



Snapshot: Allegations of Abuse Against Migrant Workers in the Gulf



Allegations by country

Across the six Gulf countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE – migrant workers, who represent 10% migrants [globally](#) and up to 90% of the manual [labour force](#) in the Gulf countries, suffer abuse and labour exploitation in a climate of near impunity.

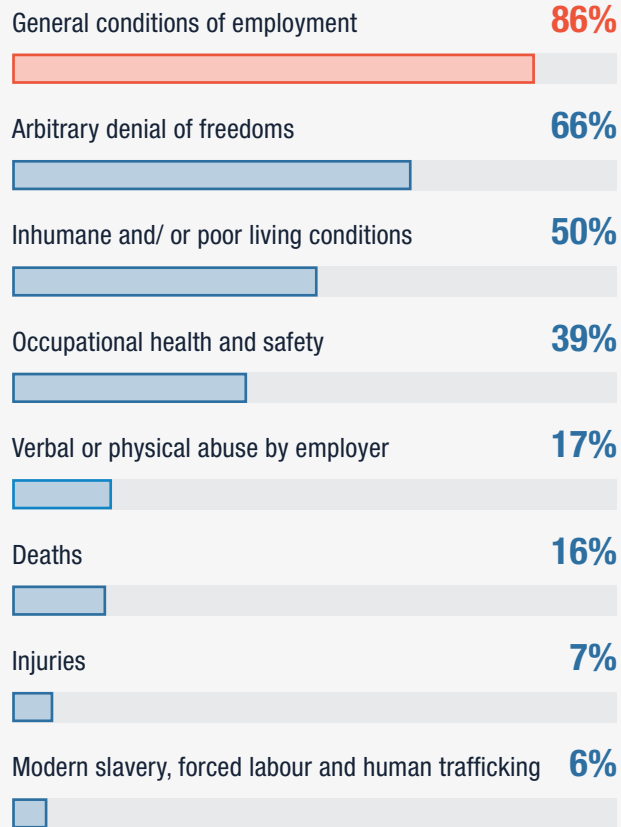
Between January 2016 and December 2019, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre tracked a total of **103 allegations of labour abuse**, including 16 cases where at least 31 workers died on site or in labour accommodation, most often allegedly as a result of unsafe working conditions.

The allegations recorded affected at least **46,000 workers**¹.

¹ The actual numbers of abuses against migrant workers and number of workers impacted are believed to be much higher. Restrictions on free press and independent human rights activism, coupled with bans on migrant workers' right to form or join unions and fears of reprisals for speaking out contribute to under-reporting.

Abuse categories

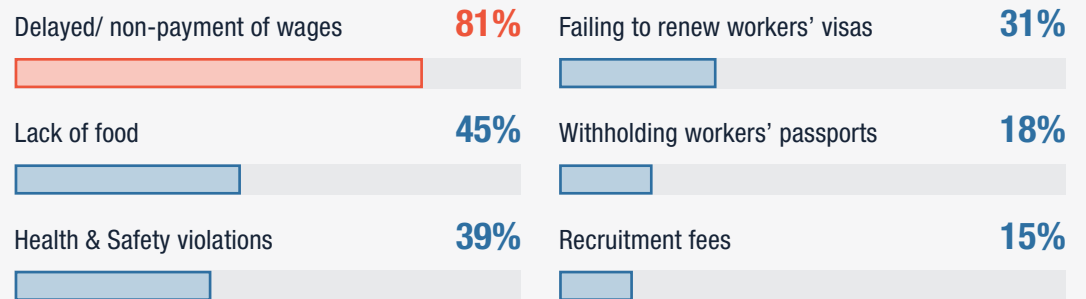
% of allegations



Within each recorded case, workers may experience multiple types of abuse concurrently from across the eight categories and 20 indicators. In most cases, workers experienced one or more type of abuse. The bar charts demonstrate the percentage of the total 103 cases in which workers were alleged to have experienced each category of abuse, and (to the right) the most common alleged abuses.

Most common abuses

% of allegations



Delayed/non-payment of wages

By far the most frequently reported abuse, despite a Wage Protection System in place in most Gulf countries mandating for electronic salary transfers and designed to flag non-payment or delays.



Withholding workers' passports

In all countries except Bahrain, it is explicitly prohibited for employers to confiscate workers' passports.



Recruitment fees

Charging recruitment fees for private sector workers in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE is prohibited by law, but flouted. Charging recruitment fees can land migrant workers in debt before they have even reached their destination. Debt bondage as a result of fees charged to workers also occurred in five instances. It can also lead to a situation of forced labour.

Fatalities

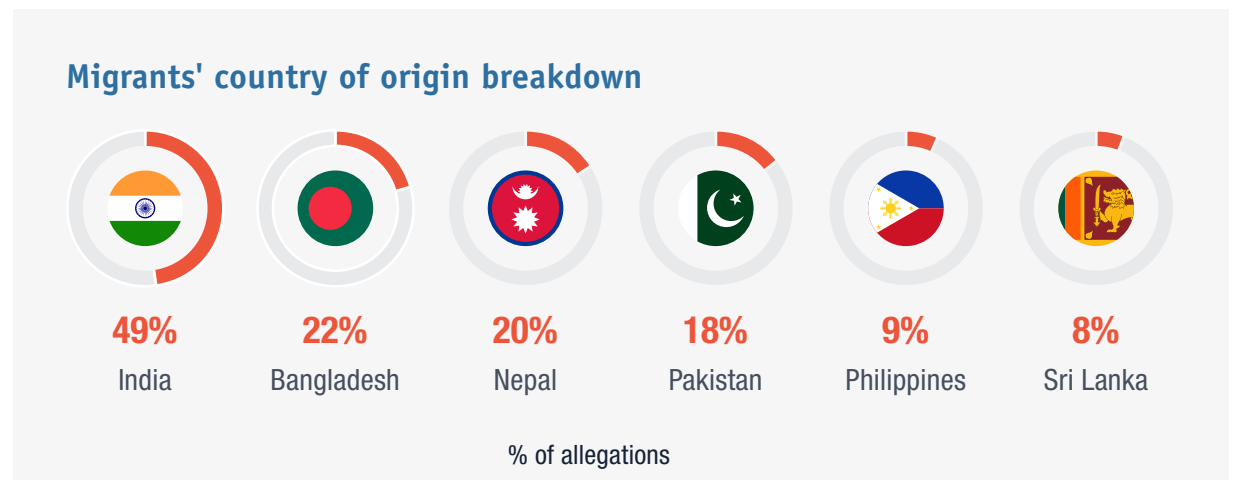
- 31 worker deaths were allegedly a result of corporate neglect or abuse.
- 10 deaths in nine cases are attributed to hazardous working conditions or accidents on site, including a case of two workers falling into a furnace, another buried alive at a construction site, and another killed while sleeping when a fellow worker ran over him with machinery.
- In one case 13 people died in a fire at their labour camp.
- One worker died after allegedly sustaining a head injury from a police tear gas cannister during a protest against delayed wages.
- One worker was allegedly beaten to death by his employer after wanting to leave employment and alleging labour abuse.
- In two cases workers committed suicide following their employers' failure to pay wages or renew visas. In one case, the employer denied this, citing that delayed wages were a 'common feature' of the industry. In the other, a further undisclosed number of workers died after they were unable to afford medical insurance that had previously been covered by their employer.
- The exact circumstances of four of the workers' deaths was not reported, with investigations in one case of three Ugandan nationals.

Countries of origin

The majority of people who migrate to the region for work come from [countries in Asia](#); unsurprisingly the proportion of workers from Asia impacted in the documented cases hugely exceeds that of other regions.

Even though low wage workers from the Global South are the most vulnerable, workers from the Americas and Europe are not completely protected from abuse. This includes the high-profile case of the death of British construction worker [Zac Cox in Qatar in 2016](#) and a [case of alleged withheld wages from American citizens](#) employed by ManTech in Kuwait.

In 81% cases impacted workers are from Asia.



Company naming rate/response

Companies were only named in 59 of the allegations of labour abuse (57%) recorded since 2016.

Despite contacting companies 21 times, we only received 4 responses. In 10 cases, companies were unreachable. In 3 cases, companies had taken action to remedy the alleged abuse and were not contacted.