

Development Matters

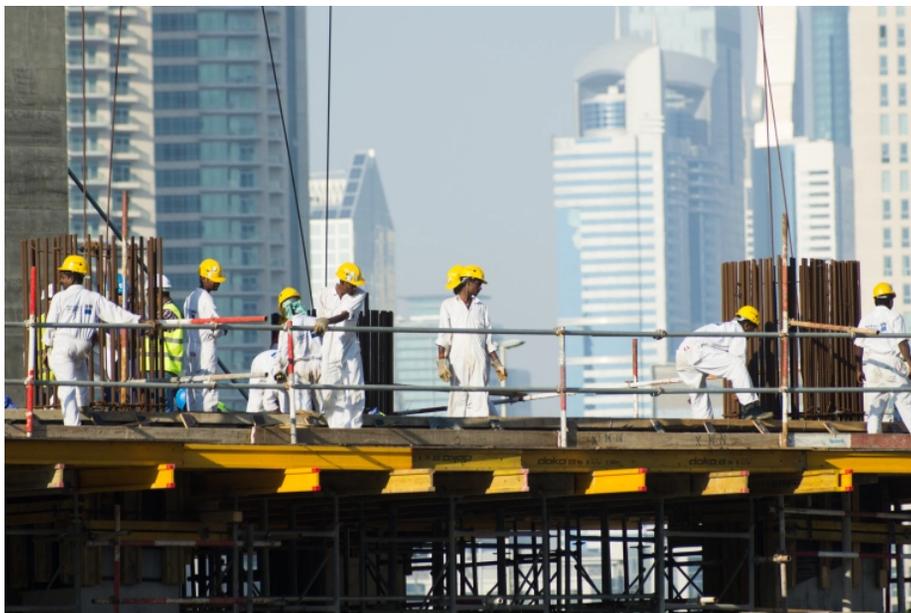
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Protecting migrant workers in the Gulf: don't build back better over a poor foundation

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The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states need to completely revamp past policies, and not merely attempt to bridge gaps or provide a salve to deep wounds.



Construction workers in Dubai, UAE. Photo: LongJon / Shutterstock

As of February 2020, millions of migrants — primarily from South and Southeast Asia and increasingly from East African countries — were holding up Gulf economies, working in sectors and for wages unappealing to the more affluent citizens. In countries with per capita GDP of US\$62,000

(<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=QA>) or more, minimum wages ranged as low as US\$200 (<https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/top-news/adlsa-statement-minimum-wage-noc/>) per month.

Men were packed into portacabins and decrepit buildings (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=f5fc2e5e7c&e=e1b66013f3>), six to a room if lucky, hidden behind screens of dust and grime, away from the smart buildings they built and shiny glasses they cleaned. The women were trapped 24/7 in homes that are their workplaces, every movement monitored. It is accepted and normalised without question (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=755b7c4078&e=e1b66013f3>) that these men and women will leave behind their families in the hopes of building a better future for themselves. That they may live all their productive life in a strange country, excluded from social security benefits and denied all rights of belonging, is seen as a small price to pay for the supposed fiscal benefits. The fact that the price is too steep (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=7131a4bdc7&e=e1b66013f3>) is rarely discussed.

“Why did able-bodied, productive individuals struggle for food and shelter in some of the richest countries in the world?” #DevMatters

Tweet (<http://twitter.com/share?&text=%22Why%20did%20able-bodied%2C%20productive%20individuals%20struggle%20for%20food%20and%20shelter%20in%20some%20of%20the%20richest%20countries%20in%20the%20world%3F%22%20%23DevMatters&url=https://oecd-development-matters.org/2021/01/19/protecting-migrant-workers-in-the-gulf-dont-build-back-better-over-a-poor-foundation/>)

Then came March, and a worldwide upheaval as the COVID-19 pandemic struck nations indiscriminately. The official response across the board (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=a2bb2da9b6&e=e1b66013f3>) ranged from well-meaning but knee-jerk, to discriminatory and short-sighted. Some of the strictest lockdowns were implemented in the most congested areas of Gulf cities, where migrants live. However, their labour was considered essential, as the process of nation-building could not be paused. Attempts to decongest (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=66f62150ed&e=e1b66013f3>) were hopeful at best, but the majority continued to live in cramped quarters, were bussed into construction sites, and remained vulnerable to this new infection, as they had been to other infections and health perils.

The women, hundreds of thousands employed as domestic workers (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=3fd902b36e&e=e1b66013f3>), have been invisible at the best of times because their ability to leave home and enjoy an off day or free time has always been at the discretion of their employers. The pandemic guidelines prevented even this thin leeway, with some countries explicitly prohibiting (<https://twitter.com/MigrantRights/status/1288459739932704768?s=20>) domestic workers from socialising, even when their employers were allowed to. Domestic workers, like a lot of other poorly-paid and badly-treated workers, were considered essential workers. With entire families working and studying from home, their workload increased exponentially. They were also exposed to strong chemical cleaning agents without proper protective gear. While their services were essential, even critical, the individual was considered dispensable and replaceable.

Force majeure rules allowed companies (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=10d0dc34e8&e=e1b66013f3>) to reduce pay (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=f6fa85fd19&e=e1b66013f3>), terminate workers, or put them on leave without pay. Measures were introduced to ensure business continuity even if these measures infringed on workers' rights. The lack of civil society and trade unions and inability to negotiate collectively — all disempowering conditions that preceded the pandemic — meant workers' voices and representation were limited and muted (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=bf7dcaef18&e=e1b66013f3>). No mechanisms were established to challenge the unfair implementation of the measures. Access to justice was riddled with even more problems than before, as wage theft and other labour abuses from the pre-COVID era were yet to be resolved. This post is not even attempting to explore the vulnerabilities and exclusion of undocumented workers — many of whom are forced into irregularity by the sponsorship or Kafala system.

“When a population has been dehumanised and othered for so long — as being temporary, their labour merely transactional — a pandemic will not magically correct decades of poor policies.”
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In the plethora of webinars that consumed the early months of the pandemic, human rights advocates and activists repeatedly spoke of the lessons being learnt, the new normal that awaited us at the end of the dark tunnel, with ‘building back better’ punctuating every discourse. What they failed to recognise is that when a population has been dehumanised and othered for so long — as being temporary, their labour merely transactional — a pandemic will not magically correct decades of poor policies.

In fact, we saw the opposite, with migrant workers being blamed (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=efcce3088e&e=e1b66013f3>) for spreading infections, because of their living conditions over which they had no control over. Ten months into the pandemic, it is almost back to business as usual, (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=61c60742d3&e=e1b66013f3>) with malls, offices, schools and even tourism, opening up in stages. Vaccination drives have begun, with a promise to include migrants in all of the Gulf Co-operation Council countries. But the most marginalised are still housed in deplorable conditions, their temporariness being reinforced. And the first sector that re-opened for recruitment was domestic work (<https://mideastyouth.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=734d825dbb4d439f1774712&id=c04e4b1499&e=e1b66013f3>), bringing in more women from impoverished countries reeling from the impact of the pandemic.

If there is one takeaway for human rights advocates it is that a socio-economic environment devastated by the pandemic is not fertile ground for righteous policies. If anything, origin and destination countries may go lax on due diligence over corporations in the name of business continuity and impose tighter controls over migrants under the pretext of protection.

“The last year has seen an increase in wage theft, and there is an urgent need for transnational mechanisms to deal with this.” #DevMatters

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There are key questions we need to ask ourselves and the governments:

- Why did able-bodied, productive individuals struggle for food and shelter in some of the richest countries in the world? What combination of policies and prejudices leads to this situation?
- With so little public investment made in social welfare, the dependence on live-in domestic workers is only likely to increase. How do we ensure recognition of domestic work as work, and domestic workers as workers, formalising their status in the labour market?
- How do we then break the monopoly of live-in domestic work that is inherently exploitative?
- The ghettoisation of migrant labour is both the root cause and the result of discrimination. In many Gulf Co-operation Council states, migrants constitute the majority of the population and their needs are deliberately neglected in urban planning.
- The last year has seen an increase in wage theft, and there is an urgent need for transnational mechanisms (<https://justiceforwagetheft.org/>) to deal with this.

In the coming years, climate change, population imbalances and economic distress will increase migrants’ vulnerabilities, and solutions cannot be rooted in the current environment of inequity and discrimination.

