

Still Struggling:

Migrant Construction Workers in Qatar During the Pandemic

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Executive Summary

“While Qatar has made more labor-reform promises than other Gulf countries, it has not followed through fully on many of its commitments.”

Qatar has relied on hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from South Asia to build the stadiums, highways, and other infrastructure needed for the 2022 World Cup soccer tournament, which the Arabian Gulf emirate will host in November. In addition to the historic hardships facing migrant laborers in the Middle East, Qatar's foreign workforce has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, beginning in early 2020.

This report uses Qatar as a case study to examine how the global public health crisis affected destitute migrants in the Middle East and how employers and the government responded. It also makes a series of reform recommendations that would promote human rights by improving workers' economic and living conditions.

The report's central findings are two-fold: After a slow start, the government of Qatar provided migrant workers with free, adequate healthcare in response to the pandemic. But foreign laborers suffered economically as a result of construction delays, wage reductions, terminated contracts, and deportations. The contrast between the government's vigorous public health campaign and its failure to protect workers' livelihoods is key. Qatar should address migrants' economic needs with the same energy and resourcefulness illustrated by its efforts to stem the spread of Covid-19.

The handling of recruitment fees provides an example of how migrant workers in Qatar and the rest of the Middle East continue to be economically exploited. International labor law requires that employers cover costs associated with the recruitment and transportation of foreign workers. Qatari law is more ambiguous, however. In general, it prohibits charging migrant workers for their own recruitment but doesn't specify that employers should cover these costs. Under special worker-welfare standards established for World Cup stadium projects, construction companies are supposed to pay for recruitment. And

key arms of the government that hire such companies have pledged to ensure that the contractors fulfill this responsibility. As a result, the percentage of foreign workers helping to build World Cup stadiums who have paid for their own recruitment has diminished over the last several years, according to surveys funded by the government.

But in the absence of a clear legal mandate and active government enforcement, most companies still do not pay for recruitment, and an overwhelming majority of migrants continue to shoulder this financial burden. This shifting of costs to workers forces many of them to borrow at high interest rates to pay recruiting agencies in their home countries. The debts can amount to as much as a year's wages and divert funds laborers otherwise would send home to their families. Migrant workers desperate to maintain their salaries are more vulnerable to exploitation by employers, all the more so during the pandemic, when some companies reduced or delayed wages.

Qatar has failed to institute the most obvious solution for the recruitment-fee issue: explicitly mandating that employers cover all costs and penalizing those companies that defy the mandate. The government still has time before the World Cup to ensure that the tournament leaves a legacy of improved worker welfare. Here, in capsule form, are recommendations to the government, employers, and World Cup sponsors, which we explain in more detail in Part Three:

Recommendations in Brief

For the Qatari Government

- **Enforce existing worker standards covering those hired for FIFA World Cup projects.** As a starting point, the government should require construction firms to compensate workers for all recruitment costs and the full amount of wages lost during the pandemic.
 - **Broaden worker-protection rules to all categories of migrant workers, expand inspections of employers, and impose meaningful penalties against non-compliant firms.** The first step to supporting workers across sectors would be to enact a clearly stated law mandating employer responsibility for recruitment costs. The law should require that government-affiliated agencies accept only those contractor bids that fully account for the cost of recruitment, wages, and decent accommodation.
 - **Invest in digitizing the recruitment process and expand the role of government-funded visa centers in labor-sending countries.** This process should also generate reliable records that the government could use to assure compliance with its laws and deter corruption.
 - **Make bidding for government projects and contract implementation public.** Greater transparency would give civil society organizations and workers themselves more of a basis for advocating for fair treatment by employers and the government.
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For Construction Companies

- **Cover all expenses related to the recruitment of current and future low-wage migrant workers and reimburse those who were charged fees in the past or denied wages during the pandemic.** Employers need to treat the payment of recruitment fees as a routine cost of doing business, no different from the payment of wages.
 - **Pay for vastly improved accommodations for migrant employees.** This would be the humane approach in general, and, more specifically, it would decrease the impact of any future contagious disease outbreaks.
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For the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Corporate Sponsors of the World Cup, and National Football Teams

- **In the months leading up to the World Cup in November, FIFA should make a concerted effort to persuade the Qatari government to require that construction firms pay all recruitment fees, as well as provide fair compensation, decent accommodations, and safe working conditions.** For their part, the commercial sponsors of the World Cup also should adopt a common strategy for raising these issues collectively with the Qatari government. In a year when people across the globe will pay attention to Qatar, national teams that compete for the World Cup also can help generate greater public concern about these matters.

1. Introduction

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Throughout the Gulf of Arabia region, there is a striking contrast between the extraordinary wealth of the energy-producing societies that rely on imported labor and the destitution of foreign workers.”

In 2010, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) named the Arab Gulf nation of Qatar the host of the 2022 World Cup—the first time a Middle Eastern country enjoyed the honor. But on their own, Qatar’s 330,000 citizens were in no position to build the stadiums, highways, hotels, and railway line needed for global soccer championships expected to draw more than one million visitors in November 2022.

As a result, Qatar and the construction companies it hired for this \$200 billion undertaking turned to the human resource that has built much of the modern Middle East: migrant labor. At present, more than two million foreign workers, primarily from India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, are employed in Qatar. Nearly half work on construction projects, many of which now are related to the World Cup.¹

The six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Qatar, as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates—collectively host more than 25 million migrant workers, about 10 million in construction and the rest in domestic service, retail, and other sectors. These jobs offer migrants greater economic opportunity than they have in their home countries and allow them to send money back to their families. Remittances to South Asia, two-thirds of which come from the Gulf, total more than \$150 billion annually.²

Throughout the GCC, there is a striking contrast between the extraordinary wealth of the energy-producing societies that rely on imported labor and the destitution of foreign workers. Vast natural gas reserves make Qatar’s citizenry the richest in the world, per capita.³ Yet its migrant construction workforce, like those in neighboring countries, have

suffered from a longstanding pattern of mistreatment: workers are routinely forced to pay steep up-front fees for their own recruitment and travel; some construction companies reduce, delay, or deny contractual wages; and the same employers maintain dangerous job sites and crowded, unsanitary living quarters.

Since early 2020, as construction for the World Cup intensified, migrant workers in Qatar and other Gulf states faced an additional hardship: the onset of Covid-19. [The spread of the coronavirus](#) compounded the dangers and deprivations these laborers faced. Infection rates soared in Qatar as hundreds of thousands of migrant workers were isolated for months in densely packed residential camps.⁴ Some construction companies shut down their work sites, while others, facing looming World Cup deadlines, stepped up the pace of activity. In this chaotic environment, thousands of workers saw their pay abruptly cut off; others were ordered to put in overtime but without receiving increased pay rates. By June 2020, Qatar had the highest recorded rate of Covid-19 infection in the world, largely because of illness among migrants.⁵

To its credit, Qatari health officials and hospitals pulled themselves together and began providing free, adequate

testing and medical treatment—not only for Qatar’s citizens but also for migrants. By late 2020, Qatar was reporting one of the lowest coronavirus-related fatality rates anywhere in the world, a status the country has maintained ever since. Today, roughly 90% of Qatar’s population, including migrants, is fully vaccinated. Meanwhile, travel restrictions have been lifted, and preparations for the World Cup have resumed, even as the highly contagious Omicron variant caused a spike in infections in early 2022.

Economic Harms

In contrast to Qatar’s effective Covid-19 response, neither the government nor the construction companies it hires have adequately addressed the economic harms suffered by migrant workers as a result of coronavirus-related disruptions or the exploitation that long predated the pandemic.

Under pressure from human rights organizations and others, Qatar in recent years has introduced new labor policies calling for the improved treatment of migrant workers, especially those assigned to World Cup projects. For some foreigners, these policies have led to a certain degree of amelioration. But old habits die hard, as illustrated by the issue of recruitment fees. Certain Qatari government contracting agencies have [pledged to ensure that employers cover the cost of recruitment and travel](#).⁶ Special worker-welfare standards established for those hired to build World Cup stadiums state that employers are responsible for these expenses.⁷ But Qatari national law does not explicitly mandate that employers cover recruitment costs. The upshot is that while the percentage of migrants helping to build World Cup facilities who have paid for their own recruitment is decreasing, the overwhelming majority of construction workers continue to bear these costs, often going deep into debt to foot the bill. Their desperation to repay lenders, among other factors, makes migrants more likely to accept exploitative job conditions. During the pandemic, the debt burden has only increased, as many workers have had to borrow additional money for quarantine accommodations and other health protocols for which they’ve been forced to pay.

What’s more, some experts warn that even modest labor reforms adopted in anticipation of the World Cup may be eclipsed as the country returns to “normal,” post-pandemic.⁸ “Whether or not this pandemic will force the Gulf states toward reforming the most problematic features of their labor-migration systems is still very much an open question,” Zahra Babar, associate director for research at the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University’s branch in Qatar, has written. “But the pandemic and its economic fallout are likely to stall some [existing] reforms, or at least blunt their impact.”⁹

The stark difference between Qatar’s response to the global health crisis and its continuing failure to adequately address the exploitative economic treatment of its migrant workforce, even under the spotlight of World Cup preparations, underscores the country’s unfulfilled obligations to foreign laborers. As we explain in our recommendations in Part 3, Qatar needs to apply the same kind of determination and resources it invested in its coronavirus response to improving the economic lot of workers. And a variety of other actors that will benefit from Qatar’s shiny new sports infrastructure—including corporate sponsors of the World Cup, FIFA, its broadcasting partners, and national soccer teams from around the world—need to lend their voices and pecuniary muscle to this cause.

Focus on Qatar

Qatar’s Gulf neighbors, of course, need to make similar improvements in how they treat migrant labor. In this report, we focus specifically on Qatar for two reasons:

First, the World Cup has intensified construction activity in the desert nation on Saudi Arabia’s eastern border, making it an appropriate case study of large-scale building in the Middle East. While Qatar has made more labor-reform promises than other Gulf countries, it has not followed through fully on many of its commitments. FIFA and certain European national soccer teams have called for improved working conditions, but this rhetorical pressure has not been

matched by sufficient concrete action. Global corporations that are sponsoring the tournament—and will plaster their names on World Cup stadiums, billboards, and websites—likewise have not done enough to push for amelioration of working conditions. By focusing on Qatar, we hope to provide an unvarnished perspective on what has transpired and what can still be done before the World Cup begins.

A second reason for reporting on Qatar is that we are following up on earlier work by the NYU Stern Center of Business and Human Rights. In March 2017, we published [Making Workers Pay: Recruitment of the Migrant Labor Force in the Gulf Construction Industry](#), a report that examined how the burden of financing their own recruitment pushes many South Asian workers into debt, making them more susceptible to exploitation.¹⁰ We focus again on Qatar to assess how the pandemic has exacerbated these conditions and may result in the failure to implement potential reforms.

In preparing this report, we collaborated with Equidem, a London-based human rights consulting firm. Local researchers overseen by Equidem interviewed 26 migrant workers who were in Qatar or had been sent back to their home countries as a result of Covid-19. All of these workers were, or had been, employed by contractors or subcontractors on projects overseen by one or more Qatari government-affiliated institutions: Ashghal, the national utilities agency; Qatar Rail, which oversees the construction of roads and train infrastructure; and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, which has supervised construction of World Cup stadiums and broader infrastructure improvements. Equidem researchers also interviewed recruiting agents and money lenders in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal who interact with migrant workers. We also consulted with migrant-rights advocates, company representatives, and academic experts. While our research and analysis apply primarily to the construction industry, the problems we address also affect Qatar’s hospitality and private security sectors, which have been recruiting migrant workers this year in connection with the World Cup.

2. Healthcare Success, Economic Failure

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The outbreak of Covid-19 brought fear and confusion to the industrial zone on the outskirts of the Qatari capital of Doha, where close to one million foreign workers are housed by their employers.

In March 2020, the government [locked down most of the area](#), isolating migrants in overcrowded dormitories with inadequate plumbing and unreliable access to clean water or soap.¹¹ Local charities provided food, masks, and disinfectant, but the coronavirus spread rapidly through worker dorms, accelerated by the confinement of so many men in cramped, unhygienic circumstances.

Outside of the industrial zone, some construction sites shut down, while others, including most projects related to the World Cup, remained at least partly active. Police guarding the perimeter of the residential area allowed men working on active sites to come and go, while the majority were forbidden to leave.

QDVC, a joint venture between the large French builder Vinci and a local firm called Qatari Diar, tried to reduce infection by doubling the number of buses transporting workers to and from its active sites and having employees spread out while going about their tasks, according to Hans Mielants, the venture's human resources director during the first year of the pandemic. QDVC also urged its employees to wear masks and socially distance as much as possible. A month into the coronavirus crisis, one out of five of QDVC's 1,000 workers tested positive for Covid-19. QDVC rented

separate accommodations for infected workers, but many companies did not take such measures and did not quarantine infected workers for days after they tested positive.¹²

By June 2020, Qatar had the highest rate of coronavirus infection in the world, with 20,000 cases per one million people, including both citizens and visiting workers.¹³ C.S. Akhil, a researcher at the Center for Indian Migrant Studies in Kerala, India, has attributed the generally high rate of illness in the Gulf early in the pandemic to decades of disregard for migrant labor welfare. Referring to the region as a whole, Akhil has written, “There was a noticeable delay and hesitation in response from the governments, at least in the initial phases of the virus spread.”¹⁴

Healthcare Initiatives

To its credit, the Qatari government began to respond to the crisis, announcing that it would provide free Covid-19 testing and treatment for everyone in the country, including migrant workers.¹⁵ Quarantine and healthcare facilities were set up within the Doha industrial zone. The government ordered employers to limit the number of people accommodated in one dorm room to four, a huge improvement in many facilities where

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men slept six to twelve to a room.¹⁶ The authorities also directed the companies to stagger the entry and exit of workers at construction sites and reduce daily operating hours to six, among other steps. A state-sponsored social media campaign [educated workers about health risks and precautions](#) in their native languages.¹⁷

Almost all of the workers interviewed for this report said that after the initial confusion in early 2020, they gained confidence that employers and the government were trying to protect their health. In particular, they said that when workers had a fever or tested positive for Covid-19, most employers promptly transported them to hospitals, where they received needed medical attention.

Chandan, a laborer from Nepal in his early forties who worked on a road-construction project, was one of the migrants who praised the healthcare available in Qatar. He told us that his employer, Teyseer Group, a contractor for Ashghal, the utilities agency, had “an ambulance on standby to take workers to the hospital, if required, and also had a nurse present at the [residential] camp.” Teyseer also provided masks, sanitizers, and gloves, as well as information on preventative steps written in Nepali that he could easily read. (To protect workers’ privacy, we are referring to them with pseudonyms.)

Soon, the results of improved healthcare became evident. While until November 2020, Qatar reported one of the highest

per capita infection rates in the world, its case fatality rate was surprisingly low. At the end of 2020, the country reported an infection rate of 49,000 people per million, of which only 85, or 0.17%, had died. A year later, in December 2021, Qatar’s fatality rate of 0.25% remained one of the lowest globally.¹⁸ In addition to free testing and medical care, two other factors contributed to the modest fatality rate, according to health policy experts: Qatar moved swiftly in 2021 to vaccinate its citizens and migrant workers. And the relative youth of Qatar’s population—an average age of about 32 years, including both citizens and foreigners—probably helped diminish the number of fatalities.¹⁹

After the infection rate in Qatar hit its peak in June 2020, the country saw a gradual decline that for the most part continued through 2021. In April 2021, it experienced a brief spike in infections when social restrictions were loosened and the Delta variant spread, but the government reasserted restrictions and pushed infection rates back down.²⁰ Today, Qatar’s death rate remains low at 225 deaths per one million people. For comparison, the U.S. has experienced over 2,800 deaths per one million.

It is important to point out, however, that by most accounts, workers hired by contractors building World Cup infrastructure generally enjoyed better accommodations and healthcare than laborers on ordinary projects.²¹ That’s because the [Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy](#) adopted special worker-welfare standards covering World Cup stadium projects. Some of the standards have been followed—most notably, limiting to four the number of men housed in a single dorm room. But other standards have been ignored, and, as Hiba Zayadin, a researcher with Human Rights Watch, has noted, the special rules do not apply to a long list of other kinds of workers, including those building the metro system, highways, parking lots, bridges, hotels, “and other infrastructure projects

essential for hosting the millions of visitors a World Cup will attract.” Also excluded are cleaners, restaurant staff, security guards, drivers, and others in the hospitality sector who will serve the huge influx of people attending the tournament.²² The Supreme Committee did not answer written questions we posed in connection with this report.

Still, Babar, the Georgetown researcher, commended the government’s health-care efforts. “Dedicated facilities and services for Covid-19 patients were available to nearly everyone who needed treatment,” she said in an interview. Referring to worker quarantine arrangements, she added: “The food wasn’t great, and the quarantine facilities in labor camps weren’t as comfortable as hotel quarantines, but they were far better than the horror stories workers would hear of quarantine facilities in their home countries.”

Economic Hardship

Regardless of whether they worked on World Cup projects, many migrants experienced heightened economic hardship as a result of the pandemic. Some of these difficulties stemmed directly from the health crisis; others reflected the persistence of exploitative practices that predated Covid-19.

The most dramatic setbacks were suffered by thousands of foreign workers who lost their livelihoods as a result of being deported for allegedly violating pandemic restrictions or because their contracts were terminated. Sunil, a native of Nepal in his late twenties, worked as a scaffolder for a subcontractor on the construction of Al Bayt Stadium for the World Cup—a project that continued during Covid-19. But one day while he was on his way back to the industrial zone, he stopped to buy groceries and was arrested by the Qatari police, he told us. They accused him of violating emergency rules limiting the movements of foreign workers. Not long after that, Qatari authorities deported him to Nepal, where we interviewed him.

Abruptly returned to his home village of Pokhara, Sunil said that he had no steady source of income. His family eats whatever they are able to grow on their small plot of land, and he occasionally finds paid work as a day laborer. Sunil said he is owed two months of back wages from his job in Qatar, or about \$500. He has repeatedly called his employer in Qatar, but to no effect. He would like to return to the Middle East but hasn't been able to obtain a visa. To get to Qatar in the first place, Sunil said he had borrowed \$940 from a money lender in Kathmandu, who charged 36% interest. It took Sunil 15 months to pay back the lender, he said. Just when he was hoping to start saving some money for his family, he was deported.

Dillip, also from Nepal, said he, too, was arrested while buying vegetables. He described being deported with a large group of other workers. "We did not even get a warning," said the laborer, who is in his mid-thirties. He said he is still owed \$2,746 for his work in Qatar.

Some terminated workers forced to return home were obliged to pay for their international flights, requiring them to incur additional debt. This happened to Hakim, another Nepalese migrant, who worked for just four months for a steel subcontractor on World Cup stadiums. Neither his employer nor the Qatari government would pay for his \$500 plane ticket home, he said. "I had to ask a friend's friend to lend me the money."

Foreign workers who remained in Qatar also were hurt economically when employers reduced or withheld altogether their pay because of construction disruptions. Hasan, a carpenter from India in his early forties, told us that his employer slashed his \$330 monthly salary to practically nothing for three months early in the pandemic when he wasn't working. During that period, he said, the company, which has worked on the Al Thumama Showcase Stadium, gave him a "living stipend" of only \$7 a month. Even after he returned to work, Hasan added, his hours were cut in half

Building During a Pandemic

Construction of many World Cup projects in Qatar, including the new Lusail Stadium, where the finals will be played, continued during the pandemic and was largely completed by late 2021.



and his monthly pay was reduced to about \$165. This meant that he could send very little, if anything, home to his family. "I am anxious about them," he said. "I am at least getting food here. I am worried what they might be doing and how they are managing."

The delay, reduction, and non-payment of migrant wages have been common in the Gulf for many years. In 2020, Amnesty International revealed that about 100 employees of a design and construction company subcontracted for work on the Al Bayt World Cup Stadium **were not paid for up to seven months**, from September 2019 through the outbreak of Covid-19.²³ A separate 2021 study by the Business and Human Rights Resource Center found a 275% increase in labor-abuse allegations by low-wage workers employed across various sectors in the GCC in 2020, compared to the previous year.

"Workers cited COVID-19 as a key or worsening factor in 95% of cases," the Center reported, adding that non-payment of wages was the most frequently cited abuse, arising in 81% of the cases.²⁴

In other instances, foreign workers have been required to work overtime but without receiving higher overtime pay rates specified in employment contracts. Kumaljit, a Bangladeshi in his late 20s employed on World Cup stadium projects, told us that his employer threatened to terminate laborers who refused to work overtime. "They forced us to work and threatened to cut our salaries if we did not work," he said. "They fired many workers."

Qatari government responses to reduced or terminated wages were self-contradictory and ineffectual. In reaction to objections by human rights activists, the government announced

in April 2020 that it would make available \$824 million in loans which companies across all sectors could seek to fulfill their salary obligations.²⁵ But according to those who monitor the situation, most construction firms declined to take advantage of the program. “Businesses who have suffered during the pandemic

don’t know when or if they will be able to pay back the loans and don’t want to take on the debt,” Vani Saraswathi said in an interview. In her role as director of projects with the GCC-based advocacy group Migrant-Rights.org, Saraswathi routinely communicates with government and corporate officials in the Gulf.²⁶

Physical Danger

Desert heat makes construction work in Qatar potentially dangerous. In February 2021, *The Guardian* reported that more than 6,500 migrant laborers had died since the country won its bid in 2010 to host the 2022 World Cup. The causes of death included heat stroke, falls, and “natural causes.” The Qatari government told *The Guardian* that, over a decade, 6,500 deaths was proportionate to the large size of the migrant workforce and that fewer than 10% of the fatalities were work-related.¹ Qatar’s Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy has reported 38 deaths on World Cup projects, 35 of which it classified as “non-work-related.”² It is impossible to reconcile this discrepancy because the government lacks a transparent process for recording and investigating death cases.³ For comparison, preparations for the 2018 World Cup in Russia reportedly led to 21 fatalities; the figure for the 2014 tournament in Brazil was nine.⁴



1 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/26/qatar-has-failed-to-explain-up-to-70-of-migrant-worker-deaths-in-past-10-years-amnesty>

3 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/qatar-failure-to-investigate-migrant-worker-deaths-leaves-families-in-despair/>

4 https://www.ihrb.org/uploads/meeting-reports/APPG_Session_Summary_-_Workers_in_Construction_of_MSEs.pdf

Rather than incur debt to ease the plight of migrants, she added, “companies have preferred to delay or deny wages or simply terminate workers altogether.” The Qatari government did not respond to requests for comment.

Critics have questioned the government’s commitment to subsidize foreign workers’ pay, citing two subsequent official actions. In May, 2020 the government said that in light of the pandemic, employers could alter employee contracts without incurring legal liability. As a result, a number of construction firms forced workers to take a combination of unpaid leave, decreased salaries, or premature contract terminations. The following month, the government instructed all state-funded organizations—including the agencies overseeing World Cup-related construction projects—to [reduce spending on non-Qatari employees](#) by 30% in 2020.²⁷ This should be accomplished by means of layoffs or pay cuts, the government said. The contradictory signals from the government of Qatar made it less likely that employers would respond to the pandemic by protecting workers’ economic welfare, Saraswathi said. “Businesses respond to their environments.”

Mustafa Qadri, executive director of the consultancy Equidem, agreed that government indifference to foreign workers’ economic woes helps shape employers’ practices. “During this pandemic,” he said, “companies know there will be no consequences or punishment if they delay wages or don’t pay workers.” Many construction firms that are active in the Gulf have longstanding relationships with the government agencies that are their customers, Georgetown’s Babar pointed out, adding that “any complaints by workers related to wage delays will not affect companies that have close ties with the government.”

Early in the pandemic, the government set up a hotline for workers to report violations of labor laws related to Covid-19 via phone, text message, or email.²⁸ The government claimed that it resolved 86% of the 3,404 complaints workers made between March 15 and April 18, 2020.

But it has not provided data to back up this claim and stopped releasing complaint statistics after the one-month period in 2020.²⁹ The Qatari government did not respond to requests for comment.

Recruitment Fees

For migrants, one of the most burdensome aspects of construction work in the Gulf is the fact that most of them are forced to pay their own recruitment fees and transportation costs. While Qatari law formally prohibits this system, the government generally continues to tolerate it.

Agencies in workers' home countries that match individuals with potential employers abroad charge fees that cover medical tests, visas, and other administrative paperwork; airline tickets; and the recruiters' profits. These fees range widely, from \$600 to \$5,000, depending on geography, rules in the sending and receiving countries, and other variables.³⁰

International labor laws, including the International Labor Organization's 1997 Private Employment Agencies Convention, prohibit the shifting of recruitment fees to workers. Employers of doctors, teachers, engineers, and other "higher-skilled" migrant workers in Qatar and throughout the Gulf routinely pay all of the costs of recruitment. But Qatar and other GCC governments historically have not required employers of construction workers and other low-wage employees to do the same.

"Workers paying recruitment charges instead of employers is the norm," says Ray Jureidini, a professor of migration ethics and human rights at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha. Rather than crack down on the construction firms, government agencies that oversee large public construction contracts pressure employers to submit low-bid proposals, which rarely include a line item for recruiting costs.³¹ "Lowest bids should be more carefully scrutinized to ascertain whether cost reductions are at the expense of migrant workers being recruited," says Jureidini.³² William Rook, deputy CEO of the Geneva-based

Centre for Sports and Human Rights, explains that cutting labor costs is a deeply entrenched practice in the region and core to construction companies' business model. "It's an industry with very thin margins, where raw material prices are largely fixed, typically with a lot of project variations that lead to cost disputes and late payments, so construction companies are bound to compete on labor costs," he says.

As explained in our 2017 report, *Making Workers Pay: Recruitment of the Migrant Labor Force in the Gulf Construction Industry*, many of these workers are forced to borrow from high-interest money lenders in their home countries to cover recruitment expenses. These workers arrive in the Middle East desperate for money to repay the lenders—a financial obligation that often consumes more than a year of wages. Heavy debt burdens make it more likely that workers will accept abusive conditions simply to remain employed. "Migrant workers all too often end up [trapped in the soul-destroying situation](#) of working abroad for years simply to pay off the huge, often illegal fees they were charged to take the job," James Lynch, the founding director of the London-based human rights group Fair/Square, has told Reuters.³³

Recruitment Resumes, Worker Costs Rise

After an eight-month pandemic suspension, recruitment of migrants to Qatar resumed in November 2020. This prompted thousands of financially desperate South Asian workers to urgently seek their return to the Middle East.³⁴ But migration was now more complicated—and more expensive. Qatar currently requires unvaccinated workers from South Asia, upon arrival, to quarantine at a hotel for seven days and then in their employer-provided dorm for another seven days. A positive coronavirus test leads to indefinite isolation in a government facility.³⁵ Vaccinated migrants must quarantine at a hotel for two days and test negative before proceeding to their accommodation.

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'Workers paying recruitment charges instead of employers is the norm.'
— Ray Jureidini, professor of migration ethics and human rights at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha.

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The additional costs related to hotel quarantines and tests can amount to as much as \$850 per worker, according to people familiar with the process. In many cases, workers are saddled with these additional costs.³⁶ Some employers are reimbursing their employees for Covid-related expenses, but they aren't legally obliged to do so. The burden of added pandemic costs is driving many workers to borrow even more money than in the past.

Still, South Asian workers are determined to travel to Qatar. In January 2021, Bangladeshi laborers who worked in Qatar protested in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka, demanding that their government facilitate their return to the Gulf.³⁷ Two hundred thousand newly recruited Bangladeshi workers never even made it to the region due to flight suspensions and still were left with large amounts of debt they incurred to pay recruitment costs.³⁸

The Qatari government maintains that it has committed to addressing the long-standing recruitment-fee problem, but to date its efforts have not been sufficient. Since 2013, the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, which oversees construction of World Cup stadiums and certain other preparations, has included in its Worker Welfare Standards a requirement that all bidding contractors pledge to pay for recruitment of migrant laborers. But the Supreme Committee has directly overseen a maximum of 30,000 migrant construction workers

at any given time, which is less than 4% of the total number of migrant construction workers in Qatar.

Moreover, even in connection with the small minority of workers who have been employed on World Cup projects, the Supreme Committee has not enforced its own welfare standards with anything approaching complete success. An external audit conducted in 2017 by the non-governmental organization Impactt and funded by the Supreme Committee found that 96% of workers on Supreme Committee construction projects had paid their own recruitment fees at an average of \$1,248 a person.³⁹ Similar [audits conducted by Impactt in 2020](#) found that the portion of construction workers paying for their own recruitment declined to 68%. The average amount workers paid in 2020 was \$1,333, a 7% increase.⁴⁰

A reduction of 28 percentage points is promising, but more than two-thirds of migrant workers are still burdened with the cost of their own recruitment. Ray Jureidini, the migrant ethics expert at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, says he is not impressed with these figures. “The Supreme Committee has the best labor standards in Qatar for their workers, who make up a small percentage of all the migrant workers in the country,” he says. “How meaningful is this reduction when the majority of workers are still paying?” The Supreme Committee did not provide answers to our written questions.

In July 2021, the London-based human rights group [Fair/Square published research](#) on Nepal-to-Qatar migration which found that “the vast majority of [Nepali] recruitment agencies still rely on charging workers extremely high

fees.” Construction companies operating in Qatar generally refused to cover these expenses, Fair/Square added. “It is the worker’s problem with the recruitment company,” one human relations manager with a company in Qatar told Fair/Square, according to the report.

Of the 26 migrant workers interviewed for this report, all of whom were hired for World Cup-related projects, 25 said that they had paid recruitment charges to secure their employment in Qatar. One worker did not respond to the question. All 11 recruiters interviewed in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal said they typically charged workers thousands of dollars apiece because nearly all prospective employers in Qatar refused to pay. “Ninety-eight percent of the construction companies in Qatar do not pay service fees,” Rajeev Ghale, a Nepalese recruitment agency owner, said in an interview.

The Lender’s Perspective

All 10 money lenders interviewed for this report said that many migrant workers have defaulted on their payments after losing wages during the pandemic. Abdul Akhtar, a lender in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, told us that the family of one borrower who owed him \$2,000 “begged me a great deal and asked for some time to repay the rest of the money.” Instead, the lender brought in the police and recovered a little more than half of what he was owed.



A Promising Pilot Program

In response to the persistence of these practices, Qatar’s Ministry of Labor and the ILO launched a pilot project in 2018 that has illustrated that construction companies can collaborate with Qatari government clients to encourage fair recruitment.

The ILO set up an office in Qatar in 2018 to work with the government to ensure compliance with international labor conventions and worker rights.⁴¹ As part of the pilot project, the ILO observed that while Qatari law “specifically prohibits charging workers recruitment fees and related costs, migrants all too often end up having to pay hefty sums and are deceived about their contracts.”⁴² The French-Qatari construction company QDVC and its service providers participated in the pilot project. The ILO and QDVC reached agreements with the company’s recruiters in Qatar and Bangladesh that featured a detailed breakdown of recruitment fees and costs to be paid by QDVC. The pilot project provided for independent auditing and enabled workers to report

any costs they were charged by intermediary participants in the recruiting process. An independent assessment conducted by Tufts University found that implementing the pilot program reduced the portion of QDVC workers who had migration-related debt from 55% to only 7%. Workers still paying fees reported an average expense of \$300, compared to an average of \$3,408 before the pilot.

Research by our center has reinforced the feasibility of employers covering recruitment costs. In 2018, we collaborated with QDVC to calculate the cost of fair recruitment and determined that typically it is less than 1% of a project's total value. The research found that other construction companies would incur a similarly reasonable percentage cost.⁴³ Nevertheless, most builders operating in Qatar continue to shirk this obligation—and face no consequences from the government.

An additional government response to the recruitment-fee issue deserves mention. In late 2017, the Supreme Committee unveiled a program to encourage employers that lacked proof that they had covered recruitment costs to reimburse workers who incurred the expenses themselves. Since the inception of the reimbursement plan, the committee claims that 252 contractors have pledged a total of \$30 million to repay more than 48,000 workers over periods of one to three years.⁴⁴

It's not clear, however, how much of the pledged amount has actually reached workers. Mahmoud Qutub, executive director for worker welfare at the Supreme Committee, [said at a public forum](#) on responsible recruiting in April 2021 that "\$21 million dollars [in reimbursement] has actually been received in the pockets of workers to date." Impactt's 2021 government-funded compliance report concluded that 90% of a randomly selected group of contractors said they were reimbursing workers over a period of 12 to 36 months. But Impactt acknowledged that it could not confirm how much of the total pledged amount has reached workers.⁴⁵

If done diligently, reimbursing workers could provide a backstop when employers have failed initially to cover recruitment costs. But reimbursement shouldn't replace proactive efforts by employers and the government to ensure that workers do not pay fees in the first place. "The Supreme Committee's work here appears to have been successful in terms of the scale of reimbursement," says Rook of the Centre for Sports and Human Rights. But he flagged "a risk of unintended consequences"—namely, that "unscrupulous agents might start to price in that payments or reimbursements to workers are expected, and then potentially start charging workers even higher recruitment fees."

Other Reforms: Divergent Results

Qatar has enacted other labor reforms, with divergent results. In September 2020, it became the first country in the region to establish a monthly minimum wage for all workers: 1,000 Qatari riyals, equivalent to about \$275, plus another 800 riyals in food and accommodation allowances. Alone, however, experts say, this reform will not ensure that workers actually receive fair pay. "This will need to be accompanied by much tougher action against employers who fail to pay their employees properly or at all," claimed Stephen Cockburn, head of economic and social justice at Amnesty International.⁴⁶

At the same time, the government eliminated a rule that had prevented workers from switching to a new job without their current employer's permission.⁴⁷ Providing migrants with more flexibility to change jobs superseded an element of *kafala*, a system of traditional laws giving employers near-total control over their workers.⁴⁸ But the government undercut the *kafala* reform by still requiring workers to submit resignation papers which, as a practical matter, previous employers are expected to sign or otherwise certify.⁴⁹ "While these reforms are encouraging and have even been

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'Migration corridors will become more bureaucratic in the future, and costs will go up for additional layers of health and travel checks, such as for quarantining... Employers will not pay for all of it. The government must pay, or workers will.' – Zahra Babar, Georgetown University.

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hailed as historic in 'dismantling' the *kafala* system, the lack of enforcement is pervasive, and impunity remains endemic," wrote Noha Aboueldahab, a non-resident fellow with the Brookings Institution.⁵⁰ Still, it is worth noting that in the year after the law was adopted in 2020, nearly 243,000 workers changed jobs.⁵¹

Looking broadly at the future for migrant labor recruitment, Georgetown's Babar says that "migration corridors will become more bureaucratic, and costs will go up for additional layers of health and travel checks, such as for quarantining. Someone will have to pay for these new protocols. Employers will not pay for all of it. The government must pay, or workers will." She warns that the increased expenses related to the pandemic may come to be seen as the new price of migration, one that will be borne by poor laborers: "When you accept certain protocols in a crisis, there is a risk of it getting normalized and integrated." Meanwhile, in the name of restoring pre-pandemic conditions, Qatari authorities may quietly stop enforcing the qualified labor reforms it announced in recent years but implemented in only some instances.

Inaction from FIFA, its Corporate Sponsors, and Broadcast Partners

FIFA, the organization that oversees the World Cup, might have used its influence to help improve the fortunes of migrant workers in Qatar. But beginning as early as 2011, the public airing of FIFA's internal corruption—including allegations that FIFA officials had accepted bribes to award the 2022 tournament to Qatar—has eroded the organization's credibility. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice said in an indictment that representatives of Qatar had bribed three FIFA officials to secure the 2022 World Cup over the U.S.¹ Two of the charged officials have since died; one lives in Brazil, which does not have an extradition treaty with the U.S. Qatar's Supreme Committee has denied wrongdoing, and FIFA claims that it has reformed itself and is now "highly esteemed and trusted."²

FIFA has issued a variety of statements calling for better worker protections in Qatar, but without any discernible effect. In a February 2021 report, [FIFA's human rights advisory board raised concerns](#) about worker-paid recruitment fees and the non-payment of wages, but these criticisms haven't led to changes either. Nor did a subsequent virtual meeting involving the Supreme Committee, FIFA, and member soccer associations.³

National soccer teams, led by Norway, have made symbolic gestures that likewise haven't resulted in identifiable reforms. During matches in March 2021, players from Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark protested worker mistreatment in Qatar by donning shirts advocating human rights. The gesture generated media coverage, but not real progress.⁴

There are precedents for FIFA attempting to assert influence over countries hosting the World Cup. In 2014, the organization pressed Brazil to repeal a public-safety law banning alcohol at football matches.⁵ In March 2021, Amnesty International criticized FIFA for failing to monitor labor abuses on World Cup construction projects and called on the organization to urge Qatar to enforce labor reforms. FIFA responded that it had convened a human rights advisory board, but, as noted, that panel hasn't had much influence.

Many companies are sensitive to how scandal associated with public events they sponsor may tarnish brand reputation. The FIFA bribery debacle prompted two major World Cup sponsors—Emirates Airline and Sony—to pull out in 2014. Others, including Visa, released statements threatening to withdraw if FIFA did not improve its governance, but no additional corporate sponsors have withdrawn.⁶

Media companies like Fox and Telemundo, which collectively paid \$1 billion for broadcast rights in the U.S. alone for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, have remained silent on Qatar's human rights record.⁷ In a press conference in November 2021, Telemundo's sports division president, Ray Warren, reportedly responded to questions about how his network would cover discrimination against women, LGBTQ+ people, and migrant workers in Qatar by saying, "We're not a news organization; we're a sports organization.... We go wherever the World Cup is played."⁸

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3. Conclusions and Recommendations

“
Qatar’s Covid-19
healthcare response
illustrates that it has
the resources and
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address serious social
challenges—including the
imposition of recruitment
costs on migrant
construction workers.”

The Qatari government’s success in managing the public health aspects of the Covid-19 crisis stands in striking contrast to its failure to protect the economic interests of its migrant workforce.

Hundreds of thousands of workers suffered in the wake of deportations, slashed salaries, and terminated contracts. Many have coped by taking on additional debt on top of the loans they obtained to cover their original recruitment fees. The Qatari government has tolerated this harsh reality, despite the country’s legal prohibition on workers paying for their own recruitment.

The government’s Covid-19 response illustrates that it has the resources and technical capacity to address serious social challenges. While the health situation has improved, the pandemic has worsened the already-unacceptable economic terms imposed on construction workers in Qatar and other GCC countries. Private construction firms that have won massive contracts to carry out World Cup-related projects for the most part are failing to take the costs of recruitment into account when they bid for business.

South Asian governments have also failed these workers, who, after all, are their citizens. While nominally encouraging reforms of the *kafala* system, governments in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are not mounting maximum diplomatic efforts to change the conduct of Gulf governments or global construction firms. This is in large part because South Asian political leaders do not want to disrupt the flow of the remittance payments that are so vital to their economies.

FIFA likewise has not taken adequate steps to address the mistreatment of construction workers involved in building World Cup stadiums and related roads, transit systems, and hotels. Neither FIFA nor the corporate sponsors and broadcasting partners of the World Cup have prioritized the need to address the mistreatment of these workers.

In the recommendations that follow, we offer practical ideas for what all of these actors can do to ensure humane treatment of migrant workers in the run-up to the World Cup—and beyond.

To the Government of Qatar

- **Qatar needs to enact and actively enforce a clearly articulated law requiring that employers cover the cost of migrant worker recruitment and transportation.** This law should protect all of those who have worked or currently are working on World Cup projects, as well as all other migrant construction workers. The government also should require that construction firms compensate workers for the full amount of back wages they are owed and any funds already spent on recruitment fees. Given the special circumstances created by the pandemic, the government ought to contribute financially to these payments. The government also needs to defray workers' repatriation and quarantine expenses.
- **The government should expand the number of inspectors enforcing its standards for worker housing, payment, health, and safety.** Qatar should publish detailed reports on violations, remedial actions, and penalties levied against non-compliant firms. Government-affiliated agencies should accept only those construction bids that fully account for the cost of recruitment. Recruiting should be viewed as a fee-for-service aspect of these contracts. The government should make clear that it will give preference to contractors with a track record of paying recruiting fees and providing proof that they have done so. Companies that do not submit proof should be fined and, after repeated violations, lose their contracts.
- **To facilitate and improve worker recruitment, Qatar should expand the role of visa centers it established in 2018 in several cities in labor-sending countries.** Designed to digitize the recruitment process, the centers are supposed to gather biometric data, conduct worker medical tests, and allow applicants to sign contracts digitally to prevent contract fraud. Among Middle Eastern countries, Qatar is the only one to create such centers, which the ILO has praised as reducing the number of instances when workers are deceived about their contracts. The centers could be made more effective if Qatar paid for a digital system connecting employers directly to recruiting agencies in sending countries and even to individual workers where possible. Employers could use this system to pay fees and expenses to the agencies. Visa centers could monitor for and try to block the charging of illegal fees and provide workers with a place to report them. This process would also generate reliable records that the Qatari government could use to assure compliance with its laws and deter corruption, such as when human resources officials at construction companies demand kickbacks from favored recruitment agencies.
- **In general, the government should make public more information about the bidding and contract-implementation processes for all construction projects.** Greater transparency would give workers and civil society organizations an informed basis for advocating for fair treatment by employers and by the government.

To Construction Firms

- **Builders should pay the recruiting costs for all low-wage migrant workers.** They should adopt the same sort of fee-for-service model they use for higher-wage migrant employees, such as accountants and office administrators. These firms should include in their bids an accurate accounting for all costs of recruitment, including document-processing fees; worker travel; sub-agent service fees; and new pandemic-related costs, such as quarantine expenses. Many European construction companies operating in Qatar and across the Gulf will soon have to adhere to new mandatory EU "due diligence" requirements that they identify, prevent, and mitigate worker-paid recruitment fees.⁵²

- **Employers should also assess and pay out all wages they failed to cover during the pandemic.** Companies should also pay any other amounts they owe to workers, including expenses associated with repatriation and quarantines.
- **Construction firms need to commit to improving accommodations and food services for their migrant employees.** Workers should have access to clean running water and electricity. They also should have the ability to travel freely within and outside of the Doha industrial area.

To FIFA, World Cup Corporate Sponsors, Broadcasters, and National Football Teams:

- **In the months leading up to the World Cup, FIFA should make a systematic effort to persuade Qatar to improve worker-welfare standards.** It should focus special attention on requiring that construction firms pay all recruitment fees, as well as provide fair compensation, decent accommodations, and safe working conditions.
- **For their part, the commercial sponsors of the World Cup should play an active role in advancing this agenda.** In the months before the matches begin in November, they should adopt a strategy for collectively raising these issues with the government. Corporate sponsors also should ensure that their partnerships with local companies are protecting workers' rights.
- **Television networks and internet platforms that carry the World Cup should produce in-depth, prominently featured news stories focused on migrant labor.** This coverage must rigorously examine the Qatari government's record in enacting and enforcing the types of reforms outlined in this report.
- **In a year when the World Cup will draw worldwide attention to Qatar, national soccer teams should collaborate on a strategy for raising worker rights in both public and private settings.** To push Qatar's leaders to make meaningful progress, teams can threaten to avoid government-sponsored promotional events. In November 2021, for example, the Danish Football Association announced that its players will not participate in such activities. The Danes expressed support for the work of human rights organizations and said they plan to focus additional attention on the treatment of migrant workers.⁵³ If Qatar does not commit to fundamental reforms, other teams should take similar action.

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