

# SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THROUGH THE KAFEEL SYSTEM: VIETNAMESE DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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## Introduction

In 2014, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Vietnam signed a bilateral labor agreement (BLA) that allowed Vietnamese citizens to temporarily migrate to work as domestics in Saudi homes. Written to automatically renew every five years, the BLA was of great consequence to the thousands of Vietnamese women who signed contracts for employment as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Materially, the BLA entrenched a visa labor sponsorship system which grants kafeel (i.e. the head of household and employer) complete control over the lives of imported female workers. The language of the BLA did specify that Saudi Arabia and Vietnam establish a Standard Employment Contract in order to ensure that Vietnamese workers are afforded basic legal protections. However, eleven years since the BLA came into effect, no progress has been made on this front.[1] Consequently, Vietnamese women continue to be subjected to acute precarity, excluded from Saudi Arabia's social welfare and social protection systems. With the two governments' complicity and neglect, they also continue to suffer from structural violence. The latter has manifested in physical, sexual, and verbal abuse.

In 2021, the reporting of local journalists and Vietnamese independent scholars, combined with the reporting of international media (the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons), put a spotlight on the plight of Vietnamese female domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. In 2022, the US Department of State also decided to downgrade the Vietnamese state's efforts in combatting human trafficking to the lowest possible ranking (Tier 3). To head off media pressure, Vietnam placed an unofficial gag order on reporting of labor abuse in Saudi Arabia. To appease the Americans, a few low-ranking officials were discharged from the Department of Labor at the Vietnamese Embassy in Riyadh. From the Vietnamese state's perspective, these actions have proven successful. In 2023, the country was reinstated by the US State Department to the Tier 2 watch list in its annual report on human trafficking. In 2024, the country was ranked in Tier 2 proper.[2]

While the Vietnamese government has engineered the appearance of progress when it comes to the working conditions of female nationals in Saudi Arabia, the reality is one of enduring hardship and abuse. Away from media scrutiny, recent years have also seen worrisome new developments come into effect. Specifically, aspects of the BLA have effectively been marketized and/or privatized: To differing degrees the recruitment, brokerage, and oversight of labor flows have been turned over to market logics. These changes continue to leave Vietnamese female workers invisible and without any protection.

## I. Creeping Marketization

An estimated 5,000 Vietnamese workers labor in Saudi Arabia. The rhetoric of Saudi Arabia and Vietnam might have one believe that a large majority are high-skilled workers employed in industries near the global technological frontier. In fact, the public statements put out by the two governments hardly mention domestic workers at all.[3] Alas, data gathered from government sources and relevant recruitment platforms establish that domestic workers represent the second largest category of laborer sent from Vietnam to Saudi Arabia, behind only individuals working in the extraction and refining of oil.[4]

[1] Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, "Vietnam-Saudi Arabia relations on strong development momentum," 21 October 2024, <https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/vietnam-saudi-arabia-relations-on-strong-development-momentum-72826.html>

[2] The 2023 TIP report <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/vietnam/>

The 2024 TIP report <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

[3] <https://baohinhphu.vn/saudi-arabia-muon-tiep-nhan-them-nhieu-lao-dong-viet-nam-102231019181702009.htm>

[4] <https://sanxuatkhaulaodong.com/xuat-khau-lao-dong-a-rap>

Historically, the agencies handling the recruitment, regulation, and oversight of bilateral labor flows between Vietnam and Saudi Arabia have been state-run and quasi-state run. Past research from the author affirms the extent to which the Vietnamese state and its recruitment agencies exploited women in poor and remote areas, including those below the legal working age and belonging to ethnic minorities.[5] (Nor is the Vietnamese state exceptional in these regards. Records establish that government officials in Uganda and Kenya have also profited from the recruitment and exportation of female workers to Saudi Arabia.[6]) Within the receiving country, meanwhile, it was semi-public entities—typically managed and partially owned by members of the Saudi royal family—that arranged for the placement of workers.

While the rampant abuse prevailing in the past made the need for reform urgent, the modality of “reform” adopted in recent years threatens to make things worse. As suggested, the trend is toward marketization and privatization. Concerning the former, recruitment processes within Vietnam have become anonymized and market-oriented. If state and quasi-state recruitment agencies are almost certainly still involved—specifically, the Vietnamese Association of Manpower Supply and Department of Overseas Labor, the latter operates under the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs—they are no longer visible on their respective official websites.[7] Also absent is the mention of BLA in all Vietnamese official websites. Instead, the market mechanism has replaced it to recruit workers in a commercial website called: “the platform of labor export to Saudi Arabia”[8] which bears no trace of being part of any state agency. It suggests that the process is being governed by “unmediated” laws of supply and demand in which any person with access to this “platform” can explore, select and apply for these open positions in Saudi Arabia. The state’s enduring responsibility for the placement of these workers and attendant problems of human trafficking and labor abuse—failures documented in full in 2021—are now fully obscured.

In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, the state has privatized one of the few support services it had previously provided international domestic workers: the provision of shelters for abused women who had escaped their kafeel owners.[9] As investigations from The New York Times detail, until as late as 2023, the Saudi state turned over management of these facilities to a company called Sakan. Per the testimony of those interviewed, Sakan extorted those in its care for money in exchange for arranging their travel.[10]

The same article also gives a sense for the breadth of physical and sexual violence suffered by female domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and the reason that it persists through the present day: to quote the authors, “powerful people profit off the system as it exists.”

- [5] Modern-day slavery: Vietnamese women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, November 29, 2021, New Mandala, <https://www.newmandala.org/modern-day-slavery-vietnamese-women-domestic-workers-in-saudi-arabia/>
- [6] <https://www.business-humanrights.org/my/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84/saudi-arabia-east-african-saudi-arabian-govt-officials-allegedly-profit-from-deadly-trade-in-domestic-workers-through-recruitment-cos-investment/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/16/world/africa/saudi-arabia-kenya-uganda-maids-women.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>
- [7] The two key state websites that used to publish news and regulations of BLAs in Saudi Arabia are: Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply (VAMAS): [https://vamas.com.vn/NguoiDung/TinTuc/timkiem/tabid/272/language/vi-VN/huong-dan-viec-dua-nguoi-lao-dong-sang-lam-viec-tai-a-rap-xe-ut\\_t221c654n44323](https://vamas.com.vn/NguoiDung/TinTuc/timkiem/tabid/272/language/vi-VN/huong-dan-viec-dua-nguoi-lao-dong-sang-lam-viec-tai-a-rap-xe-ut_t221c654n44323) and Department of Overseas Labor (DOLAB): <https://www.molisa.gov.vn/organizational/2230>. The private website is: <https://sanxuatkhaulaodong.com/xuat-khau-lao-dong-a-rap>
- [8] This is an English translation of the website’s Vietnamese name: <https://sanxuatkhaulaodong.com/xuat-khau-lao-dong-a-rap>. The head company of this “floor” is the An Vi Group, which is most likely a quasi-state staffing company: <https://anvigroup.com.vn/chung-toi>
- [9] <https://www.business-humanrights.org/my/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84/saudi-arabia-east-african-saudi-arabian-govt-officials-allegedly-profit-from-deadly-trade-in-domestic-workers-through-recruitment-cos-investment/>
- [10] Abdil Latif Dahir and Justin Scheck, “Why maids keep dying in Saudi Arabia”, New York Times (March 16, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/16/world/africa/saudi-arabia-kenya-uganda-maids-women.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

## II. Structural Violence and Social Reproduction

In Johan Galtung's groundbreaking work on structural violence, he traces the structural character of political violence, physical violence and the economic violence of deprivation, malnutrition, and illness (1968). For 21<sup>st</sup> century domestic workers, however, structural violence expresses itself as well through severe sexual violence resulting in bodily injuries, dehumanization, and forms of suffering largely invisible to the world outside the houses of the kafeel.

In 2019, Nghiêm Hương, a former domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, provided insight into how this structural violence is experienced. In her devastating memoir entitled “*Đừng Chết Ở Ả Rập Xê Út*,” Hương, from the north of Vietnam, recounts how she came to sign a work contract in November 2014 and all that followed thereafter.[11] Across seventeen chapters, she speaks of how she and others moved to Saudi Arabia dreaming of earning money but ended up enduring graphic abuses—physical, sexual, and psychological in nature. Hương herself describes working under oppressive conditions, over 50 degrees Celsius, not only to take care of the household but also to work on the chicken/cattle ranch that the household owned. Despite violating the terms of her labor contract, she also reveals how she was sold from one kafeel's household to another. Regardless of its illegality, the latter practice is extremely common and regularly arranged through collaborations between Vietnamese and Saudi commercial entities, private brokers, and the kafeel households. In Hương's case, her story ended when she faked suicide by threatening to jump from the top of the minaret of the kafeel mansion: Fearing the scandal, her final kafeel agreed to send her home. Tragically, her story is far from exceptional. As one of Vani Saraswathi's interlocutors from east Africa conveyed in a 2022 article on domestic workers in Saudi Arabia: “You will be raped. You will be beaten. No action will be taken. You will have a child as evidence of rape. Still no action. The police, the embassy, the office all collaborate to make you work only. You have no rights.”[12]

The reality is that structural violence, in both its physical and sexual forms, remains extremely pervasive in Saudi Arabia. Applying Tithi Bhattacharya's “social reproduction” theory to the international female domestic workers,[13] my interviews and current evidence show that the capitalist market system relies on these workers not only in the production of services, but also in the work of the ladies in the kafeel's households. These “production of life” tasks include taking care of the family members who work, taking care of the children and the elderly who do not work but are part of the kafeel's households, and taking care of pregnant women so they can biologically “reproduce” workers for the future workforce. Indeed, it is important to note that domestic workers are not an elite luxury in Saudi Arabia, but a staple and expectation of middle-class life. It is also worth noting that it is in middle class households where abuse of domestic workers is often the worst: Worker testimony suggests that conditions are most intense for those working for “less affluent” large-sized families, where sixteen-hour workdays and sexual violence are especially common.[14]

A sense of scale for structural violence can be had through surveying relevant Facebook postings.[15] As recent as April 2025, searches on the platform revealed users asking questions about “How to escape abusive kafeel.” Of the advice offered, one respondent recommended they “go to the police station, to never return to the house of the kafeel, but return straight to Vietnam”; another warned not to seek out help from Vietnamese living in

[11] Nghiêm Hương, *Don't die in Saudi Arabia*, Thế Giới Publisher, Hochiminh City, 2019.

[12] Vani Saraswathi, “If my husband touches you, I'll kill you” August 2022, Migrant-Rights.Org

[13] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/what-is-social-reproduction-theory>

[14] “If my husband touches you, I will kill you”.

[15] *Vương quốc người Việt tại Ả Rập Xê Út* | Facebook



Saudi Arabia as their countrymen were liable to sell them into a brothel (March and April 2025). Facebook postings also exhibited laments about workers suffering so much that they wanted to return home prior to the conclusion of their contract (February 2025). Female domestic workers also lamented that there is no break for them, compared to male workers who were relaxing over the weekend with their friends (2020).

But what is perhaps most troubling is ongoing concerns over abuses and tragedies that happened as far back in 2020. Even today, these incidents' past—the death of an underage woman in 2020, the 2021 SOS message via Facebook of a group of female workers (one with an eye injury due to physical abuse) —continue to garner a lot of viewing and sympathy. Similar to the anecdotes compiled by journalists, these artifacts from social media speak to the constancy of structural violence amongst domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. This truth is simply being suppressed through the actions of governments like Vietnam's.

### III. “Reforms” of Domestic Worker Laws are not Bearing Fruit

In October 2024, a new law on domestic workers came into effect in Saudi Arabia. To what extent, if any, has it changed things on the ground?

Unfortunately, the answer is next to none. To understand why, one need first appreciate that this law is not designed to protect workers. Rather, it was legislated for two purposes: (i) to protect the kafeel; and (ii) to appease the outside world. This is apparent through even a superficial reading of the law in question. To begin, the law does not prohibit passport confiscation. It also fails to specify that work contracts are not transferable amongst kafeel. In addition, the law does not designate maximum work hours per day, mandatory one-day of weekly rest, stipulations on decent living conditions and privacy, and workers' freedom of association; alarmingly, the law does not assure workers safe access to complaint and justice mechanisms. In particular, workers' anonymity is not guaranteed in these mechanisms and the online portal where complaints can be filed is only in Arabic and English.<sup>[16]</sup> Complicating matters further, should a worker attempt to file their complaint in person, they risk being charged with “absconding.” Lastly, even if they do manage to break their contract, one final obstruction remains: Under the new law as under old regulations, workers still need to get prohibitively expensive exit visas to leave the country prior to the completion of their original contract. Moreover, the new Saudi Domestic Workers Law is also lacking in key enforcement mechanisms. And to make things worse, the Saudi Arabia government has recently reduced the penalties for employers who violate safety and health regulations. The gap between ILO Convention #189: Convention on Domestic Workers (2011) and Saudi Arabia's so-called domestic workers reforms remains far apart.

### III. Conclusions and Recommendations

The bilateral labor agreement (BLA) between Vietnam and Saudi Arabia facilitates systematic abuse of domestic workers. The responsibility that the two states bear for this reality remains, even if both have used gag orders and a combination of marketization and privatization to muddy the waters.

■ [16] Global Detention Project, “Saudi Arabia: joint submission to the United Nations committee on the elimination of racial discrimination 114th session (25 November - 13 December 2024). Issues related to the human rights of migrants including discriminatory labor policies, gender-based violence, and arbitrary detention and deportation measures,” October 2024

At this stage, it is essential that the terms of the BLA be changed, and that the international community mobilize to advance this end. Members of global civil society must broadcast and demand the swift establishment of a Standard Employment Contract as well as the instituting of proper enforcement mechanisms. Pressure must be put on the government of Saudi Arabia to revise its Domestic Workers Law to align it with ILO Convention 189. The government of Saudi Arabia must also bring sheltering facilities and protocols back under the control of public authorities and take transparent steps toward guaranteeing that these facilities follow best practices.

On the side of labor-sending countries such as Vietnam, entities like the United States' State Department should hold the government of Vietnam to account for its actual performance on human trafficking and not reward their gag order. In deploying market mechanisms, the BLA's recruitment procedure has served to normalize structural violence and make it harder for the public to detect systemic violations of domestic workers' rights. At present, workers are left on their own to deal with abusive employers without any legal recourse and state protection. With awareness, public outcry can demand genuine reforms of the BLA and effective enforcement mechanisms to protect these vulnerable domestic workers. It is that awareness we must work toward.