

Freedom of Contract and Movement After Qatar's *Kafala* Reforms: Law-on-the-Books vs. Law-in-Action (2018–2025)

Salim Al Barami

Yuri Yoshida

Ruslan Asfandiyarov

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1. Introduction: A Paradigm Shift in Labour Governance

1.1 The Imperative for Reform: The Pre-*Kafala* System

For decades, Qatar's labour market was governed by the sponsorship (*kafala*) system, a framework common throughout the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries that structured and controlled labour migration (ILO Regional Office for Arab States 2017). In its modern form,

which emerged in the mid-20th century, the *kafala* system was a means to regulate the entry and residence of the migrant workers needed to fuel the nation's ambitious development goals. The system was legally founded on Qatar's Sponsorship Law (Law No. 4 of 2009) and Labour Law (Law No. 14 of 2004), which together tied a migrant worker's legal status (State of Qatar 2009; State of Qatar 2004), including their right to reside in the country, change jobs, or leave, to a single employer or "sponsor" (*kafeel*) (Jureidini 2017; Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness 2014; Regueiro 2020). This framework created a significant power imbalance that constrained two fundamental liberties: freedom of contract (the ability to terminate employment and seek new opportunities) and freedom of movement (the ability to leave the country).

1.1.1 Origins and Structure: Historical and Legal Foundations

The term *kafala* originates from the Arabic root k-f-l, which includes the meanings "to vouch for" or "to be a legal guardian" (AlShehabi 2019). While the concept has roots in legal practice, its application to migrant labour in the Gulf is a modern construct. This system was developed to manage a massive influx of foreign labour required to meet ambitious development goals; by 2015, foreign nationals constituted up to 95 percent of the entire employed population in Qatar (De Bel-Air 2017). Historical analysis shows that the system did not originate from ancient Bedouin customs, but rather from bureaucratic procedures developed during the British colonial era (c. 1920s-1970s) to control the flow of migrant labour, first in the pearl industry and later expanding with the advent of the oil sector (AlShehabi 2019).

Following independence, the authority to sponsor foreign workers was restricted and delegated to citizens and citizen-owned companies (AlShehabi 2019). This effectively transferred regulatory authority over labour migration from the state to its citizenry, placing citizens at the center of a system of privilege and power (Babar 2015). The sponsor, or *kafeel*, became legally responsible for the sponsored migrant worker, whose legal status to enter, reside, and work in the country became entirely dependent on that sponsor (AlShehabi 2019; Regueiro 2020). This structure created a profoundly unequal relationship that rendered workers highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Babar 2015; Crépeau 2014).

1.1.2 Control Mechanisms: Key Instruments

The primary instruments of this control were the legal requirements for a No-Objection Certificate (NOC) to change employers and an exit permit to depart Qatar.

- **No-Objection Certificate (NOC):** Under the pre-reform system, a migrant worker could not legally change employers without first obtaining an NOC from their current sponsor. This permission was granted entirely at the sponsor's discretion (ILO Regional Office for Arab States 2017). Without this certificate, the worker faced a two-year ban on re-entering the country for new employment after their contract ended (Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness 2014).
- **Exit Permit:** The Sponsorship Law mandated that most migrant workers secure an exit permit from their sponsor to leave Qatar, whether temporarily or permanently (Jureidini 2017; Crépeau, 2014). This requirement was largely removed by legal changes on September 4, 2018, and January 16, 2020, which extended the right to exit without a permit to nearly all categories of workers (ILO 2020b).

1.1.3 Worker Experience: The Pre-Reform System

The legal structure of the *kafala* system produced a range of adverse outcomes for migrant workers, which were widely documented by researchers and human rights organizations. One of the most common illegal practices was passport confiscation. In a 2012 survey of low-income migrants in Qatar, later published by Gardner et al. (2013), 90% of respondents reported that their employer possessed their passport. Although illegal, this practice was widespread and served to further restrict workers' freedom of movement and their ability to abscond from an abusive situation (Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness 2014).

This system also facilitated financial exploitation. The high demand for jobs in Qatar led to a system where prospective migrants paid substantial recruitment fees in their home countries to secure employment (R. R. Jureidini, n.d.). One study found that 71% of low-income migrants had paid an average of US\$1,031 for the right to work in Qatar (Gardner et al. 2013). Many workers and their families took on significant debt to cover these costs, meaning they often spent their first year or more in Qatar simply repaying these loans. This debt bondage created a coercive dynamic that undermined a worker's practical ability to leave an exploitative job (Pessoa, Harkness, and Gardner 2014).

Furthermore, salary abuse was a common grievance. The same 2012 survey revealed that 21% of low-income workers reported receiving their salary "only sometimes, rarely, or never" (Gardner et al. 2013). The difficulty in changing employers, institutionalized by the NOC requirement, meant that workers had little leverage to challenge delayed wages or contract substitutions, where the salary upon arrival was lower than what was promised in the home country. For many workers, the non-payment of promised wages was the primary factor that compelled them to seek redress through the justice system (Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness 2014).

The domestic worker population faced particular vulnerabilities. As they are typically excluded from the protections of national labour laws, domestic workers had even fewer avenues for seeking assistance (Murray 2012). Their isolation within private households made them acutely dependent on their sponsors and susceptible to abuses with limited recourse (Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness, 2014). The combination of these legal and practical constraints underscored the urgent need for comprehensive reform of Qatar's labour governance system.

1.2 Strategic Enablers: A Wave of Legislative and Administrative Change

Beginning in 2018 and accelerating significantly in 2020, Qatar initiated a series of historic legal and administrative reforms designed to dismantle the most restrictive elements of the *kafala* system. This wave of change was not spontaneous but was enabled by a combination of international scrutiny and a strategic partnership with key international bodies, most notably the International Labour Organization (ILO). Furthermore, these reforms are increasingly understood as crucial components of Qatar's long-term economic and social development strategy, aimed at creating a more competitive and diversified economy.

1.2.1 The Catalyst for Change: International Scrutiny and ILO Cooperation

The awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar placed its labour laws under intense international scrutiny. A range of actors, including media outlets and international organizations, critiqued the country's human rights record and advocated for legal reform (Calo 2023; Regueiro

2020). While the reforms were not a contractual obligation for hosting the tournament, the event served as a powerful catalyst for change (Calo 2023).

This pressure culminated in a formal complaint lodged against Qatar with the ILO in 2014 by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (BWI). The complaint alleged non-compliance with international obligations regarding forced labour and labour inspection, citing the power imbalance created by the *kafala* system (ILO 2016; Jeremiašová 2021). This initiated a multi-year supervisory process that ultimately led to a significant breakthrough. In November 2017, the ILO Governing Body closed the complaint, endorsing the launch of a comprehensive three-year technical cooperation program with the Qatari government (ILO 2017). This agreement marked a pivotal shift from an adversarial process to a collaborative partnership aimed at fundamentally transforming Qatar's labour market. A key outcome of this accord was the inauguration of an ILO Project Office in Doha in April 2018, creating an institutional anchor for providing technical assistance and monitoring the implementation of reforms (ILO 2019b; Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) 2025).

1.2.2 Legislative Agenda: A Landmark Overhaul

The technical cooperation with the ILO provided the framework and impetus for a rapid and ambitious legislative agenda between 2018 and 2021 (ESCWA 2025; World Bank 2021). Between 2018 and 2021, reforms followed three pillars: (1) exit permits, (2) job mobility/NOC, and (3) wage floor and enforcement. The government, in partnership with the ILO, began systematically dismantling the legal pillars of the *kafala* system that constrained workers' freedom of contract and movement. This legislative push was seen by observers as a significant step toward rectifying the structural issues that facilitated exploitation (Jeremiašová 2021).

This agenda included several landmark pieces of legislation. Law No. 13 of 2018 represented a critical first step by formally ending the exit permit requirement for most workers covered under the Labour Law (State of Qatar 2018). This was followed by a series of ministerial decrees, such as Ministerial Decision No. 95 of 2019, that extended this right to nearly all remaining categories of workers, including those in ministries and the oil and gas sector, fundamentally altering the power dynamic between employer and employee (Bartoszewicz and Lang 2024; State of Qatar 2020b; Ministry of Labour (MoL) 2021).

The cornerstone of the reforms came with Decree-Law No. 19 of 2020, which officially abolished the No-Objection Certificate (NOC) requirement, thereby allowing workers to change employers without their sponsor's permission (State of Qatar 2020d; MoL 2021; Zahra 2014). In parallel, Law No. 17 of 2020 established the region's first non-discriminatory minimum wage, which was later detailed in Decision of the Minister of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs No. (25) of 2020. This decision set a minimum basic wage and mandated allowances for food and housing, creating a wage floor for all workers, including those in domestic service (State of Qatar 2020a; Minister of Administrative Development, Labor and Social Affairs (MADLSA) 2020). These legislative changes collectively represent one of the most significant labour governance transformations in the region, directly addressing the core question of how legal reforms can enhance worker freedoms (ILO 2022b).

1.2.3 Broader Motivations: Economic Diversification and Labour Market Efficiency

Beyond responding to international pressure, Qatar's labour reforms are deeply intertwined with its long-term national strategy. The Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV 2030) outlines a roadmap for transitioning from a hydrocarbon-based economy to a diversified, knowledge-based one (General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP) 2008). This strategic vision necessitates a more dynamic and competitive labour market, which the traditional *kafala* system, with its inherent restrictions on labour mobility, actively hindered (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022).

The *kafala* system was increasingly recognized as creating labour market inefficiencies. By tying workers to a single employer, it suppressed wages, discouraged skills development, and led to a practice of “labour hoarding,” where employers would keep more workers than necessary (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022). The reforms, therefore, are also an economic imperative. Allowing workers to change jobs introduces competition among employers, incentivizing them to offer better wages and working conditions to attract and retain talent. This increased labour mobility allows for a more efficient allocation of skills across the economy, which is crucial for fostering productivity and innovation (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022; ESCWA 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated fiscal crisis further highlighted the rigidities of the old system. With international recruitment heavily restricted, the need for a flexible internal labour market where employers could hire from the pool of workers already in the country became more urgent (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022). Consequently, the reforms are not just a human rights issue but a strategic adjustment to meet the demands of a modern, globalized economy. While significant legal changes have been enacted, the “unfinished business” of reform remains, particularly in ensuring that these new laws translate into meaningful, everyday freedom for all workers (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022; Jeremiašová 2021).

1.3 The Core Policy Question: Gauging On-the-Ground Impact

This report provides an extended analysis of Qatar's recent labour reforms, examining both the changes in law (“law-on-the-books”) and their practical, on-the-ground implementation and outcomes (“law-in-action”) for the migrant workforce between 2018 and 2025. The landmark legislative agenda, undertaken in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), has systematically dismantled the legal pillars of the *Kafala* system that historically constrained workers' freedom of contract and movement (ESCWA, 2025). However, the central aim of this report is not simply to document these legal changes, but to investigate their tangible effect on workers' lives.

1.3.1 Central Framework: Law-on-the-Books versus Law-in-Action

A critical distinction must be made between the law as it is written and the law as it is experienced. While Qatar has instituted a broad suite of significant legal reforms, questions remain about whether these new legal norms have translated into enforceable rights and improved access to justice for migrant workers (Calo 2023). Many observers have noted a persistent gap between the reformed laws and the reality on the ground, where many of the new rights are reported to exist only on paper (Calo 2023; Hawkes et al. 2023).

Therefore, a core challenge is to assess the “law-in-action,” which means the practical effects of these reforms on the everyday freedoms of workers. This involves analyzing the extent to which

legislative changes have overcome the deeply embedded power imbalances and structural features that defined the pre-reform *Kafala* system (Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).

1.3.2 Core Challenge: Implementation and Enforcement

Despite the formal abolition of key control mechanisms, researchers and international bodies continue to document significant hurdles that prevent the full realization of worker freedoms. Structural problems concerning imbalances of power and the way dispute resolution is conducted remain deeply rooted (Calo 2023).

Key implementation challenges that illustrate this gap include:

- (a) **Employer Retaliation:** Workers who attempt to exercise their new right to change jobs still face retaliatory actions from employers, such as the cancellation of residency permits or the filing of false “absconding” charges (ILO 2024b).
- (b) **De Facto Requirements:** Although the legal requirement for a No-Objection Certificate (NOC) to change employers has been abolished, a de facto NOC, such as a signed resignation letter, is often still required in practice for many job applications (ILO 2024b; Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).
- (c) **Dispute Resolution Deficiencies:** While new Labour Dispute Settlement Committees have been established, workers continue to face significant difficulties with enforcement, including long delays in holding hearings and problems with enforcing judgments, which undermines the effectiveness of the system as a mechanism for legal redress (Calo 2023).

These persistent issues underscore that legislative reform alone is insufficient. The effectiveness of the new laws is contingent on robust and transparent enforcement, the capacity of state institutions, and the degree to which reforms can alter the conduct of employers and the profoundly unequal relationship that has long characterized the labour market (Babar and Vora 2022; Calo 2023). This report, therefore, moves beyond a simple review of new laws to ask a more fundamental question: to what extent have these legislative changes translated into a tangible, everyday reality of greater freedom for workers?

1.4 The Social Context: Attitudes of the National Population

The long-term success of labour reforms also depends on their social legitimacy within the host population. A 2021 study by Al-Khelaifi et al. (2025) offers key insights into the evolving attitudes of Qatari citizens, revealing a complex but increasingly supportive social context for the reforms.

The study highlights a dual perspective among Qataris: a strong majority acknowledges the vital economic contributions of migrant workers, yet concerns about demographic balance and infrastructure strain persist, with 41% of citizens favoring a decrease in new foreign workers. Crucially, however, the research reveals a significant generational shift. Younger Qataris (aged 18-44) were found to be significantly more supportive of increasing the number of high-skilled workers compared to the older generation. This suggests that as a new generation enters the workforce and civic life, social acceptance of a diverse and dynamic labour market is likely to strengthen.

2. Challenges to the Old System: Analyzing the Key Reforms

2.1 Dismantling Barriers to Movement: The Abolition of Exit Permits

A cornerstone of Qatar's labour reform package was the near-total abolition of the exit permit requirement, a key instrument of control under the pre-reform *Kafala* system that constrained workers' freedom of movement. The legislative process to dismantle this barrier was notable for its phased approach, beginning with a broad reform and later extending protections to previously excluded worker categories.

2.1.1 Legislative Process: A Phased Abolition

The first major step in this reform was the passage of Law No. 13 of 2018, which amended the existing Law No. 21 of 2015 regulating the entry and exit of expatriates (State of Qatar 2018). This new legislation formally granted the majority of migrant workers covered under the Labour Law the right to leave Qatar, either temporarily or permanently, without first needing to secure an exit permit from their employer (Jeremiašová 2021). The law aimed to significantly reduce employer control over workers' ability to depart the country.

However, the 2018 law was not comprehensive. It explicitly excluded large categories of workers not covered by the Labour Law, including domestic workers, public sector employees, workers in the oil and gas industry, and those employed in agriculture and at sea (Human Rights Watch 2018; ILO 2020a). Furthermore, the law introduced a provision allowing employers to designate up to 5% of their workforce as essential, thereby requiring those individuals to still obtain prior permission to leave due to the nature of their work (State of Qatar 2018; Regueiro 2020).

Recognizing these gaps, the second phase of the reform came with Ministerial Decision No. 95 of 2019, which came into force on January 16, 2020 (Minister of Interior 2019). This decision extended the right to exit without a permit to almost all of the previously excluded categories of workers (ILO 2020a). This included:

- Domestic workers
- Workers in government and public institutions
- Employees in the oil and gas sector
- Workers employed at sea and in agriculture

This move was a landmark step, extending the right to leave Qatar without prior employer permission to almost all migrant workers and marking a significant milestone in the government's labour reform agenda (MoL 2021)

2.1.2 Policy Stability: Remaining Exceptions and Risks

Despite the near-total abolition, a few exceptions remain. The exit permit requirement is still in place for members of the armed forces. Additionally, the provision allowing employers to designate up to 5% of their staff as requiring exit clearance remains legally possible, although available information suggests it is rarely invoked in practice (State of Qatar 2018).

More significantly, the long-term stability of these protections, particularly for the most vulnerable workers, has been tested. As detailed in Section 3.2.4, discussions within Qatar's advisory Shura Council in June-July 2024 considered measures to reinstate an employer permission requirement for domestic workers seeking to leave the country (Page 2024). While the proposal was not enacted as of early 2025, the discussion itself created significant uncertainty and highlighted the risk of policy backsliding on critical labour reforms.

2.2 Unlocking Labour Mobility: The Abolition of the NOC

The single most important reform for enhancing workers' freedom of contract was the removal of the employer's right to prevent a worker from changing jobs. This was achieved by dismantling the legal requirement for a No-Objection Certificate (NOC), a key pillar of control in the pre-reform *Kafala* system which tied a worker's ability to move to a new job to their current employer's consent (Human Rights Watch 2020; Zahra 2014).

2.2.1 Legislative Cornerstone: Abolishing the NOC Requirement

The cornerstone of the mobility reforms was Decree-Law No. 19 of 2020, which amended key provisions of Law No. 21 of 2015 on the entry, exit, and residence of expatriates. This new legislation formally abolished the legal requirement for migrant workers to obtain an NOC from their employer before changing jobs (State of Qatar 2020c; Human Rights Watch 2020). The reform was a landmark step, establishing for the first time in the region that workers could change employers at any point during their contract, subject only to a set of procedural requirements managed by the state rather than their employer (ILO 2022a). This legislative action fundamentally shifted the power dynamic between employer and employee, introducing competition into the labour market and reducing workers' vulnerability to exploitation (Bartoszewicz and Lang 2024).

2.2.2 Administrative Process: The New Framework for Labour Mobility

To operationalize this new right, Ministerial Decision No. 51 of 2020 outlined the administrative process for changing employers, hereafter referred to as an Employment Change (EC) (State of Qatar 2020e; MoL 2021). The process is managed through the Ministry of Labour's electronic platform, a centralized digital system where workers or their new employers can submit a request to change employment (MoL n.d.-a).

The procedure requires the worker to observe a statutory notice period, which is one month if they have worked for the current employer for two years or less, and two months if they have worked for more than two years (Human Rights Watch 2020). Once the notice period is complete and the application is approved, the new employer must use the Ministry's Digital Authentication System to process a new multi-lingual employment contract. To further streamline this process, the Ministry of Labour launched a revised electronic platform for ECs in May 2024, which allows both workers and new employers to initiate the application and no longer requires the submission of paper forms (see Section 4.2.2) (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025 (Ministry of Labour administrative data shared with ILO)).

2.2.3 Law in Action: Uptake and System Performance

The uptake of the new system has been substantial, demonstrating that the reforms addressed a significant need within the labour force. Between the introduction of the reforms in September 2020 and October 2023, the Ministry of Labour processed 1,037,644 EC applications. Of these,

669,198 applications were approved (approximately 64%) and 364,053 were rejected (approximately 36%) (ILO 2024a). This high volume illustrates a fundamental shift in labour market dynamics. This progress is also reflected in data for domestic workers, a historically more restricted group; in 2024 alone, there were 3,399 approved EC applications from this group (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).

2.2.4 Persistent Challenges: The ‘De Facto’ NOC

Despite the formal abolition of the NOC, significant hurdles to labour mobility persist. Researchers and international bodies continue to document a persistent gap between Qatar’s reformed laws as written and the reality of their implementation and enforcement on the ground (Calo 2023; Hawkes et al. 2023). A primary challenge is the emergence of “de facto” NOC requirements, where new employers, despite the legal change, still request a signed resignation letter or similar document from a worker’s previous sponsor as a condition of employment (ILO 2024a; Kalush and Saraswathi 2024).

A 2024 study by the ILO and the Ministry of Labour found that a significant majority of employers still ask for NOCs or equivalent documents when recruiting workers locally. Employers cited reasons such as mitigating potential delays in the official transfer process and avoiding conflicts with the former employer (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). Furthermore, workers who try to exercise their right to change jobs still face retaliatory actions from employers, such as the cancellation of residency permits or the filing of false “absconding” charges, which can deter workers from pursuing new opportunities (ILO 2022a; ILO 2024a). These persistent issues underscore that while the legal levers of control have been largely eliminated, structural and practical challenges continue to impede the full realization of labour mobility.

2.3 Establishing a Bargaining Floor: Minimum Wage and Wage Protection

To provide a baseline for bargaining power and prevent exploitation, Qatar established a universal wage floor supported by a robust electronic monitoring system. These two pillars, the non-discriminatory minimum wage and the Wage Protection System, work in tandem to create a more transparent and equitable wage environment.

2.3.1 Minimum Wage: A Non-Discriminatory Standard

A landmark development in Qatar’s labour reforms was the adoption of Law No. 17 of 2020, which established the region’s first non-discriminatory minimum wage (State of Qatar 2020a). This legislation set a universal wage floor applicable to all workers in all sectors, including domestic workers, regardless of their nationality.

The specifics of the wage were outlined in the subsequent Ministerial Decision No. (25) of 2020 (MADLSA 2020). Effective March 20, 2021, the decision mandated a minimum basic monthly wage of QAR 1,000 (Hatayama 2022). Furthermore, it stipulated that employers must also provide either decent accommodation and food, or, alternatively, monthly allowances of at least QAR 500 for housing and QAR 300 for food (MADLSA 2020). The introduction of this wage floor had a significant and immediate impact; an estimated 280,000 workers, representing 13% of the private sector workforce, saw their basic wage increase to meet the new threshold (ILO 2022a). The law also established a Minimum Wage Committee to periodically review the wage level, ensuring its continued relevance to economic conditions and the cost of living (State of Qatar 2020a).

2.3.2 Wage Protection: The WPS Enforcement Mechanism

The minimum wage framework is supported and enforced by the pre-existing Wage Protection System (WPS), an electronic salary transfer system established in 2015 to monitor and document wage payments (Jureidini 2018; ILO 2019a). As mandated by Ministerial Decision No. (4) of 2015, all employers are required to transfer workers' wages through Qatari banks within seven days of their due date (Minister of Labor and Social Affairs 2015). This process makes wage payments fully traceable by the Ministry of Labour (ILO 2020c).

The system functions through a monthly Salary Information File (SIF) that employers must submit to their bank, detailing each worker's basic salary, allowances, and any deductions (ILO 2019a). The WPS has achieved extensive coverage, with reports indicating that more than 1.66 million workers (96% of the eligible workforce) are registered (MoL 2021; ILO 2020c). Following the introduction of the minimum wage, the WPS was upgraded to better detect violations, including payments below the new minimum threshold and to ensure greater transparency by adding specific data fields for food and housing allowances (ILO 2020c). Non-compliance with the WPS can result in penalties, including the suspension of an employer's ability to obtain new work permits, a sanction that employers perceive as commercially serious (Minister of Labor and Social Affairs 2015).

2.4 Systemic Enablers: Dispute Resolution and Digitalization

Qatar has paired legal reforms with systems intended to make those rights usable: (1) faster dispute channels, (2) guaranteed wage recovery, and (3) digitalization of core processes. Recognizing that legal reforms are only meaningful if they can be enforced, Qatar has bolstered its remedy mechanisms and administrative efficiency through several systemic enablers. These initiatives, focused on dispute resolution and digitalization, are designed to lower transaction costs, standardize procedures, and provide financial safeguards for workers (ILO 2019c; Calo 2023).

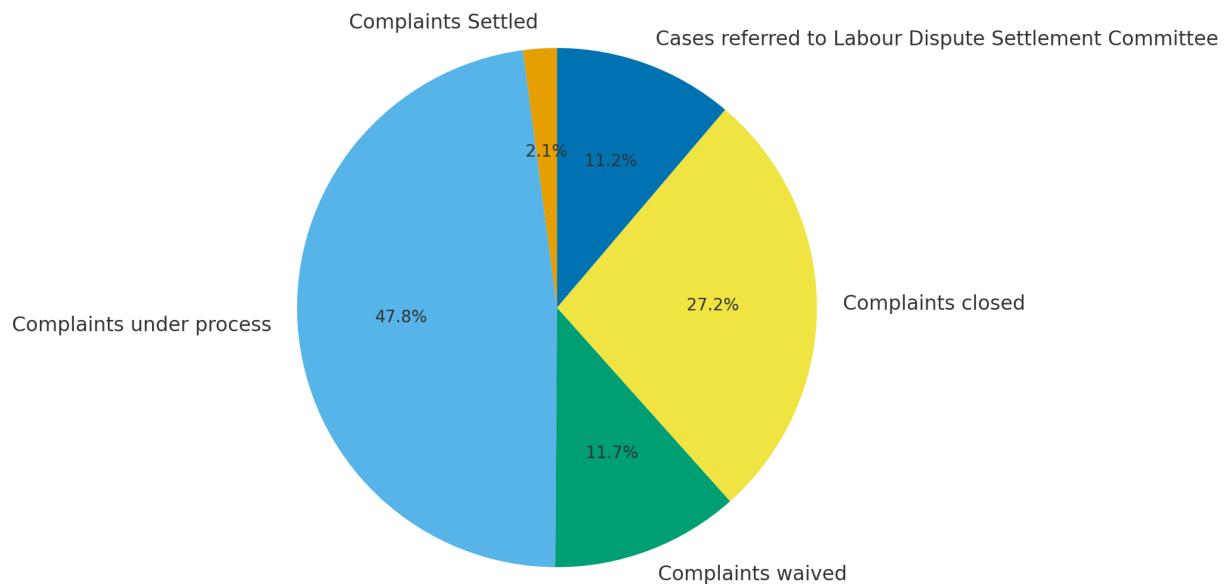
2.4.1 Reforming Dispute Resolution: The Labour Dispute Settlement Committees

A significant shift in Qatar's approach to labour justice was the establishment of the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (LDSCs) in 2018 (Gulf Times 2018). Mandated by Law No. 13 of 2017, these committees created a new, specialized bipartite dispute resolution process designed to be more accessible and efficient than the traditional court system (Legal and Judicial Studies Center, Ministry of Justice 2018; Calo 2023). It involves a two-step process: first, a mandatory mediation at the Ministry of Labour aimed at an amicable settlement, and second, if mediation fails, the case is referred to the LDSCs for a binding legal judgment.

The committees have jurisdiction over disputes arising from the Labour Law and employment contracts, including issues of unpaid wages, job duties, and working hours (Legal and Judicial Studies Center, Ministry of Justice 2018; Calo 2023). To improve accessibility for migrant workers, committees were established in several locations, including the industrial area where many workers reside (Calo 2023). The number of committees was increased from three to five in November 2022 to handle the caseload (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). Official data from the Ministry of Labour for the first quarter of 2022 provides a detailed breakdown of how worker complaints are handled at the initial conciliation stage within the Labour Relations

Department. During this period, a total of 9,944 complaints were received and processed. The data shows that the vast majority of cases are handled without being referred to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees (MoL 2022a). However, observers note that despite these structural improvements, challenges remain in enforcement and in addressing the power imbalance between employers and employees (Calo 2023).

Figure 1. Labour Relations Complaint Outcomes: Qatar Ministry of Labour (Q1 2022)



Most complaints are resolved at the Labour Relations Department without escalation to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees, suggesting that the Ministry of Labour is functioning as an accessible first filter for wage and contract disputes.

Note: Counts and shares reflect the status as of quarter-end (1 Jan–31 Mar 2022). “Under process” indicates cases still pending at the Labour Relations stage; some may later be settled, waived, closed, or referred to the Labour Dispute Settlement Committees. Source: Annex to “Annex to the Report of the Ministry Efforts in the Labour Sector: Ministry Statistics First Quarter of 2022” (MoL 2022a).

2.4.2 Financial Redress: The Workers’ Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF)

To provide a financial safety net for workers, the Workers’ Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF) was established in October 2018 under Law No. 17 of 2018 (State of Qatar 2018b; “WSIF” n.d.). The Fund’s primary purpose is to ensure workers receive due compensation when employers default on wage payments following a final judgment from a Labour Dispute Settlement Committee (ILO 2019c). In such cases, the Fund pays the workers’ entitlements and then seeks to recover the amount from the employer.

Public reports indicate that the WSIF has disbursed significant amounts since its inception. By August 2023, the total amount paid to workers from the Fund had increased substantially to approximately QAR 2.3 billion (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). The Fund represents a critical mechanism for ensuring that legal victories in the LDSCs translate into tangible financial relief for workers, particularly when employers are insolvent or fail to comply with judgments (ILO 2019c).

2.4.3 Digitalization: Streamlining Labour Services

The process for all these reforms has been increasingly digitalized, with e-contracting, online mobility applications, and digital identity verification intended to lower transaction costs, reduce forgery, and standardize timelines (Elidrisy 2024). This push aligns with Qatar's broader national strategy of digital transformation (Asmyatullin and Glavina 2025; Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) 2024).

A key digital tool is the Ministry of Labour's electronic platform for processing ECs. A revised version launched in May 2024 allows both workers and new employers to initiate the application, notifying the other party for approval, which eliminates the need for paper forms and streamlines the process (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025; MoL 2024a).

Furthermore, the authentication of employment contracts is now handled through a unified digital platform that uses the National Authentication System (NAS), known as Tawtheeq, to verify the identities of both parties (MCIT, n.d.). This system allows employees to review and approve or reject contract terms digitally, with the contract available in 11 languages to ensure clarity (MoL 2023). Workers can also file complaints and report violations through the "Unified Platform for Complaints and Whistleblowers," making grievance mechanisms more accessible (MoL n.d.-a). Studies on e-government adoption in Qatar have shown that such digital initiatives are critical for improving transparency and efficiency, although user adoption remains a key challenge that is being addressed through these new, more user-friendly systems (Weerakkody et al. 2009; Rouibah et al. 2024).

3. Evidence of Practical Uptake: How Workers Are Using the New Rights in Practice (2020–2025)

3.1 Gauging System Uptake: Job Mobility and Processing Data

The ultimate test of these reforms lies in their uptake by the workforce and the efficiency of the systems designed to implement them. The shift from a highly restrictive environment to a more dynamic labour market is evidenced by a significant volume of EC applications processed since the reforms were introduced. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and academic surveys provide critical insights into the scale of this change.

3.1.1 System Uptake: Scale and Growth of Labour Mobility

The introduction of policies to dismantle the *kafala* system facilitated a huge increase in labour mobility. Prior to the reforms, job mobility was extremely limited, with approximately 9,000 and 18,000 workers changing jobs in 2018 and 2019, respectively (ILO 2022a). Following the legal changes, the uptake was immediate and substantial. In the first year of the reforms alone (September 2020 to August 2021), EC approvals increased by approximately 830% compared to the year before the reforms (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025).

This high volume has been sustained, demonstrating that the reforms address a significant need within the labour force. Between September 2020 and October 2023, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) processed 1,037,644 EC applications. Of these, 669,198 were approved (an approval rate of approximately 64%) and 364,053 were rejected ($\approx 36\%$), demonstrating a high and continuous volume of use (ILO 2024a). The trend continued through 2024, with an additional 60,251 EC

applications approved for men and women through the end of September 2024 (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This brings the total number of approved ECs to over 729,000 since the reforms began. A 2021 survey of low-wage migrant workers confirmed this trend from the workers' perspective, finding that 27% had already changed their employer since arriving in Qatar (Ewers et al. 2023; Diop et al. 2021).

3.1.2 System Performance: Administrative Processing and Efficiency

The performance of the administrative system for processing ECs has improved dramatically since its inception. The average processing time for an EC request fell from approximately 22 days in August 2021 to just 6 days by August 2023 (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023). More recent data from 2024 indicates that processing times have stabilized in the single digits, with an average of 9 days in September 2024 (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). While this represents a slight increase from the previous year, it is still a significant reduction from the initial processing times, reflecting a more mature and streamlined system.

Table 1: Employment Change (EC) Applications: Qatar Ministry of Labour Administrative Data Reported to the ILO (Oct 2020–Oct 2023)

Year/Period	Applications	Approved	Rejected	% Approved	Processing-time notes	Notes
Oct 2020–Oct 2021	344774	242870	99814	70.4	Avg days to process EC request: Aug 2021 → 22	Includes 2,090 pending at period end (not shown)
Nov 2020–Aug 2022	532290	348455	183835	65.5	Avg days to process: Aug 2022 → 17	
Sept 2020–Oct 2023 (cumulative)	1037644	669198	364053	64.5	Avg days to process: Aug 2023 → 6	

Note: This table compiles official job-mobility ("employment change") statistics from International Labour Organization reports based on Qatar Ministry of Labour administrative data for 2020-2023. Periods reflect ILO publication windows (Oct 2020-Oct 2021; Nov 2020-Aug 2022; Sept 2020-Oct 2023, cumulative) and overlap, so totals should not be summed across rows. "Applications," "Approved," and "Rejected" follow MoL definitions; % Approved = Approved ÷ Applications × 100. Processing-time notes report average calendar days to process EC requests (snapshots for Aug 2021, Aug 2022, Aug 2023). Sources: ILO 2022a; ILO 2022b; ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023; ILO 2024a.

3.2 Extending Protections: The Case of Domestic Workers

The extension of recent labour reforms to domestic workers, a historically vulnerable and restricted group, is a critical indicator of progress. The significance of this inclusion is underscored by the sheer size of the domestic worker population.

3.2.1 Demographics: A Snapshot of Domestic Workers

According to data from Qatar's National Planning Council (NPC), the domestic worker sector comprises 167,264 individuals, all of whom are non-Qatari (NPC 2025). This workforce is gendered, with women making up the majority at 101,069 (approximately 60.4%), while men number 66,195 (approximately 39.6%) (NPC 2025). This substantial population was historically excluded from the main Labour Law (Law No. 14 of 2004) and was instead covered by the less comprehensive Law No. (15) of 2017 on Domestic Workers (Mahasneh 2022). This separate legal framework established basic protections but lacked the scope of the general labour law, particularly regarding overtime pay and sick leave (Mahasneh 2022; State of Qatar 2017). The inclusion of this group in the recent wave of major reforms, therefore, represents a significant step towards dismantling a tiered system of rights.

3.2.2 Legal Inclusion: Landmark Mobility Reforms

A pivotal development was the extension of the “No-Objection Certificate” (NOC) abolition to domestic workers, granting them the same right as other private-sector workers to change employers (MoL n.d.-a). This move directly addresses one of the primary drivers of vulnerability by allowing workers to leave an abusive or exploitative employment situation without their employer’s consent. Similarly, the right to exit the country without a permit was extended to domestic workers in January 2020, removing another key instrument of control previously held by employers (ILO 2020b).

3.2.3 Law in Action: Uptake and Impact on Mobility

The data shows a steady and significant increase in the uptake of these new freedoms by domestic workers. In the first year of the reforms (October 2020 to October 2021), 3,674 domestic workers successfully changed jobs (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2021). By September 2023, the cumulative number of approved EC applications for domestic workers had reached 10,827 (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2023).

This momentum has continued, with an additional 3,399 approved EC applications from domestic workers in 2024 alone (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). Interestingly, 60% of these applications in 2024 were for male domestic workers, a notable trend within this sector (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This sustained high volume demonstrates that the reforms have addressed a critical need within the domestic worker community, empowering them to actively seek better working conditions and new opportunities.

3.2.4 Emerging Challenges: Persistent Vulnerabilities

While legal inclusion has been achieved, dedicated monitoring and protection for this group remain a focal point for ensuring that “law-in-action” matches the “law-on-the-books.” The progress on mobility is paired with high grievance rates. In 2024, the U.S. State Department noted 5,218 complaints from domestic workers, a significant increase from 1,391 in 2023 (U.S. Department of State 2025). This sharp rise does not necessarily signal worsening conditions; rather, it more likely points to a greater awareness among domestic workers of their rights and an increased trust in and access to complaint mechanisms (U.S. Department of State 2025).

However, the long-term stability of these protections has been tested. In June-July 2024, Qatar's advisory Shura Council proposed measures to reinstate an employer permission requirement for domestic workers seeking to leave the country (Page 2024). The proposal would have required

domestic workers to submit departure requests through an online portal at least five days in advance and allowed employers to deny approval. While the proposal was not enacted as of early 2025, the discussion itself created significant uncertainty and highlighted the risk of policy backsliding on critical labour reforms (Page 2024). This underscores the persistent view among some stakeholders that employer control is necessary and highlights the unique vulnerability of domestic workers, who often face a greater risk of exploitation and abuse (Page 2024).

4. Implementation Risks, Enforcement Gaps, and Structural Frictions

4.1 Sectoral Roadmaps: Areas of Progress and Remaining Frictions

While the legal and administrative changes have materially expanded worker freedoms, significant challenges and risks persist in implementation.

4.1.1 Areas of Progress: Where Freedom Has Materially Expanded

Despite remaining implementation challenges, the legal and administrative changes since 2018 have materially expanded worker freedoms in four key areas, fundamentally altering the labour market structure.

- **Employer-change without NOC is now a standard, high-volume procedure, fundamentally altering the labor market by introducing competition for workers.** The cornerstone of the reforms, the abolition of the No-Objection Certificate (NOC), has unlocked labour mobility. The impact of this change is evident in its high uptake; between September 2020 and October 2023, the Ministry of Labour processed over one million EC applications, approving more than 669,000 of them (ILO 2024a; ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This newfound freedom introduces competition among employers, incentivizing them to offer better wages and conditions to attract and retain talent (ILO 2022a). This effect is consistent with evidence from a similar reform in the UAE, where relaxing mobility restrictions was shown to reduce the monopsony power of firms and increase incumbent workers' wages (Naidu, Nyarko, and Wang 2014). Surveys confirm that expatriate workers perceive the removal of the NOC as one of the most significant recent reforms (Diop et al. 2021).
- **Exit without permits has become the norm for the vast majority of workers, removing a key tool of coercion.** The exit permit system, which previously tied a worker's ability to leave the country to their employer's consent, has been nearly dismantled in a phased approach. Law No. 13 of 2018 removed the requirement for most workers, and Ministerial Decision No. 95 of 2019, which came into force on 16 January 2020, extended this right to almost all remaining categories, including domestic workers and those in the oil and gas sector (ILO 2020b). This reform directly addressed and removed a major instrument of control under the pre-reform *kafala* system.
- **The minimum wage and expanded WPS have strengthened workers' baseline bargaining power.** In March 2021, Qatar established the region's first non-discriminatory

minimum wage, a policy that directly benefited over 280,000 workers by increasing their basic wage (ILO 2022a; MoL 2021). In line with economic principles, the establishment of a wage floor serves to redistribute earnings and strengthen the baseline bargaining position of low-paid workers (Terrell and Almeida 2008). This is enforced through the expanded Wage Protection System (WPS), an electronic salary transfer system that monitors payments. The WPS has achieved extensive coverage, with over 1.66 million workers (96% of the eligible workforce) registered, ensuring a high degree of compliance and transparency in wage payment (MoL 2021; ILO 2019a).

- **Digitalized MoL services have lowered transaction costs, standardized procedures, and improved traceability.** Aligning with Qatar's broader national strategy of digital transformation (MCIT 2013; MCIT 2024; MCIT n.d.), the Ministry of Labour has increasingly digitalized its services to streamline administrative processes. A key example is the revised electronic platform for processing ECs, launched in May 2024, which allows both workers and new employers to initiate applications digitally, eliminating paper forms and reducing processing times (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025; MoL 2024b). Other digital initiatives, like the e-authentication service for employment contracts and the updated Occupational Classification Guide, further aim to enable faster approvals, improve data-driven decision-making, and reduce procedural barriers for workers and employers (MoL n.d.-b; MoL 2024b). While public adoption of e-government services is still growing, these digital tools are critical for making legal reforms accessible and effective in practice (Al-Kuabaisi, Al-Thani, and Al-Emadi 2022).

4.1.2 Persistent Risks: Bottlenecks and Frictions

While the legal reforms are significant, their practical implementation faces persistent bottlenecks and risks that impede the full realization of worker freedoms. These challenges highlight a continuing gap between “law-on-the-books” and “law-in-action.”

- **Employer Retaliation and Coercion:** Despite the legal changes, workers who exercise their rights, particularly the right to change jobs, continue to face retaliatory actions from employers. These practices include the filing of false “absconding” charges, which can lead to a worker’s arrest and deportation, non-payment of final wages, and the illegal retention of passports to restrict their movement (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025; Kalush and Saraswathi 2024; Page 2024). This creates a climate of fear that can deter workers from leaving an exploitative job or pursuing legal remedies (Amnesty International 2016). Such practices of deception and coercion are deeply rooted in the previous system and undermine the practical ability of a worker to exercise their newfound rights (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016).
- **Recruitment Debt and Fees:** The charging of recruitment fees to workers, which is illegal in Qatar, remains a major structural barrier to freedom. Although regulations require sponsors (employers) to bear all recruitment costs, these are often passed on to workers through recruitment agencies in their home countries (Babbitt et al. 2023; Damir-Geilsdorf 2016). Workers take on significant loans, often at high interest rates, to pay these fees, starting their employment in a state of debt bondage. This debt creates a coercive dynamic that undermines a worker’s practical ability to leave an exploitative job, regardless of local laws allowing them to change employers (Babbitt et al. 2023; Amnesty

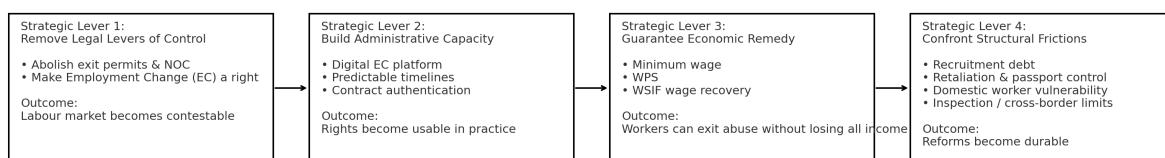
International 2016). Research shows that this debt burden is a key factor in workers' vulnerability and can take a significant portion of their employment period to repay (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016).

- **Transparency and Efficacy of Remedies:** While mechanisms like the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF) have been established to provide financial redress, their effectiveness is hampered by a lack of transparency and operational limitations. There is a call from independent monitors for more granular, public data on the WSIF's disbursements, including beneficiary counts by sector and nationality and processing timelines, to build trust and demonstrate effectiveness (MRRORS 2025). Reports indicate that the fund has payout caps that may not cover the full extent of wages owed, and workers can face long, unspecified waits for their cases to be heard at the Dispute Settlement Committee stage, which is the only point at which the WSIF can release funds. This leaves many workers without income or the ability to find a new job while they await resolution (MRRORS 2025).
- **Policy Stability and Protections for Domestic Workers:** The long-term stability of reforms, especially for the most vulnerable groups, remains a significant risk. As noted previously (see Section 3.2.4), Qatar's advisory Shura Council in June-July 2024 proposed reinstating an employer permission requirement for domestic workers seeking to leave the country (Page 2024; MRRORS 2024; The Shura Council 2024). Although the proposal was not enacted as of early 2025, the discussion itself created significant uncertainty. This underscores the unique vulnerability of domestic workers and the risk of policy backsliding on critical labour reforms (Hawkes et al. 2023).

4.2 Proactive Governance: Risk Assessment and Mitigation Strategies

The issues outlined above are not incidental; they point to deeper structural factors that will determine whether Qatar's reforms remain durable. These structural factors can be grouped into four strategic levers. An analysis of the reforms' successes and failures reveals four key drivers of "real" freedom of contract and movement that must be protected and enhanced.

Figure 2. Four Strategic Levers Sustaining Worker Freedom After Kafala Reform



These levers translate "law-on-the books" into "law-in-action" by making freedom of movement and wage recovery real.

4.2.1 Strategic Lever 1: Eliminating Legal Levers of Control

The abolition of the exit permit and NOC requirements was the essential first step. It fundamentally reshaped bargaining dynamics by reducing employer dependency and creating a more contestable labour market. These legal instruments were primary sources of employers' monopsony power, a market condition where employers have significant wage-setting power due to restricted worker mobility. Economic theory predicts that in such environments, wages are suppressed below workers' marginal product (Webber 2020). Removing these legal restrictions

increases the labour supply elasticity facing the firm, forcing employers to compete for workers and pushing wages higher (Naidu, Nyarko, and Wang 2014).

Evidence from a similar reform in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) demonstrates this effect in practice. The UAE's 2011 reform, which allowed workers to change employers after their contract expired without their previous employer's consent, reduced the monopsony power of firms. This led to an increase in incumbent workers' earnings of over 10% and a higher rate of firm retention, a distinctive signature of reduced market power where both wages and employment quantities for incumbent workers rise (Naidu, Nyarko, and Wang 2014).

The impact in Qatar has been similarly transformative, unlocking labour mobility on a massive scale. Before the reforms, job mobility was extremely limited, with only around 9,000 and 18,000 workers changing jobs in 2018 and 2019, respectively (ILO 2022a). Following the legal changes, the uptake was immediate and substantial. Between September 2020 and October 2023, the Ministry of Labour processed over one million EC applications, approving more than 669,000 of them (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This newfound freedom introduces competition among employers, incentivizing them to offer better wages and conditions to attract and retain talent (ILO 2022a). Surveys confirm that expatriate workers perceive the removal of the NOC as one of the most significant recent reforms (Ewers et al. 2023). Beyond improving worker welfare, these reforms also enhance overall market efficiency by reducing 'labour hoarding,' the practice of keeping more workers than necessary, and allowing for a better allocation of labour to meet the needs of a productive economy (Kagan and Cholewinski 2022).

4.2.2 Strategic Lever 2: Administrative Capacity and Clarity

De jure rights become de facto access only through efficient, clear, and predictable administration. The conversion of legal potential into practical reality is contingent on the state's administrative capacity to implement and enforce its own rules (Amengual 2014; Peters 2015). The effectiveness of reforms depends on the consistent application of the law by front-line agents like labour inspectors and ministry officials, a concept known as "street-level bureaucracy" (Piore and Schrank 2007; Evans 2020).

Recognizing this, Qatar's strategy has decisively focused on leveraging digitalization to bolster administrative capacity and clarity, thereby reducing ambiguity and standardizing procedures. This aligns with global best practices, which identify digitalization as a core component of competent and effective governance (ILO 2025). A key example is the Ministry of Labour's revised electronic platform for processing ECs, launched in May 2024. This streamlined online portal allows both workers and new employers to initiate applications digitally, eliminating the need for paper forms and improving transparency by notifying each party for approval (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025; MoL 2024a).

The impact of such digital initiatives on administrative efficiency has been measurable and significant. The average processing time for an EC request, which stood at 22 days in August 2021, was reduced to just 9 days by September 2024, demonstrating a marked improvement in predictability and speed (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This digitalization effort is supported by the provision of digital user guides and the e-authentication service for employment contracts, which further aims to standardize timelines, reduce forgery, and ensure clarity for all parties (MoL 2022b; MoL 2023; MoL n.d.; Deloitte 2024).

However, administrative capacity extends beyond the efficiency of digital platforms. It also encompasses the state's ability to ensure that new rights are enforceable. Despite significant progress in streamlining procedures, many observers note a persistent gap between the reformed laws and the on-the-ground reality for workers (Calo 2023). Challenges in the dispute resolution system, including long delays and difficulties in enforcing judgments, highlight that technological enhancements alone are insufficient (Calo 2023). True administrative capacity requires strengthening the entire institutional chain, from digital application to final legal redress. While digital tools have been decisive in improving the clarity and efficiency of key labour processes, achieving universal de facto access to rights remains contingent on bolstering the enforcement and judicial mechanisms that give those rights practical meaning.

4.2.3 Strategic Lever 3: Wage Floors and Effective Remedy

The minimum wage and the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund (WSIF) anchor contract freedom by limiting the scope for coercion through non-payment and offering a credible path to recovery. These two pillars are essential in labour markets characterized by significant power imbalances, where the formal freedom to contract can mask underlying coercive dynamics (Bagenstos 2020).

In labour markets with monopsony power, where employers have significant wage-setting power due to factors like restricted worker mobility, wages can be suppressed below workers' marginal product (Azar and Marinescu 2024). The pre-reform *kafala* system, by tying workers to a single employer, created precisely such a market condition which enabled widespread exploitation (Offia 2023). The introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage establishes a "wage floor," a baseline that strengthens the bargaining position of low-paid workers and limits the extent of wage exploitation (Terrell and Almeida 2008). This policy directly mitigates the effects of monopsony power by raising wages, thereby creating a more competitive labour market and ensuring that the employment contract does not fall below a basic threshold of decency (Azar and Marinescu 2024).

However, a wage floor alone is insufficient if wages are not paid in a timely or complete manner. Wage theft: which includes illegal deductions, delayed payment, or non-payment of wages: is a primary tool of coercion and a key driver of forced labour, as it creates dependency and can trap workers in debt bondage (Harkins 2020; ILO 2009). An "effective remedy" requires not only a legal judgment in the worker's favor but also a credible mechanism for recovery. Workers often face a final hurdle after winning a legal case: the employer may be insolvent, have disappeared, or simply refuse to pay. The WSIF was established to address this exact problem (Richardson 2024). It functions as a wage guarantee institution, ensuring that workers receive their owed compensation following a final judgment from a Labour Dispute Settlement Committee, particularly when an employer defaults. The Fund pays the workers' entitlements first and then seeks to recover the amount from the employer (ILO 2023). This mechanism is a critical systemic enabler, ensuring that legal victories translate into tangible financial relief and providing a credible path to recovery that makes workers' newfound rights enforceable in practice.

4.2.4 Strategic Lever 4: Addressing Structural Frictions

With the primary legal levers of control abolished, the constraints on practical freedom are now dominated by deeper, more complex structural frictions. While the legal reforms were a

necessary precondition for change, they do not automatically dismantle the economic and social scaffolding that enabled exploitation under the previous system. The persistence of these frictions demonstrates that changing the law is only the first step. The primary obstacles that remain are the powerful economic incentives within the transnational recruitment industry, the deep-seated power imbalances that continue to define employer-worker relationships, and the resulting gaps in enforcement.

The business model of the international recruitment industry remains a core structural impediment. This system creates perverse incentives by allowing the costs of recruitment to be passed on to workers, who are the least able to afford them (Anadolu Ajansi 2025). This practice is not just a matter of a few rogue agencies; it is a systemic issue where Qatari-based companies contribute to the problem by imposing costs on recruiters with the knowledge that these expenses will ultimately be borne by the workers (Human Rights Watch 2022). This creates a market where ethical recruiters who absorb these costs are at a competitive disadvantage, and it institutionalizes debt bondage as a fundamental feature of labour migration to the region (The Times of India 2025).

Furthermore, the reforms have not yet fully altered the profound power imbalance that characterized the *kafala* system. Many employers continue to operate with a mindset of sponsorship and control, leading to practices such as retaliation against workers who try to change jobs or the demand for “de facto” NOCs (ILO Project Office for the State of Qatar 2025). This dynamic undermines the effectiveness of legal remedies. Workers burdened by recruitment debt are less likely to challenge abuses, and the dispute resolution system itself struggles to operate effectively in an environment of such starkly unequal power (Calo 2023).

Finally, these issues are compounded by gaps in enforcement and the transnational nature of recruitment. Qatari labour inspectorates, while improving, have been described as historically under-resourced and ineffective, particularly concerning the hidden abuses faced by domestic workers (Faraday 2022; Coalition on Labor Justice for Migrants in the Gulf 2024). The problem is inherently cross-border, with many of the exploitative practices originating in workers’ home countries, far beyond the direct reach of Qatari law. Without robust cross-border cooperation and a fundamental shift in the economic model of recruitment, these structural frictions will continue to dilute the practical impact of Qatar’s legal reforms. In practical terms, this means that sustaining reform outcomes will increasingly depend on bilateral recruitment agreements, targeted inspection capacity for high-risk sectors such as domestic work, and public reporting that builds confidence in enforcement outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Qatar’s labour reforms since 2018 have materially expanded workers’ freedom of contract and movement, both in law and, crucially, in practice. The abolition of exit permits, the removal of the NOC requirement, the approval of hundreds of thousands of ECs, and the establishment of a national minimum wage collectively point to a structural shift away from the most restrictive features of the old sponsorship regime. However, practical freedom remains contingent on robust enforcement and transparency. Persistent risks, including employer retaliation, recruitment debt, and policy stability concerns for domestic workers, can dilute the lived impact of statutory rights if not carefully managed. Sustained policy stability, targeted enforcement, and regular public

data will determine whether the reforms' promise becomes a durable, everyday reality for all segments of the workforce.

Key Takeaways:

- 1. A Fundamental Shift:** The abolition of the NOC and exit permit requirements has created a more contestable labor market, representing a fundamental and positive shift in labor governance.
- 2. High-Volume Uptake Confirms Relevance:** Hundreds of thousands of workers: more than 669,000 approved job changes between September 2020 and October 2023 alone: have successfully used the new systems to change jobs, proving that the reforms address a real and significant need within the labor force.
- 3. Administrative Efficiency is Key to Rights Access:** The dramatic reduction in processing times for job changes demonstrates that administrative capacity is a critical enabler for turning legal rights into practical realities.
- 4. Domestic Workers Remain a Focal Point:** While legal inclusion has been achieved, high complaint volumes and discussions of policy reversals show that domestic workers remain a uniquely vulnerable group requiring dedicated monitoring and protection.
- 5. Structural Barriers Now Dominate:** With major legal impediments removed, the primary obstacles to "real" freedom are now structural issues like recruitment debt and practical challenges like employer retaliation, requiring a focus on enforcement and cross-border cooperation.
- 6. Transparency Drives Trust and Accountability:** The effectiveness of remedy mechanisms like the WSIF and the fairness of the job mobility system can only be assured through the regular publication of disaggregated performance data.

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