
Moving towards WPS 2.0:

Recent measures taken to strengthen wage protection in Qatar

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The challenge of wage protection for migrant workers around the world has been exacerbated by the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In June, a global coalition of civil society organizations and trade unions issued an appeal to governments to establish a transitional justice mechanism to ensure migrants are able to access their due wages. In May, the governments of Switzerland and the United Kingdom launched the Call to Action “Remittances in Crisis: How to Keep them Flowing”, in order to raise awareness on how important remittances are to hundreds of millions of people.

Since 2015, the Wage Protection System (WPS) has required that all employers covered by the Labour Law transfer their workers’ wages by bank, in a manner that can be traced by the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs (ADLSA). Over 1.66 million of the 1.71 million (or 96 per cent) of the eligible workers are registered in the WPS. This has led to the more timely payment of wages and enabled a more transparent resolution of wage disputes.

In 2019, a [comprehensive assessment of the WPS](#) > was commissioned by ADLSA and the ILO Project Office in Doha, and carried out by an independent consultant. This was the first review of the WPS since it was established, and was published online. It put forward recommendations on how the WPS could better realize its potential in ensuring that the rights and responsibilities set out in Qatari labour legislation are fulfilled.

The WPS is central to the application and enforcement of the recently announced non-discriminatory minimum wage, which specifies an amount for basic wage, housing and food allowance, and will come into force in early 2021.

This note provides an update on the changes that have been adopted in the past year, and what is already underway – based on the recommendations of the independent assessment. Key developments include:

1. The WPS Unit is now able to detect additional violations, including payment under the minimum wage. The Salary Information File that employers submit on a monthly basis with information on each worker's wages is being amended to collect additional details. By adding specific fields on the food allowance, housing allowance and overtime (rather than a single field for "additional income"), there will be more clarity and transparency on how workers' wages are calculated. This will take on additional importance once the minimum wage comes into force, as there will be a minimum monetary value mandated for food and accommodation allowances respectively.
2. Electronic contracts are increasingly prevalent in the country, and can be accessed by the WPS Unit. E-contracts are not only signed in the Qatar Visa Centres in countries of origin, but are now also signed when renewing residency permits in Qatar. The e-contract includes fields for wages, the food allowance and the housing allowance.
3. The WPS Unit has been swifter in imposing blocks on companies for violations, preventing them from receiving ADLSA services. In January 2020, the WPS Unit imposed blocks on 588 companies. Later in the year, as the impact of the lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions took hold, more companies were found to be in violation of the WPS, and in June 8,756 companies were blocked.
4. Violations are also increasingly referred to the police for action, and communication with the Ministry of Interior is being strengthened to ensure timely action on priority cases. In 2019, there were 2,318 such referrals.
5. In August 2020, ADLSA increased the penalties for non-payment of wages stipulated in the Labour Law, specifically a maximum prison sentence of one year, and a maximum fine of QAR 10,000.
6. All labour inspectors are being trained on forced labour and trafficking, including on how to identify these crimes and the fact that the withholding of wages is a strong indicator.
7. Positive incentives for WPS compliance are also being explored. A pilot initiative in public procurement is under development where the WPS Unit will issue a 'certificate of compliance' to contractors as a prerequisite for submitting bids to a particular client.
8. Domestic workers are currently not covered by the Labour Law, and therefore not covered by the WPS. However, building on the initiative of ADLSA and Qatar Central Bank to facilitate the opening of bank accounts for domestic workers earlier in 2020 (in light of the measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19), discussions are underway about the possible adoption of a mechanism similar to WPS specifically for domestic workers. Discussions are ongoing with the Central Bank, the International Domestic Workers Federation and a software development company.
9. A review of international good practice on the issuance of payslips was commissioned, and the results are currently under review. Different models of issuing payslips will be considered so as to provide workers with clarity and transparency on how their wages are calculated.
10. Awareness raising materials have been published for enterprises about WPS registration. Additional materials are under development.
11. The WPS Unit is now able to generate its own reports on a daily basis to track the number of violations or blocks imposed on companies. Previously, the Unit relied on an external Department to prepare this information. The Strategic Office of the Labour Inspection

Department will use this data in the design of an inspection campaign on wage protection in 2021 to accompany the entry into force of the Minimum Wage legislation.

12. Given the additional pressures placed on the WPS Unit, later this year, training will be provided to staff and systems reviewed to enhance efficiency.

The WPS has a vital role to play in the detection and remedy of wage violations against migrant workers. Accelerating the implementation of the recommendations from the independent report is a process, but unquestionably a priority for the ADLSA-ILO Technical Cooperation project. Along with the other elements of this cooperation, this will contribute to the broader aims of ensuring migrant workers' access to justice and their due wages, and keeping remittances flowing to the millions of families who depend on them.

Regions and countries covered: Qatar