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# Blood, Sweat, and Goals: The Human Cost of Hosting the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup

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## ABSTRACT

*The FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar attracted international attention not merely because of its scale but also due to the serious human rights issues relating to its preparation. This paper critically analyses the use of migrant workers who played a crucial role in building the event facilities. Predominantly from South Asia and Africa, these migrant workers suffered under inhumane conditions of work, such as long working hours, unpaid or delayed wages, poor living conditions, and suppression of freedom of movement within the Kafala system. Though Qatar attempted to reform the labour legislation in light of international pressure, enforcement remained ineffective to a considerable extent, and exploitation continued. The article examines accounts from international bodies like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Labour Organization, identifying structural failures in safeguarding workers' rights. In addition, the article addresses the role of FIFA and other actors in facilitating or ignoring these abuses. This research demands tighter international responsibility mechanisms and binding legal regulations to ensure that human rights are not compromised for international sporting spectacles. The Qatar World Cup is a harsh reminder that without enforceable safeguards, vulnerable labour cohorts will still shoulder the unseen costs of international grandeur.*

**Keywords:** Migrant labours, Human Rights, FIFA, Qatar, Kafala System.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was a milestone in sports globally as it became the first time that the tournament would be hosted in the Middle East. Although it highlighted state-of-the-art stadiums and facilities, the tournament was marred by serious accusations of human rights abuse, more specifically the conditions under which migrant workers were treated. While the world's fans rejoiced at football players' moves on perfectly built pitches, the brutal conditions endured by the people who built those very grounds continued to go unnoticed.

Qatar invested heavily in rebuilding its infrastructure to stage the tournament, constructing stadiums, roads, hotels, and other infrastructure. Its reconstruction was dependent on the work

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of over 2 million foreign migrant workers, overwhelmingly from South Asia and Africa. With the exploitative Kafala (sponsorship) system, most of these migrant workers were subjected to poor or unpaid wages, dangerous working conditions, seizure of passports, forced labour, and draconian limitations on their freedom of association and movement.

Despite its public pledge to labour reforms under international pressure, such as cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), several reports suggest that the reforms were poorly enforced or too late. The legislative reform gap vs. on-ground enforcement was a centre of criticism from around the world.

This research paper seeks to examine the depth and character of the human rights violations experienced by migrant workers during preparations for the 2022 World Cup. It will examine the legal and ethical obligations of key actors—namely, the Qatari government, FIFA, and multinational construction companies—and determine whether international human rights norms were respected or violated in the process. By raising this question, the paper aims to contribute to the expanding dialogue on labour rights in mega sports events and promote more robust accountability frameworks for future global collaborations.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar was a historic event as it became the first World Cup to be hosted in the Middle East. On 2 December 2010, Qatar successfully bid to host the tournament by beating strong rivals like the United States, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. To meet the region's scorching summer temperatures, the tournament was shifted from its usual June–July timeslot to November–December, a major change that reshuffled domestic football schedules across the globe.

In preparation, Qatar launched an unprecedented boom in infrastructure. A nation with minimal existing football infrastructure quickly built or rebuilt eight top-of-the-line stadiums, created a new metro network in Doha, improved roads, and airports, and constructed new accommodations to welcome an influx of spectators and teams. The grand finale was the brand-new Lusail Stadium, set up to hold the final match and represent Qatar's national aspirations under its Vision 2030 vision to move its economy away from oil and gas. Innovative architecture, such as cutting-edge cooling technology and green building, was employed to combat the climate and to foster a vision of modernity and environmental stewardship.

The World Cup has also been deeply controversial. Corruption and bribery allegations were levelled at Qatar's bid, prompting investigations by US Justice Department and Swiss

prosecutors. Even more importantly, the focus shifted to mass human rights violations endured by migrant workers who constructed the tournament's infrastructure. The overwhelming majority of the construction and service labour force were South Asian and African migrants who often worked under the limiting Kafala (sponsorship) regime, in which their immigration status depended on being sponsored by an employer. This resulted in massive abuses including:

- unpaid or delayed salary,
- passport confiscation
- unsanitary and unsafe living and working environments,
- prohibition against job change or flight from the country.

International human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, catalogued many cases of forced labour and estimated thousands of migrant workers could have died since Qatar started preparing for the event. Due to increasing international pressure, Qatar implemented labour reforms, including the establishment of a minimum wage and partially eliminating parts of the Kafala system, but reports are that enforcement was uneven and many workers continued to be exploited.

Despite these controversies, Qatar framed the World Cup as a national symbol of pride, regional influence, and soft power. The tournament was meant to speed up its vision under Vision 2030 through increased tourism, economic diversification, and the promotion of Qatar globally. But the 2022 World Cup legacy is disputed: while the tournament proved Qatar could host an international sporting event, it also revealed persistent labour rights, human rights, and sustainable development challenges.

### **III. HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS OF WORKERS IN QATAR**

Even before Qatar was selected to host the FIFA World Cup 2022, the nation's economic boom had already left it reliant on a massive number of migrant workers. From the 1970s, when oil and gas revenues started altering the Gulf states, Qatar began to recruit cheap labour from South Asia and Africa to construct its cities, highways, and infrastructure. By the early 2000s, migrants made up more than 90% of Qatar's entire labour force — a world-leading proportion.

This mass migration was controlled under the Kafala system of sponsorship, prevalent in most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Under this arrangement, the legal status of a migrant worker is attached to a local sponsor (commonly the employer), who determines their

right to enter, work in, and depart from the country. While aimed at controlling labour migration, in reality, it generated a disproportionate power imbalance between employers and employees. Sponsors also commonly abused their authority by withholding passports, denying wages, refusing exit permits, and making threats of deportation, and workers had few legal options.

Throughout the decades, international human rights groups and press agencies have continued to report instances of:

- Forced labour and debt bondage, since workers commonly paid excessive recruitment fees in their countries of origin and spent long periods just trying to pay off the debt.
- Poor and congested living conditions, frequently with unsanitary conditions, poor ventilation, and unsafe housing.
- Long working hours, usually in hot conditions without adequate rest or protective gear, resulting in occupational fatalities and injuries.
- Poor grievance redressal, since fear of deportation or retaliation inhibited workers from raising grievances.

Although all these problems have been around for a long time, it came under the global focus when Qatar started its expansive preparations for the World Cup. Testimonies from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and investigative reporting by publications such as The Guardian uncovered appalling statistics: thousands of mysterious deaths in young, healthy migrant workers, rampant wage theft, and institutionalized exploitation by ruthless contractors and recruitment agents. These disclosures occasioned global outrage and compelled the Qatari regime to announce a string of labour reforms between 2017 and 2021, such as the elimination of the No Objection Certificate (NOC) to switch jobs and the implementation of a non-discriminatory minimum wage.

But several reports and independent audits pointed out that these reforms were weakly enforced and that most workers still suffered the same abuses. Critics say that despite changes in the law, deeply embedded practices, poor oversight, and fear of retaliation by employers have prevented significant progress.

The record of human rights abuses for migrant workers in Qatar is thus not a new one connected only to the World Cup but one with roots in structural dependency on low-cost foreign labour and the systems of government that favour swift economic growth at the cost of neglecting workers' rights. The World Cup simply amplified these older issues internationally.

#### **IV. FORMS OF EXPLOITATION AND WORKING CONDITIONS**

The migrant workers who supported Qatar's World Cup infrastructure experienced a variety of exploitative practices that undermined international labour standards and basic human rights. These abuses were not isolated incidents or the work of the odd wayward employer; they were instead indicative of systemic issues inherent in Qatar's labour migration system and amplified by the overwhelming pressures to complete mega projects within short time frames.

- **Wage Abuse and Wage Theft**

One of the most common types of abuse was the general practice of wage withholding, part payments, or non-payment altogether. Wages were often unpaid for several months, and workers could not send money home to families or pay debts entered to get a job. Cash flow issues or financial disagreements were the common excuses for contractors and subcontractors, while workers found few legal channels for complaint and were subjected to reprisals.

- **Hazardous Working Conditions**

Construction workers faced scorching temperatures, often over 50°C (122°F) in the hottest summer months. Though officially prohibited from working in the hottest part of the day, human rights reports suggest weak enforcement and widespread exemptions. Long working hours, heavy labor, and inadequate rest breaks substantially heightened the risk of heat stress, dehydration, and deadly cardiac arrests. In most instances, deaths were credited broadly to "natural causes" that covered occupational risks.

- **Poor Living Conditions**

Housing for workers, especially in Doha's outskirts labour camps, did not always answer the minimum requirements of safety and hygiene. Dormitories were overcrowded, sanitation was poor, and clean water and health services were scarce. It was found that workers were often accommodated in distant areas, keeping them away from the rest of the population and limiting their mobility and access to welfare services.

- **Limitations on Freedom of Movement**

Employers in the Kafala system often took away workers' passports, making it extremely difficult for them to switch jobs, exit the country, or gain improved working conditions. While legal reforms were stated to prevent this practice, several audits determined that most employers still withheld travel documents and employed threats of deportation as a control mechanism.

- **Excessive Working Hours and Inadequate Rest**

Laborers regularly worked shifts that went over legal hours, with few days off. Overtime was frequently unpaid or underpaid, and refusal to work lengthy hours might mean being fired or blacklisted, putting a worker's legal status at risk in Qatar. These demands, along with inadequate nutrition and sun exposure, additionally risked workers' health.

- **Psychological Abuse and Intimidation**

In addition to economic and physical exploitation, most migrant workers described incidents of verbal harassment, threats, and intimidation. Fear of losing their jobs, being arrested, or deported hindered them from complaining or requesting fair treatment. Lack of awareness of legal rights coupled with language barriers made them further vulnerable.

## **V. ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND REPORTS**

International institutions and non-governmental monitors were critical in revealing, chronicling, and contesting the institutional exploitation of migrant labor in Qatar in the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Their repetitive research and campaigning have been key to raising international awareness of human rights abuses that may go unseen behind Qatar's ambitious development narrative otherwise.

- **Amnesty International**

Amnesty International released several in-depth reports between 2013 and 2022, such as "Reality Check 2021: A Year to the World Cup" and "In the Prime of Their Lives". These reports documented widespread wage theft, forced labor indicators, hazardous working conditions, and worker deaths from heat stress. Amnesty consistently highlighted the gap between Qatar's promised reforms and the reality on the ground, arguing that cosmetic legislative changes were not matched by robust enforcement mechanisms or access to justice for workers.

- **Human Rights Watch:**

Human Rights Watch (HRW) also investigated the labour conditions in Qatar and the complicity of FIFA. HRW investigations highlighted how employers continued to exploit the loopholes of the reformed labour laws, like not processing exit permits or preventing workers from switching jobs, even though the formal abolition of the No Objection Certificate (NOC) was legislated. HRW findings highlighted how the sponsorship system had the effect of enabling forced labour by tying workers' legal residency to employers' goodwill.

- **International Labour Organization (ILO)**

In 2017, following growing international pressure, Qatar signed a historic accord with the ILO to implement a far-reaching technical cooperation program to transform its labour system. The ILO set up a project office in Doha and helped to prepare new laws, establish a non-discriminatory minimum wage, enhance labour inspection regimes, and devise dispute settlement committees. While the ILO recognized significant legal advancement, its monitoring reports and external audits indicated that implementation was many steps behind legislation. Structural obstacles like fear of reprisal, language gaps, and domination of informal networks among recruitment intermediaries and subcontractors continued to erode reforms.

- **Media and Investigative Journalism**

International media outlets also had a significant role in holding Qatar to account. Investigations by The Guardian, for example, put the number of migrant workers killed between 2010 and 2020 in Qatar as more than 6,500 from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, although not all the fatalities were directly attributed to World Cup projects. Such reports, as much as they were disputed by Qatari authorities, pointed out the transparent registration of worker deaths and failure to conduct detailed investigations into the causes of death, particularly those euphemistically described as "cardiac arrest" or "natural causes."

### **Impact and Limitations**

The combined pressure from international organizations, trade unions, and journalists generated significant global outrage and forced both FIFA and the Qatari government to acknowledge the issues. These efforts led to policy announcements, regulatory amendments, and greater public scrutiny of corporate supply chains and sponsorship ethics. However, critics argue that without legally binding commitments and independent enforcement, international advocacy had limited power to effect deep structural change within the rigid sponsorship system and profit-driven construction industry.

### **UN Calls for Release of Qatar Whistleblower**

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found that Abdullah Ibhaïs, a Jordanian former media manager for Qatar's 2022 World Cup, has been unlawfully detained for nearly three years. Ibhaïs was arrested in 2019 after raising concerns about the mistreatment and unpaid wages of migrant workers on World Cup projects.

Despite seeking help through FIFA's whistleblowing platform, FIFA failed to support him



beyond a generic statement about fair trials. In 2021, Ibhais was convicted of bribery in a trial criticized by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as grossly unfair and reliant solely on a coerced confession.

In July 2024, the UN Working Group concluded there was no legal basis for his detention and demanded his immediate release and compensation. Qatari authorities did not respond to the UN's findings.

Rights groups stress that Ibhais was punished for exposing abuses that were already well-documented. Although he is due for release in October 2024, an unpaid fine could extend his imprisonment until April 2025.

This case highlights serious concerns about retaliation against whistleblowers and the lack of accountability for human rights abuses linked to mega sporting events.

## **VI. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK: REFORMS AND SHORTCOMINGS**

In response to intense international scrutiny over widespread labour abuses, Qatar undertook several legal and regulatory reforms in the years leading up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Notably, it introduced the region's first non-discriminatory minimum wage in 2021 and implemented measures to dismantle critical aspects of the Kafala (sponsorship) system, such as abolishing the No Objection Certificate (NOC) requirement for workers to change jobs. These changes were made in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and were presented as significant steps towards protecting migrant workers' rights and modernizing Qatar's labour market.

However, despite these legal amendments, reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other independent bodies consistently revealed a persistent gap between legislation and on-the-ground reality. Many employers continued to exploit loopholes or disregard the new rules with minimal fear of consequences, due to weak enforcement and limited government oversight. Wage theft, passport confiscation, excessive working hours, and unsafe living conditions remained common. Workers often faced retaliation for lodging complaints, and grievance mechanisms were inaccessible or ineffective.

Moreover, while reforms targeted high-profile sectors linked to World Cup construction, broader systemic issues across other industries—such as domestic work and low-skilled services—remained largely unaddressed. Critics argue that the reforms appeared more performative than transformative, serving to mitigate reputational damage rather than fundamentally dismantle exploitative practices. Thus, Qatar's legal framework, though

improved on paper, failed to deliver consistent protection in practice, underscoring the need for stronger enforcement, independent monitoring, and binding international accountability in future mega-projects.

### **Case Studies: Stories from the Ground**

Behind Qatar's shiny World Cup stadiums are the little-heard stories of migrant labourers whose work made the tournament possible. Most workers from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Kenya said they paid astronomical recruitment fees to get jobs, trapping their families in debt before they even reached Qatar. There, thousands of workers saw their promised salaries cut or go unpaid for months. Some resided in crowded labour camps with inadequate sanitation and scarce access to clean drinking water.

For instance, The Guardian found in an investigation that thousands of workers had perished during World Cup preparation, with several deaths listed officially as having been caused by "natural causes," downplaying the contribution of extreme heat, excessive working hours, and unsafe working conditions. A Nepali worker described working 12-hour days in blistering heat without rest or medical attention. When he fainted from heat stroke, he was given little care and coerced into working the following day in order not to lose pay.

Another high-profile case is that of Abdullah Ibhais, a former media manager for Qatar's Supreme Committee and whistleblower. Following his complaints about unpaid migrant workers, he was prosecuted on unsubstantiated bribery charges in what international human rights groups term a retaliatory step to muzzle dissent.

These personal anecdotes expose the human cost of Qatar's global image transformation. They attest to the dire price of systematic neglect and inadequate protection by law, and remind the world that mega-events should not be constructed over the exploitation and oppression of vulnerable workers.

## **VII. DUTIES OF STAKEHOLDERS: FIFA, CONTRACTORS, AND THE GOVERNMENT OF QATAR**

FIFA, being the body that grants hosting rights, were duty-bound to guarantee human rights levels were maintained but failed to a great extent to monitor Qatar to act on labour misconduct. Contractors and subcontractors, who were mainly multinational companies, had direct accountability for workers' welfare but regularly dispensed with safety procedures and equitable remuneration practices to reduce expenses. The Qatari government, in making reforms in response to international pressure, did not regularly enforce laws, enabling

exploitative techniques to continue. These stakeholders, together, valued quick construction and international glory over migrant workers' rights and dignity, demonstrating a strong necessity for binding accountability at future global events. Migrant workers, including domestic workers, continued to suffer major human rights violations like wage theft, poor working conditions, and restricted access to justice. Even after commitments, Qatar and FIFA have not yet offered remedies or compensation to the huge number of workers taken advantage of in preparing for the 2022 World Cup. Seventeen East African men, for instance, were dropped by sponsors, left without food or papers, locked up in shelters with limited freedom, and finally returned home without recourse. Domestic workers continue to be vulnerable, particularly with suggestions to reintroduce the requirement of exit permits, undermining previous reforms. The authorities also did not effectively enforce heat protection legislation; although more than 350 violations were reported, information regarding penalties was not provided.

- **Right to Remedy**

Qatar and FIFA failed to provide long-awaited compensation to exploited workers. An independent report, recognizing FIFA's responsibility to offer remedy, was postponed and its key recommendation—paying victims back—was rejected. Instead, FIFA revealed a USD 50 million "Legacy Fund" aiding global NGOs, but none of it will go towards directly compensating exploited workers. In the meantime, migrant worker deaths continue to go poorly investigated, depriving families of rightful compensation.

- **Civil Liberties**

Freedom of expression is still limited. People such as Abdullah Ibhaïs, who reported bad conditions for workers, were unjustly prosecuted and imprisoned; the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has demanded his release and compensation. Lawyers and human rights activists remain subject to arbitrary detention for criticising government policies.

- **Women's and LGBTI Rights**

Women are still in need of male guardian consent for important life choices and are inadequately shielded from domestic violence. LGBTI people are discriminated against and arbitrarily arrested, as illustrated by the arrest and forced confession of British-Mexican national Manuel Guerrero Aviña, who was subsequently deported.

- **Environmental Commitments**

Though Qatar's Third National Development Strategy commits to reducing emissions by 25%

by 2030, this is undercut by a large increase in liquefied natural gas production. At COP29, Qatar committed to assisting in mobilizing USD 300 billion per year by 2035 for climate action in lower-income nations.

### **VIII. PATH FORWARD: BRIDGING GAPS AND ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY**

As Qatar continues to position itself as a global hub for sports, trade, and diplomacy, the gap between its ambitious international image and the everyday reality for vulnerable communities remains stark. Sustainable progress demands more than legal reforms on paper — it requires genuine enforcement, transparent monitoring, and meaningful participation of civil society, affected workers, and independent human rights organizations. Strengthening grievance mechanisms, ensuring corporate accountability for international partners like FIFA, and guaranteeing protection for whistleblowers are essential steps to prevent future abuses. International scrutiny and collaboration can play a vital role in urging the Qatari government and its partners to uphold commitments to human rights and equitable development for all residents.

### **IX. CONCLUSION**

Qatar's rapid development and global ambitions have come at a significant human cost, particularly for migrant workers, women, and marginalized communities. Despite some reforms, persistent gaps in implementation, lack of accountability, and restrictions on basic freedoms continue to undermine human rights protections. The failure of key stakeholders, including FIFA and major contractors, to ensure effective remedies for abuses further highlights the need for stronger oversight and enforcement. Genuine progress requires Qatar to align its laws and practices with international standards, guarantee fair treatment and redress for all workers, and protect fundamental freedoms without fear of retaliation. The international community must sustain pressure and support reforms to ensure that Qatar's development does not come at the expense of human dignity and justice.

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