# “ONCE WE STEP IN THEIR HOMES, WE ARE NO LONGER HUMAN”

## TESTIMONIES OF FILIPINO WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SAUDI ARABIA

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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First published in 2026 by Amnesty International Ltd
Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, UK

**Index: MDE 23/1197/2026**
**Original language: English**
**amnesty.org**

*Cover: An applicant for overseas domestic work practices housekeeping skills at a training centre in Manila, the Philippines.*
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# INTRODUCTION

Woman cleaning staircase © Alex Pinheiro/pexels

In 2025, Amnesty International documented how Kenyan women migrating to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers were routinely deceived by recruiters about the nature of their work. Once in the country, many were forced into gruelling and abusive conditions, regularly working more than 16 hours a day, denied rest days, and confined to their employers' homes. Women described degrading living conditions and inhumane treatment, including verbal, physical and sexual violence, often exacerbated by discriminatory and racist attitudes and enabled by structural racism and discrimination underpinning the kafala sponsorship system.[1] Employers commonly confiscated their passports and phones, and in some cases withheld their wages entirely. The abuse undoubtedly breached both Saudi Arabia's laws and regulations, and international human rights law and standards. Indeed, the treatment of many of the women amounted to forced labour and sometimes human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.

New interviews in March 2026 with 19 Filipino women who had also recently worked as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia[2] – as well as discussions with representatives of eight Filipino organizations supporting returnees – revealed patterns of abuse strikingly similar to those experienced by the Kenyan women. Conducted by Amnesty International delegates in Manila through a mix of individual and group interviews, these testimonies – when considered alongside findings from other human rights organizations, journalists and trade unions[3] – reinforce a consistent picture of exploitation, with excessive working hours, severe restrictions on movement and communication, sexual violence, and inhuman and degrading treatment by private employers remaining widespread and largely unaddressed.

Under the kafala system, which despite some reforms persists in policy and practice, employers have significant power to exercise control over and shape the experiences of migrant domestic workers - for the better or for the worse. Indeed, a couple of those interviewed felt they had a 'better' experience compared to other Filipino domestic worker peers in Saudi Arabia, with their employers providing what they considered fairer working conditions. But while individual experiences differed

1 Amnesty International, *Locked in, left out: The hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia (*AI Index MDE 23/9222/2025), 12 May 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/9222/2025/en/

2 Out of the 19 women interviewed, 16 returned to the Philippines between 2023 and 2026 and three between 2019 and 2022.

3 See for example: Dhaka Tribune, Abuse of female migrant workers: 70,000 returned in 7 years, bodies of 800 brought home, 8 March 2026, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/404974/70-000-female-migrant-workers-returned-in-7-years; Equidem, "Shattered Dreams, Hidden Trauma: The Systemic Abuse of East African Care Workers in the Gulf", 2025, https://equidem.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Equidem_Shattered-Dreams-Hidden-Trauma_The-Systemic-Abuse-of-East-African-Care-Workers-in-the-Gulf.pdf; Center for Migrant Advocacy – Philippines, "Stakeholder Submission for Universal Periodic Review", Oct-Nov 2018 Session, https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-04/cma_phils_upr31_sau_e_main.pdf; Le Monde, "Saudi Arabia, a promised paradise turned into a nightmare for Ugandan maids", 31 January 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/31/saudi-arabia-a-promised-paradise-turned-into-a-nightmare-for-ugandan-maids_6013745_4.html; https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/maids-saudi-arabia-human-trafficking-05022024150341.html; New York Times, "Why Maids Keep Dying in Saudi Arabia", 16 March 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/16/world/africa/saudi-arabia-kenya-uganda-maids-women.html; International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), "Trade unions take Saudi Arabia to UN labour body over exploitation and deaths of migrant workers", 4 June 2025, https://www.ituc-csi.org/Trade-unions-take-Saudi-Arabia-to-UN-labour-body

from one household to another, the underlying dynamic remained highly consistent: former domestic workers described a reality in which, once inside their employer's homes, the terms of their contracts often ceased to matter and were replaced by the boss's unchecked authority. As Cristine put it, *"We are not robots… but once we step in their homes, we are no longer human."* Taken together, the testimonies of dozens of Filipino and Kenyan women gathered over several years point to more than a pattern of abuse: they expose a state-run system - sustained by the kafala sponsorship framework, weak labour protections and ineffective enforcement - that continues to enable the exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia across nationalities.

The timing of this new research coincided with the onset of the US-Israeli war with Iran and Iran's attacks on the Gulf, during which millions of both Gulf nationals and migrant workers across Gulf Cooperation Council countries have found themselves caught in crisis, with foreign nationals often stranded far from their home countries and loved ones. While the interviews did not focus specifically on the impact of the conflict on migrant workers' experiences in Saudi Arabia, many nonetheless raised concerns about its potential consequences, including safety risks, job insecurity in the absence of adequate social protection measures, salary cuts, and the scale of support that would be needed from the Philippines and Saudi Arabia governments. At the same time, escalating phone searches, arrests and surveillance across Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states - part of a broader state crackdown on sharing online content or expressing views related to the conflict – have deepened existing restrictions on freedom of expression and association, further limiting migrant workers' ability to seek help, report abuse or organize.[4]

This briefing once again seeks to highlight the high-risk gamble that migration to Saudi Arabia entails, by amplifying the voices of some of the women who travelled in search of greater economic security for their families but instead experienced daily and serious human rights abuses in private households, with little or no protection from the authorities. It focuses on the Saudi Arabian government's obligations and shortcomings. While it notes the Philippine government's broad legal responsibilities, it does not assess its actions or protection gaps in detail, as doing so would have required research beyond the scope of this briefing.

Saudi Arabia must protect all domestic workers by bringing them fully under the scope of the labour law and ensuring equal protections in line with international law and standards; fully dismantling the kafala system by removing all employer-imposed restrictions on changing jobs or leaving the country, in both law and practice; implementing an effective, pro-active inspection regime; thoroughly investigating allegations of abuse; and adequately punishing abusive employers to ensure a real deterrent.

On 5 March 2026, Amnesty International met with The Philippines' Department of Migrant Workers and discussed the department's mandate and work across the Middle East region. On 26 June 2026, Amnesty International shared the findings of its latest research with the Saudi Arabian government. In its response on 5 July, the Saudi government stated it takes the allegations seriously and provided an overview of some of the measures it has taken to strengthen protections and enforcement. The government's full response can be found in annex I of this briefing, and is summarized in the Background section below.

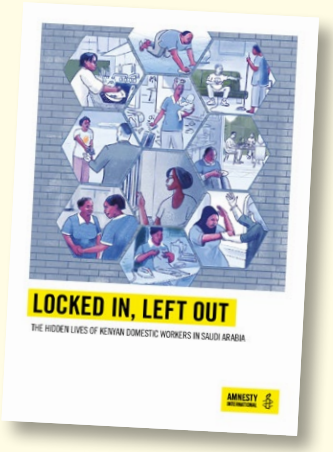
Amnesty International would like to thank all those who assisted with the research of this briefing, in particular everyone who gave interviews to researchers in Manila, and the organizations who facilitated these discussions and provided their expertise, without whom this briefing would not have been possible. This includes the Centre for Migrant Advocacy, Kaagapay OFW Resource and Service Center, KAAKAMPI, Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. Lawyers Beyond Borders Philippines, Migrante International, Mindanao Migrants Center for Empowering Actions Inc (MMCEAI), and Pinay Careworkers Transnational.

4 Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, "Gulf States: Phone searches, arrests exacerbate existing restrictions on trade unions, expression", 11 June 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/06/gulf-states-phone-searches-arrests-exacerbate-existing-restrictions-on-trade-unions-expression/

## SAUDI ARABIA'S INTERNATIONAL LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Saudi Arabia has not ratified several key United Nations (UN) human rights treaties protecting civil, economic, political, economic, and social rights,[5] including the main treaty on migrant workers' rights.[6] It is, however, party to other UN treaties on discrimination, women's rights, torture, and trafficking in persons.[7] It has entered broad reservations to most of these, arguing that it is not bound where provisions conflict with its interpretation of Islamic law. However, these treaties still require the government to address human trafficking and the exploitation of women in migration, and ensure victims have access to an effective remedy. As such, Saudi Arabia must investigate abuses, hold perpetrators accountable, and provide timely and adequate reparations.

Saudi Arabia has ratified 19 International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including on forced labour and discrimination, as well as the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention. It has not ratified those protecting domestic workers, freedom of association, or minimum wage-setting.




Even so, as an ILO member, it is expected to uphold all fundamental labour rights including the right to a safe and healthy working environment and to collectively bargain.[8] As a UN member, it is also expected to maintain the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, and to give effect to the principles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), that sets out a range of civil, economic and social rights and which and is widely regarded as reflecting customary international law and covers many of the abuses documented in this briefing.[9]

For a comprehensive overview of Saudi Arabia's legal obligations, see pp.78-81 of Amnesty International's 2025 report *Locked in, left out: The hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia*.

5 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR).
6 International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW).
7 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), UN Convention against Torture (CAT); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol),
8 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work and its Follow up, 1998, ILO Constitution, 1919 and Declaration of Philadelphia annexed to the ILO Constitution, 1944.
9 See for example, William A. Schabas, *The Customary International Law of Human Rights*, Chapter 9, Oxford Academic, June 2021, https://academic.oup.com/book/39904/chapter-abstract/340150337?redirectedFrom=fulltext


*A woman pushes a baby stroller in the Saudi capital Riyadh on 10 March, 2026. © Fayez NURELDINE / AFP via Getty Images*

# BACKGROUND

Domestic workers are an integral part of daily life in Saudi Arabia. They form the backbone of households and family life across the country, and their labour helps the government realize wider economic reforms under Vision 2030, including efforts to increase Saudi women's participation in the workforce, by fulfilling essential care needs and undertaking the household responsibilities that sustain families and communities.[10] As of the end of 2025, over 4 million people were employed in the sector, all of them foreign nationals[11] – including hundreds of thousands of Filipino women and men.[12]

Although still excluded from Saudi Arabia's labour laws, domestic workers have, since 2024, been governed by the 2023 Regulations for Domestic Workers, which sets out their rights and employers' obligations.[13] This represents an improvement on earlier regulations and mandates electronic wage payments, capped hours, mandatory rest days, and stricter employer penalties – but still falls short of relevant international law and standards[14] and offers weaker protections to domestic workers than are provided for most other workers in the country under Saudi Arabia's labour laws. Further, inspection and enforcement mechanisms remain almost non-existent for domestic workers, meaning severe exploitation continues in practice.

10 Vision 2030, https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf

11 General Authority for Statistics, Register-based Labour Market Statistics - Q4 2025, tab 2-3, https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/statistics-tabs?tab=436312&category=124074

12 According to Saudi Arabia's census data 725,893 Filipinos were residing in the country as of 2022. https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/w/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-2?category=127396&tab=436327. By October 2024, media reports indicated that had increased to 898,014, citing data from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, though this includes workers in all sectors, not only domestic work. See, ABS CBN, "Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia becoming more diversified, says envoy", 28 October 2024, https://www.abs-cbn.com/business/2024/10/28/filipino-workers-in-saudi-arabia-becoming-more-diversified-says-envoy-1753

13 2023 Regulations for Domestic Workers and the Like, Decision Number (40676), 17/03/1445AH (2 October 2023), https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/sites/default/files/2024-09/Regulation%20for%20Domestic%20Workers%20and%20Those%20in%20Similar%20Positions.pdf

14 For a detailed assessment of the 2023 Domestic Workers Regulations and other initiatives introduced, see Chapter 5 of Amnesty International, *Locked in, left out*, [previously cited].

Additionally, like all foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, migrant domestic workers remain subject to the kafala system, which, despite some reforms still grants employers the ability to control the entry, residence and freedom to leave the country for foreign nationals working in Saudi Arabia under their sponsorship. As Amnesty International's 2025 report detailed, this labour migration system is underpinned by structural racism and discrimination, where racialized migrant workers – particularly those from Africa and South and South East Asia – are dehumanized and treated as disposable.[15]

In 2021, the government began introducing reforms to the kafala system through the Labour Reform Initiative (LRI). While the LRI explicitly excluded domestic workers, subsequent changes have extended some provisions to them. These include limited circumstances in which domestic workers can, in principle, change jobs or leave the country without their employer's permission.

However, these possibilities remain narrowly defined and, in practice, extremely difficult to access. Domestic workers may only change jobs after completing one year of their contract or once it has expired, or in limited other situations, such as where their work permit has not been issued within 90 days of arrival or has not been renewed, or where they have not been paid for three consecutive months. Similarly, they are generally only permitted to leave the country without employer consent after completing their standard two-year contract. Moreover, the Regulations for Domestic Workers continues to leave room for employers – given the significant control they exercise – to restrict workers' ability to exit the country, even after their contract has expired.[16]

While the Saudi government maintains that these reforms equate to the abolition of the kafala system, in practice key elements of the system remain for all migrant workers, including domestic workers, continuing to expose them to serious abuse and exploitation. Human rights organizations, UN bodies, and global trade unions have repeatedly documented this, including in a landmark June 2025 complaint filed by ITUC and ITUC-Africa against Saudi Arabia at the ILO, alleging breach of the ILO Forced Labour Convention, among others.[17]

**MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS** REMAIN SUBJECT TO THE

# KAFALA SYSTEM

WHICH, DESPITE SOME REFORMS STILL GRANTS EMPLOYERS THE ABILITY TO CONTROL

- ☑ **THEIR ENTRY INTO SAUDI ARABIA**
- ☑ **LEGAL RESIDENCE**
- ☑ **ABILITY TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY**

15 For more details about racism and discrimination in the Gulf, see Chapter 3 of Amnesty International, *Locked in, left out* [previously cited].

16 For further discussion on the ongoing restrictions and continuing challenges, see pp. 65-70 of Amnesty International, *Locked in, left out* [previously cited].

17 ITUC, "Trade unions take Saudi Arabia to UN labour body over exploitation and deaths of migrant workers" [previously cited]. In November 2025 the ILO Governing Body declared the complaint admissible and in March 2026 postponed its decision on the complaint until November 2026.

In its response to Amnesty International's allegations, the government of Saudi Arabia stated that the Domestic Workers Regulations "reflect the core protections of the Labor Law" and that "any alleged breach of these regulations, or any allegations of violence or abuse, is taken extremely seriously and addressed accordingly". It also provided an overview of some of the measures it has taken to strengthen protections and enforcement. These include standardized contracts through the Musaned platform, the extension of the wage protection system to domestic workers, an insurance scheme for unpaid wages, and mechanisms allowing domestic workers to change employers if the regulations are breached. The government also emphasized that allegations of abuse, non-payment of wages, passport confiscation and other breaches can be reported through official complaint mechanisms and are subject to investigation and enforcement measures, and, finally, pointed to ongoing labour reforms developed in coordination with the ILO. However, the government failed to respond to a request for data or to provide answers to specific questions about the implementation and enforcement of its reforms and other measures to protect domestic workers, investigate and remedy abuses, and ensure accountability for perpetrators. These were originally submitted to the government by Amnesty International in January 2025 and re-shared in June 2026, alongside the findings of this latest briefing.

Further details on some of these measures, along with Amnesty International's assessment of their implementation in practice, can be found in *Locked in, left out*.

## THE PHILIPPINES' INTERNATIONAL LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Under international law, states have obligations to protect their nationals from human rights abuses that are committed both inside and outside their territories. In particular, when it comes to Filipino migrant workers, the Philippines government as a country of origin and state party to several relevant international human rights treaties and ILO conventions, must, among other things, effectively regulate recruitment, provide accurate pre-departure information, protect and support its nationals abroad through consular mechanisms, and ensure safe return and reintegration.[18] Further, the Philippines has an obligation to prevent trafficking in persons and should protect and support victims. This includes ensuring identification of any of their nationals or permanent residents who are trafficking victims and, if they are identified, to repatriate them if they wish to return to the Philippines.[19]

18 These duties are reflected in the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (2011, C189), to which the Philippines is a state party. In 2013, the Philippines also signed a bilateral labour agreement with Saudi Arabia on domestic worker recruitment to the Kingdom, aiming to "to protect the rights of both the employers and domestic workers and regulate the contractual relation between them". Available at: https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/32.Agreement-on-Domestic-Worker-Recruitment-between-Saudi-Arabia-and-the-Philippines.pdf

19 The Palermo Protocol.

# PATTERNS OF ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

This section draws on interviews conducted by Amnesty International with Filipino former domestic workers, highlighting key human rights abuses and, where relevant, parallels with the experiences of Kenyan women previously documented by the organization. Many of the individual experiences relayed to Amnesty International by former domestic workers in the Philippines – like those in Kenya – point to treatment that breaches both national and international law and standards and which, when taken as a whole, often amounts to forced labour, and in some cases points to human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.[20]

All of the women quoted below were interviewed by Amnesty International delegates in person in March 2026. Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

## FORCED LABOUR

> ***"...all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily"***
>
> (ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29))

### INDICATORS OF FORCED LABOUR

The ILO has established 11 indicators of forced labour - common signs that may point to a possible case of forced labour. These are:

- ☑ **Abuse of vulnerability**
- ☑ **Deception**
- ☑ **Restriction of movement**
- ☑ **Isolation**
- ☑ **Physical and sexual violence**
- ☑ **Intimidation and threats**
- ☑ **Retention of identity documents**
- ☑ **Withholding of wages**
- ☑ **Debt bondage**
- ☑ **Abusive working and living conditions**
- ☑ **Excessive overtime**

20 Article 3(a) of the Palermo Protocol, defines human trafficking as: *"the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, or the removal of organs."*

# WORK WITHOUT LIMITS

> ***"Why do you need a day off? My house is not that big."***
>
> Gemma, former domestic worker, quoting her employer.

As in Amnesty's research on Kenyan workers, the Filipino women interviewed described working days that stretched far beyond what they had agreed to during recruitment and in clear breach of Saudi Arabian law.[21] Their accounts show that this included not only the length of the working day and lack of rest, but also the nature and scope of the work itself, with many describing constantly shifting between childcare, cleaning, and other tasks they had not expected.

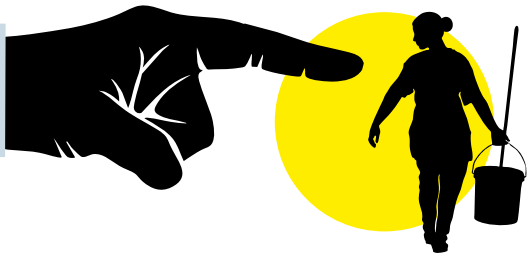
Across testimonies, work often not only filled the day but also extended into the night, leaving little room for rest. Most described working at least 14 hours each day, though some were on duty for up to 21 hours daily. Even basic daily breaks were uncertain.

Joy told Amnesty International that *"20 hour days were normal"*, as she would wake up around 6am and work throughout the day before being repeatedly woken during the night by members of the household to undertake tasks for them. *"My employer used to tell me: "you cannot say you're tired, or I will be angry at you,""* she recalled, saying that – like nearly everyone interviewed - she did not receive overtime pay on top of her SAR 1,500 [USD 400] salary. Gloria, who worked in Saudi Arabia between 2021 and 2023, also recalled starting at 6am each day and working until 8pm. Responsible for both household tasks and the care of a family member with additional needs, she said she would have no rest during the day, even for toilet breaks, *"because I would be pestered with orders"*.


*Filipino women practice childcare on baby dolls during a caregiver course in Manila. © Cheryl Ravelo/REUTERS*

21 Saudi Arabia's 2023 Regulations for Domestic Workers state that working hours should not exceed 10 hours a day, that workers are entitled to eight hours of continuous rest each day, and that they have the right to one full day off per week. Nonetheless, they leave open the possibility of employers considering their staff on 'standby' for longer hours and do not account for the reality of domestic workers who often end up working more than 14 hours per day with no additional pay.

## "I BROUGHT YOU FROM YOUR COUNTRY, SO I CAN DO ANYTHING TO YOU"



Gemma, whose employer told her repeatedly *"I brought you from your country, so I can do anything to you",* said her workload was so intense that *"the rest and eating time is just for 10 minutes".*

Isabel described working around 21 hours each day, from early morning until the early hours the following day, with minimal sleep. "I would wake up around 5am and then sleep at 2am".

Cristine specifically complained about Eid periods, when the workload increased and *"you do not sleep,"* she explained, ***"from the morning straight until the following day - you will close [stop work] 6am in the morning, and then you will start again 10am.... You just take rest a few hours, just to change your clothes, refresh, take a little nap, and then you will go back to work"***

Nearly all of those interviewed said their employer would also regularly deny them a weekly rest day, often for the duration of their contract. For Adelina, the absence of a day off was constant: *"No day off, I worked for two years straight without a day off."* Gemma, who worked in a four-storey house, described asking her employer for even just one day off each month. *"Why do you need a day off?"* she recalled her employer replying, *"my house is not that big".*

In some cases, women interviewed were made to work in more than one household, contrary to the terms of their employment agreements. Ruby, for example, described being required to work across two households without being asked. Hana said she was made to work in five households, ***"including my employer's, their mother's, siblings' and other relatives. I would do the work in all five houses. Every day I would move from one household to another, all seven days of the week."***

Some employers demanded the women interviewed take on additional roles and responsibilities they had not anticipated or agreed to. Joy described being hired as a caregiver but being made to carry out cleaning, cooking and massage work for her employer: *"I applied as a caregiver, but my actual task was all around. We call it 'all around'."*

Karina recalled her contract stating that she would be working for one person, *"but when I got there, the household was composed of 11 people. I even had to give support for an elderly person."*

Gloria's experience reflected a broader pattern described by most of the women interviewed: in practice, what was written in their contracts was secondary to what their employers required at any given moment. As she told Amnesty International,

> ***"All that is written there [in the contract], is not followed. For example, it says 'the work will be finished after eight hours', but it is not. Then, 'you will rest three hours'. But no, there is no rest… They [the employers] will say "we need the house made", so there will be no rest. The work is continuous, continuous, continuous…. Oh, my body is so much tired. Then I need to rest, just 15 minutes. But they are knocking the door, saying "I want this, and I need that"."***

# EXTREME CONTROL

> ***"It was so easy to leave the Philippines, but it was so difficult to go back."***
>
> Cleo, former domestic worker.

The experience of Kenyan women in Saudi Arabia often highlighted the extent of employer control over workers' daily lives, a domination that is fostered by the kafala sponsorship system which continues to place legal restrictions on domestic workers' movement. New testimonies from the Philippines point to similar dynamics, often manifested through employers' confiscation of or control over passports and phones, or limits on their movement and ability to leave.

Nearly all the women interviewed said they were told to hand over their passports to their employers soon after arrival. Eliza, for example, recalled how two days after she landed in the country in June 2023, *"my employer just said "I am going to take your passport"."* Having just started her job and being shy and inexperienced, she said she felt unable to refuse. ***"It seemed to be just the way it is done there. I didn't reject because it was my first time being abroad"***, she explained.

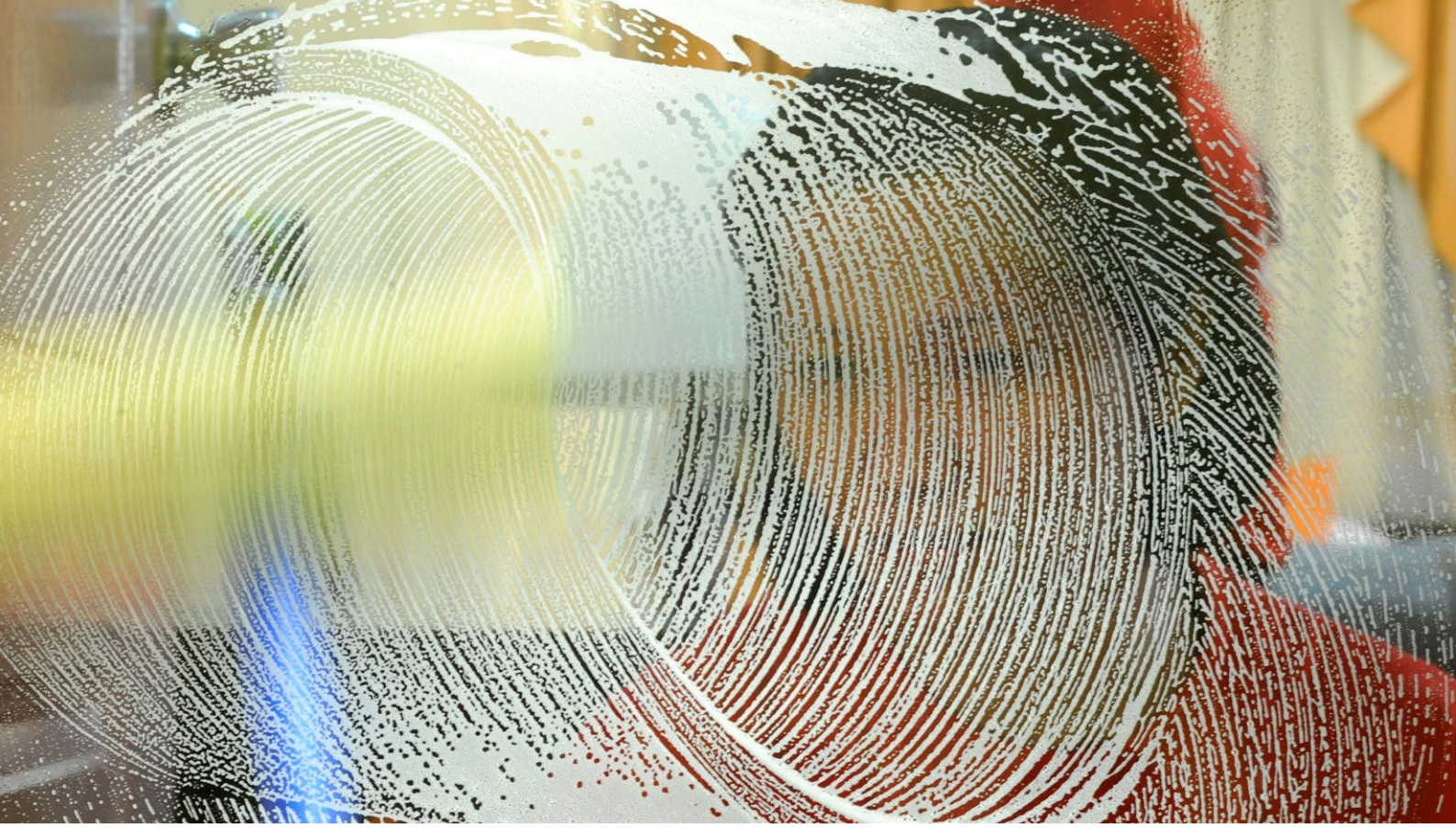
Restrictions on their communication with the outside world was another tool used by employers to control the women. Despite many saying they managed to retain their phones, the former domestic workers said they were effectively limited in how and when they could use them, affecting their ability to contact their families. For Hana, moving between five households impacted her access to the internet and ability to speak with her young children, she explained: *"Every time I was at my employer's parents' home, there was no internet. For five days, I was unable to contact my family. I could only call my husband once I returned to my employer's house.* ***Sometimes, I could not contact my family for three weeks, which was really difficult for me because my children were little."***

Restrictions on movement took different forms. Most spoke about long periods being prevented from leaving their employer's house at all. Gemma recalled that she couldn't leave the house, *"even to throw the garbage outside."* On the limited occasions some were allowed to leave, it would only be to accompany their employers on their outings, look after the children, or when being taken to another household for work.

This lack of freedom, combined with passport confiscation, enduring legal restrictions on them leaving the country without permission, and unfamiliarity with the local language and systems, meant many domestic workers were effectively bound to their employer – not only for work, but also for their ability to move around or return home, even when escaping abuse.

For example, Cleo arrived in Saudi Arabia in late 2023. After months of preventing her from leaving the house, Cleo's employer began depriving her of food by locking the fridge, and accusing her of theft, prompting Cleo to ask her employer to send her back to her recruitment agency so she could return

GEMMA RECALLED THAT SHE COULDN'T LEAVE THE HOUSE,
**"EVEN TO THROW THE GARBAGE OUTSIDE."**



*A Filipino woman cleans a glass door during a government-mandated crash course in domestic duties in Manila on 14 September 2011.*
*© NOEL CELIS/AFP/Getty Images*

home. This process involved further inhuman and degrading treatment when her employer subjected her to an intrusive search to check whether she had stolen anything from the house. Reflecting on the difference between entering Saudi Arabia and her return journey, she explained: ***"It was so easy to leave the Philippines, but it was so difficult to go back. Like, before I got to leave my employer's house, they stripped me naked, inspected every corner of my body."***

Once at the agency, she said she was not allowed to keep her phone and felt she had no choice but to hand it over. Despite this, she found creative ways to communicate with her husband and keep him updated about her situation: ***"I had to hide an old phone with a keypad in my underwear just so I can contact him. There is a lot of requirements [inorder to leave the country]. You have to have the exit visa. You have to have the signature of the employer. You need to visit the embassy. If you're not able to do that, then you're not going to be able to leave."***

Ultimately, for many, leaving safely to return home took priority over seeking justice and securing remedy for the abuses they were subjected to.

Cristine said she had to prioritize retrieving her passport from her employer, who ill-treated her and deprived her of food, at the expense of filing a legal case, in order to get home. She recalls: ***"…the daughter of my employer said she will talk with her mother and that I will get all the documents I need, but that I must not file any charges against her mother – the one who mistreated me. I did not have much of a choice so I decided to just comply, because I cannot stay there for long, because I knew that if I am going to file something, I will have to stay there longer, and food is hard to come by, and I just wanted to return home."***

As described in the next section, this was also the case for survivors of sexual assault in their employer's home.

# SEXUAL ASSAULT, HARRASSMENT

> ***"I would always hide from him"***
>
> Isabel, former domestic worker.

Like the Kenyan women interviewed previously, for some of the Filipino women, their employer's home - which was also their workplace – became a place of fear and risk to their physical integrity. Several described being subjected to sexual harassment or assault, often when left alone with their male employer or another male relative in the household. Their isolation in the homes and lack of access to the outside world also meant that most were unable to report their treatment to the police or pursue charges against their abusers.

Marielle described repeated sexual assault by her employer's son. She said the son's behaviour towards her was routine, often occurring up to twice a week. She recounted that after the family would finish eating, her female employer would call her to clean the kitchen. Shortly afterwards, the son would enter *"stealthily, hiding under tables and chairs"* to catch her off guard, before suddenly approaching and touching her. She explained that she would resist and shout so that her cries could be heard through the CCTV system, knowing that her employer would hear the disturbance in the kitchen. She said that other Filipinos working for friends of her employer later told her that he had a history of assaulting the family's domestic workers, including raping them. In some cases, she had been told, this had resulted in the domestic workers becoming pregnant.

Gemma similarly described her male employer assaulting her just a month before the end of her contract in 2023: ***"I didn't know that he [male employer] came back home... He gets inside the room quietly, the house is quiet. And while I was washing the dishes, I can feel that someone was on my back, smelling my hair and touching me here [bottom]."***

She explained that she shouted at him to stop, but felt unable to tell the man's wife, fearing she wouldn't be believed.

Isabel, who was made to work in two households, was forced to make a choice between gruelling working conditions in one and sexual harassment in the other. She said she lived in constant fear, particularly when her female employer asked Isabel to clean her room, knowing that the husband would be there.

***"One day I was pulling the comforter and there he was, in the bed, under the comforter, masturbating and calling me to lie beside him. I ran out of the room and went to the rooftop, where I would always hide from him, because I can lock the rooftop from the outside and he wouldn't be able to get me… Sometimes I felt like I preferred staying at the [employer's] mother's house. The work there was too much and very difficult, but at least I felt safer."***

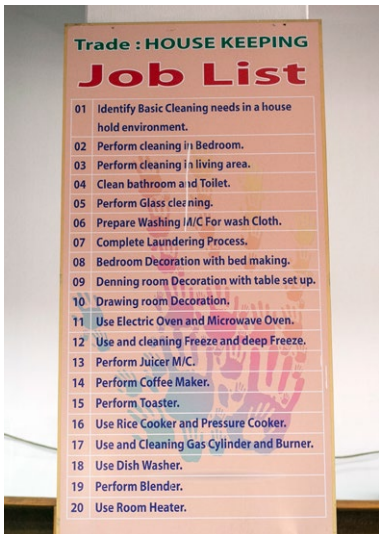
Fearing that her employer's husband might eventually rape her, Isabel managed to escape in October 2023 with the help of fellow Filipinos. She said she left all her belongings behind to avoid any accusations of theft and eventually sought refuge at the Philippine Embassy. When her female employer came to the embassy to hand back her confiscated passport, she begged Isabel not to bring charges against her husband.

# INHUMAN AND DEGRADING LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

> ***"I'm not an animal"***
>
> Gloria, former domestic worker.

Many of the women interviewed also described degrading treatment at the hands of their employers, including food deprivation, inadequate living conditions and verbal abuse.

Cristine described how, upon her arrival in Saudi Arabia in January 2026, her employer deprived her of food for three days and then continued to strictly ration her meals, forbidding her from touching any food in the household, which was reserved for the family. She was also threatened with constant surveillance through CCTV cameras installed in the house. When she could no longer endure the hunger, and following instructions from her recruitment agency, she explained: ***"I just opened the fridge and got food that I wanted. So, I got two eggs, tomato and onion, and I was about to cook when my employer saw me and threw away the food that I was preparing and told me that I shouldn't be touching food."***




*A sign is posted in a classroom at a technical training centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where potential migrant workers are trained in skills needed to earn a living overseas. © Allison Joyce/Getty Images*

Isabel said she had to sleep beside her employer's baby and regularly work at her employer's mother's house, where the workload was particularly demanding. There, she was given only dry noodles and one egg to eat, *"I can only have one egg because the mother will count them, she was very strict".*

In some cases, discrimination shaped how workers were treated. One worker described being told not to touch certain items, including religious objects, because she was considered "dirty" as a Christian. Others spoke about being shouted at, insulted or belittled during everyday work. A few recalled being called degrading names in Arabic, including: "Kalba" (dog) and "Mafi mokh" (no brain). Gloria recalled that her employer's son would often shout at her when calling her to serve, in a "demeaning manner". *"I'm not an animal,"* she recalled telling him.

Living conditions were also noted as an issue by some women. For instance, Cristine described her room as ***"very small, it was like a dog's house, just one bed and a very small toilet where I can pee and just wash my face, not enough for taking a bath."***

The impact of these cumulative experiences was often physical as well as emotional, some of the women explained. Gloria described the toll after months of continuous work: ***"My body collapsed… I'm over fatigued, like stress, no good sleep, especially during Ramadan."***

Others spoke about exhaustion, high blood pressure, and untreated illnesses.

GLORIA RECALLED THAT HER EMPLOYER'S SON WOULD **OFTEN SHOUT AT HER WHEN CALLING HER TO SERVE, IN A DEMEANING MANNER.**

## Isabel's story of work Saudi Arabia

### *"It would become my worst nightmare"*

Isabel

Like many others, I decided to work overseas so I could provide a better future for my family. I have five children. During the pandemic, my husband lost his job, and even after that he couldn't find another one. At that time, I was working in a bar [in the Philippines], but it wasn't enough.

I wanted to earn more. That's why when someone offered me a job abroad, I grabbed the opportunity — not knowing it would become my worst nightmare. After everything that happened, I told myself I would never go through that again.

When I arrived in Saudi Arabia in July 2023, the recruitment agency was already waiting for me. They took me to their accommodation, and that same day, my employer came to pick me up — the one listed on my contract. At first, she was nice. When we got to the house, she gave me food and told me to rest. She said that the next day we would go to her mother's house.

That's when things became really difficult for me. Her mother was very strict, especially when it came to food. There were nine people in her mother's household. I worked there for five days a week, and then for two days I worked at my employer's own house, where there were seven people. But my contract said I would only work for a household of five.

I did everything — all the cleaning, all the work. When they had visitors, I would not stop working until everyone had gone. Even on normal days, I had to do everything, including taking care of my employer's baby and sleeping beside the child.

Food was very limited. I could only eat rice once a week — once a week. Most days, I only ate instant noodles and eggs. And I was only allowed one egg, because the mother counted them. She was very strict about it. I would wake up at around 5am and only sleep at around 2am. I was getting about two hours of sleep every night.

What I feared most was when my female employer would ask me to clean their room, because her husband would be there. One day, I was pulling the comforter and there he was, in the bed, under the comforter, masturbating and calling me to lie beside him. I ran out of the room and went to the rooftop, where I would always hide from him, because I can lock the rooftop from the outside and he wouldn't be able to get me… Sometimes I felt like I preferred staying at the [employer's] mother's house. The work there was too much and very difficult, but at least I felt safer."

I called my husband and told him I really wanted to go home. I couldn't take it any more. But I stayed for three months because I was trying to find a way to escape safely. I was afraid of what might happen if I stayed longer… I feared I would be raped.

Other Filipinos living nearby helped me. They brought me to the embassy in a closed van in October 2023. It was a seven-hour trip, and it was very hot. I didn't bring anything with me because they told me I could be accused of stealing, even if the things were mine. When I arrived at the embassy, my employer also came later and returned my belongings, including my phone and passport and begged me not to file a case against her husband.

# CONCLUSION: "WHATEVER THEY WANT"

> ***"If you are a domestic helper there [in Saudi Arabia], the boss is the contract - whatever they want, they will get"***
>
> Elena, former domestic worker.

While the details of their personal experiences may have varied, the vast majority of the 19 Filipino women who had worked as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia told Amnesty International of extreme overwork, chronic lack of rest, degrading treatment and sometimes sexual assault. Running through these testimonies was another common thread: inside the household, the employer's authority ruled the lives of the domestic workers. Whether in relation to working conditions, daily treatment, or the ability to leave their job, many of the women interviewed described being left at their employer's mercy, their well-being shaped far more by the employer's will than by the contract they signed, or the laws meant to protect them.

Reflecting on her experience in Saudi Arabia, Elena – who returned to the Philippines in late 2025 – described this imbalance starkly: *"If you are a domestic helper there [in Saudi Arabia], the boss is the contract - whatever they want, they will get"* [emphasis added]. Her words were met with nods of recognition from other women in her group interview, a reflection of their shared understanding of how power operates inside the home. As Gemma went on to explain, *"The employers always told us, "I brought you from your country. So, I can do anything to you"."*

Not every experience was the same. A couple of women spoke of employers who paid on time, treated them with respect, and allowed them to rest. Yet even these accounts were regarded by the interviewees as the exception rather than the norm. When Abigail described her relatively positive experience as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, she underscored how rare it was: of five cousins who had worked there, she was the only one who had not faced significant abuses. As one of her cousins told her, *"You were very lucky with your employer… one out of five."*

This perception - that fair treatment is the exception – was echoed in discussions with local organizations supporting workers on the ground. It reflects systemic shortcomings in implementing and enforcing both the limited national legal protections in Saudi Arabia and applicable international law and standards, resulting in a system where domestic workers' conditions depend largely on the attitude and behaviour of individual employers.

Despite some nuances, these testimonies mirror many of the experiences of Kenyan domestic workers previously documented by Amnesty International. Taken together, they point not to isolated cases, but to a broader, state-enabled system in which more than 4 million domestic workers in Saudi Arabia remain exposed to a high risk of exploitation behind closed doors with little means of escaping exploitation or seeking redress. In the most serious cases, the abuses described amount to forced labour and may indicate human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.

While some rights are now guaranteed on paper, protection in practice remains weak, and the legal and policy framework still enables employers to exercise significant day-to-day control over domestic workers. The Saudi authorities have the power to dismantle these systems and strengthen labour protections, but have failed to take adequate measures, ensure meaningful accountability, or provide accessible and effective remedies for migrant domestic workers.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Saudi Arabia must:

- **Bring domestic workers under the labour law** to guarantee equal rights and protections for domestic workers as other workers in Saudi Arabia, including limits on working hours, paid rest days and timely wages;
- **Enforce existing protections effectively**, including the Regulations for Domestic Workers, through proactive monitoring and regular inspections;
- **Strengthen inspection mechanisms**, including by mandating pre-employment home visits, implementing an innovative and proactive inspection regime;
- **Stop passport confiscation in practice**, and ensure workers retain full control over their identity documents at all times;
- **Ensure workers can report abuse safely**, through independent, accessible complaint mechanisms that protect them from retaliation;
- **Thoroughly investigate all allegations of abuse**, including physical and sexual violence, and hold perpetrators accountable including through the criminal justice system;
- **Fully dismantle the kafala sponsorship system in law and practice**, removing all requirements for employer consent to change jobs or leave the country.

For more detailed recommendations, see Amnesty International's 2025 report, *Locked in, left out: The hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia*.

# ANNEX I

Email sent by the International Media team of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in response to a letter sent by Amnesty International on 26 June 2026 sharing the key findings of this research and seeking data and answers to detailed questions related to protection of domestic workers.

**RE: Letter from Amnesty International FAO H.E. Eng. Ahmed bin Sulaiman Al-Rajhi, MHRSD**

**From** International Media <[redacted]@hrsd.gov.sa>
**Date** Sun 05/07/2026 21:33
**To** [redacted]@amnesty.org>
**Cc** AIS - GRP – [redacted]@amnesty.org>

⚠ **CAUTION External Sender** Exercise caution opening links or attachments. Do not provide login details.

Dear Mr. [redacted]

Thank you for sharing the letter from Ms. [redacted] addressed to His Excellency Eng. Ahmed bin Sulaiman Al-Rajhi, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, as well as an advance copy of the key findings from Amnesty International's forthcoming research. We welcome the opportunity to review these findings and to share important information on the legal protections, enforcement mechanisms, and complaint systems available to domestic workers in the Kingdom, together with a close review of the allegations raised, in advance of publication.

We set out below the legislative, regulatory, and oversight developments of recent years relevant to the issues raised:

**The regulatory framework for domestic workers**

Domestic workers in the Kingdom are protected by dedicated regulations that reflect the core protections of the Labor Law. These regulations govern working hours, rest periods, weekly rest, paid vacation, and compensation, and they set out clear obligations on employers regarding accommodation, meals, and medical care, either free of charge or through health insurance. Any alleged breach of these regulations, or any allegations of violence or abuse, is taken extremely seriously and addressed accordingly.

Employment relationships are documented through the Musaned platform, which requires standardized contracts that set out the nature of the work and the rights and obligations of both parties. This reduces disputes over undisclosed duties or work for households other than the employer, and any deviation from the agreed contract can be reported and addressed.

**Wages and financial protection**

The Kingdom enforces the payment of wages owed to domestic workers through a comprehensive system centered on the Musaned platform. As of 2026, all domestic workers in the Kingdom are covered by the Wage Protection System, which monitors wage payments and imposes penalties on employers who fail to pay. Domestic workers whose wages go unpaid, or whose employer does not meet their obligations under the regulations, have the right to transfer to a new employer. A contract insurance scheme also compensates domestic workers directly if an employer fails to pay wages owed.

**Passports and freedom of movement**

Personal identity documents remain the legal property of the worker at all times, and the regulations do not permit an employer to retain a domestic worker's passport under any circumstance. Any such instance constitutes a clear violation that can be reported through the Ministry's complaint channels, with corrective action taken immediately where allegations are substantiated. Pre-arrival and arrival orientation programs, multilingual guides, and digital applications ensure workers are aware of their rights, including their right to report any restriction on their movement or communication.

**Complaint and enforcement mechanisms**

An omni-channel, multi-language platform has been established to receive complaints directly from domestic workers, in addition to inspection and monitoring carried out by the Ministry. Where allegations of abuse are raised, they are investigated, and violations are referred through the appropriate legal channels. The Ministry continues to expand these channels so that workers can raise concerns safely and have them addressed.

**Ongoing reform and international cooperation**

The Kingdom continues to strengthen protections for domestic workers as part of a broader program of labor market reform, including the measures described above and continued engagement with the International Labour Organization. Enhancing protections for domestic workers is one of the priorities of the third phase of the ILO-Saudi Arabia Programme of Cooperation, discussed by the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, Eng. Al-Rajhi, and ILO Director-General Gilbert F. Houngbo in Geneva on 4 June 2026. That phase also covers improving labor mobility and recruitment systems, expanding access to justice and social protection, and reinforcing labor inspection systems, reflecting the Kingdom's commitment to implementing international labor standards in both law and practice.

We take the allegations raised in your letter seriously and have addressed each of them above with reference to the applicable regulations and the mechanisms in place to enforce them. We hope the information set out above is helpful as you finalize your report.

Best Regards,

Human Resources and Social Development | International Media Team

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Index: MDE 23/1197/2026
July 2026

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