step process: first, a complaint is filed with the Ministry of Labour's Labour Relations Department for a mandatory mediation process intended to be resolved within seven days (Legal and Judicial Studies Center, Ministry of Justice 2018). If mediation fails, the dispute is referred to the LDSCs, specialized judicial bodies chaired by a judge with the authority to issue binding judgments (Calo 2023). The entire process was designed to conclude within six weeks of the initial complaint (Amnesty International 2019).

Performance and Caseload

Data from the Ministry of Labour (MoL) confirms that labour disputes are a systemic, high-volume issue.

- The MoL's Labour Disputes Department received 6,849 complaints in Q2 2024, 8,027 in Q3 2024, and 6,316 in Q4 2024 (MoL 2024c-d; MoL 2025a).
- Between January and September 2024 alone, 22,158 complaints were filed through the MoL's online portal (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 72.8% of these complaints were settled during the initial conciliation phase in 2024. However, the ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar (2025) notes that a significant portion, 25% of all complaints, were referred to the LDSCs for formal adjudication. This indicates a congested pipeline into an already overburdened judicial mechanism.

Persistent Limitations and Barriers to Redress

Despite the system's capacity, significant gaps between its design and its on-the-ground application undermine its effectiveness and deny timely justice to many workers.

- **Onerous Timelines:** The intended six-week resolution timeframe is rarely met. Independent reports consistently document “onerous, six-month-plus timelines” for cases, a delay that is devastating for low-wage workers who are often already indebted and without income (U.S. Department of State 2024a; U.S. Department of State 2025a; Calo 2023). The ILO notes that the high referral rate to the LDSCs “leads to a long period for workers to wait to have their cases heard” (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).
- **Enforcement Failures:** A favorable ruling does not guarantee payment. Employers frequently ignore judgments, become insolvent, or shut down operations, forcing workers to initiate a new, complex enforcement case in the separate civil courts (Calo 2023; Amnesty International 2019). This leaves workers vulnerable even when they win their cases (Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).
- **Power Imbalances:** Financially distressed workers are often pressured into accepting settlements for far less than they are owed, as employers can afford to wait. This turns mediation into a tool for disposing of complaints rather than delivering just outcomes (Amnesty International 2023a; Calo 2023).
- **Systemic Gaps:** Overall, the system is described as an “inadequate grievance and redress mechanism” (Amnesty International 2024). The lack of state-funded legal aid, language barriers in a system that operates in Arabic, and the opacity of procedures leave many workers unable to effectively navigate the process (Amnesty International 2023a).

In a positive step, the Ministry of Labour is preparing to launch a comprehensive review of the national dispute resolution system to identify these challenges and introduce more effective procedures (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). The government has also increased its engagement with migrant community leaders and international labor bodies to discuss and improve labour grievance mechanisms (Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) 2024).

4.2.2 The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF): A Vital but Limited Safety Net

Mandate and Scale

Established under Law No. 17 of 2018, the WSIF was designed as a crucial safety net to address employers' failure to comply with LDSC rulings. Its primary mandate is to pay workers their awarded entitlements and then assume responsibility for recovering the funds from the employer (State of Qatar 2018). The scale of the fund's disbursements underscores the systemic nature of wage theft.

- By August 2023, the Fund had paid approximately QAR 2.3 billion to over 70,000 workers (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023).

- In early 2025, the fund’s executive director stated that the number of beneficiaries had grown to over 130,000 (Qatar Tribune 2025).

Limitations and Critiques

While the WSIF provides a critical lifeline, its effectiveness is constrained by its design. It is a fundamentally reactive, not preventative, measure that compensates workers only after wage theft has occurred and a worker has already navigated a lengthy legal battle (Ford 2022; Farbenblum and Berg 2021). Its reach is highly restricted, as it only disburses payments to the minority of workers (with only about 25% of all complaints reaching this stage) whose cases have been successfully adjudicated by the LDSCs (MRRORS 2025).

Accessing the fund is not automatic. The process often requires workers to initiate further legal action in civil courts to enforce the LDSC’s decision, creating months of additional delay (Wells 2022). This structural limitation is compounded by a lack of transparency, as critics consistently point to a “profound lack of data” on the WSIF’s activities, which are not publicly available in an up-to-date, disaggregated form (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 2023; Farbenblum and Berg 2021).

Furthermore, a 2022 ministerial decision capped the fund’s disbursements to a maximum of three months’ salary or QAR 20,000 (~USD 5,500), an amount often significantly less than a worker’s total adjudicated entitlements (MRRORS 2023). As a result, firms that delay or withhold wages can still treat non-compliance as a manageable business risk. This dynamic can pressure financially desperate workers to accept unfair settlements (Ford 2022). Because employers know the Fund will pay workers only after a lengthy procedure and up to a capped amount, the current design does not materially raise the cost of initial non-payment for firms, so the structural incentive to delay wages remains. This undermines the fund’s role as a deterrent, positioning it as a backstop for a system that still allows non-compliance to be a viable business choice.

Table 4: Qatar’s main enforcement / protection instruments and remaining gaps

Instrument / Reform	Intended Function	Documented Achievements	Documented Gaps / Risks
Wage Protection System (WPS)	Monitor timing/amount of wage payments via bank transfers	Enables MoL to detect late/non-payment; supports targeted inspections; 96% of eligible workers covered by 2020.	Employers can still delay/underpay; workers may be coerced to sign false payslips; WPS itself does not force immediate payment or verify overtime.

Labour Dispute Settlement Committees	Fast-track wage and contract disputes, replacing slow labor courts.	Thousands of complaints processed per quarter; hundreds of rulings issued monthly. (e.g., Q3 2024: 8,027 complaints received, 2,357 referred to committees, 1,402 decisions issued).	Cases still take 6+ months; enforcement of awards not guaranteed; workers report fear of retaliation during/after filing; mediation process can disadvantage workers.
Workers' Support and Insurance Fund	Pay workers owed wages when employers default, disappear, or become insolvent.	~QAR 2.3 billion disbursed to >70,000 workers (as of August 2023); beneficiary numbers reportedly grew to >130,000 by early 2025.	Limited transparency on operations; employer cost recovery is not guaranteed; payout caps are often less than total wages owed; potential moral hazard for abusive firms.
Ministry of Labour Inspections	Proactive worksite, housing, and recruitment office inspections.	Consistently high volume of activity (e.g., in Q3 2024, inspection teams conducted 8,045 visits, filing 1,772 violation reports).	Widespread passport confiscation, wage theft, and excessive hours persist, particularly in domestic work and subcontracting chains, indicating inspections are not universally effective.

Note: This table synthesizes Qatar's primary state-led enforcement and protection mechanisms. The sources cited represent examples of the broader evidence base supporting the analysis. Sources for the instruments include: Wage Protection System (WPS) (ILO 2022a; U.S. Department of State 2025a; Kalush and Saraswathi 2024); Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (Ministry of Labour 2024d; Calo 2023; U.S. Department of State 2025a; Amnesty International 2023a); Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (State of Qatar 2018; ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023; Qatar Tribune 2025; Migrant-Rights.Org 2025; Wells 2022); and Ministry of Labour Inspections (Ministry of Labour 2024d; ILO 2025b; U.S. Department of State 2025a; Amnesty International 2024).

5. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that while Qatar has implemented a comprehensive and ambitious suite of labor reforms, a significant gap persists between law and practice. The introduction of the Wage Protection System, Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSC), and the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund demonstrates a substantial state investment in creating enforcement and remediation mechanisms. These systems are active and handle a high volume of cases, indicating both their necessity and their institutional capacity.

However, the same data, corroborated by international observers, show that foundational problems like wage theft, illegal recruitment fees, and passport confiscation remain widespread. The key drivers of these violations are structural: the indebtedness of workers upon arrival, the

diffusion of responsibility through multi-layered subcontracting, and the persistent power imbalance rooted in employer control over residency and housing.

Consequently, Qatar's enforcement landscape is largely reactive. It has become adept at processing complaints and disbursing compensation after abuse has already occurred, but it has not yet eliminated the upstream incentives for employers to commit these violations. The path forward requires a continued shift from post-abuse remediation to proactive prevention. Therefore, the next phase of reform must focus on disrupting the illegal transfer of recruitment costs from employers to workers, establishing clear and enforceable joint liability for wages throughout multi-tier contracting chains, and strengthening retaliation protection for workers who file complaints to build trust in the system.

Key Takeaways:

1. **The Central Paradox of Reform:** Qatar's significant legal reforms coexist with widespread violations, indicating a major gap between law and enforcement.
2. **Wage Theft is Systemic, Not Anecdotal:** The high volume of labor complaints and massive payouts from the Workers' Support Fund confirm that wage theft is a structural and ongoing crisis.
3. **Recruitment Debt as a Core Driver:** The practice of workers paying illegal recruitment fees creates a state of bondage that enables further exploitation.
4. **Passport Confiscation Remains a Key Tool of Control:** The widespread retention of passports is a primary barrier to worker mobility and a key indicator of forced labor.
5. **Enforcement is Primarily Reactive:** The current system is effective at addressing complaints *after* harm has occurred but has not yet dismantled the business practices that make violations profitable.
6. **The Legacy of Kafala Persists:** The power imbalance created by employer control over a worker's legal and residential status continues to foster a climate of fear that deters reporting.

Acknowledgement:

This study was developed as part of the labor market research initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Labor of Qatar. We gratefully acknowledge the Ministry's support in providing guidance and resources, which enabled a thorough examination of the structural drivers and ongoing prevalence of labor rights violations, specifically wage non-payment, passport confiscation, and related enforcement challenges, in Qatar's migrant labor market.

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