

# Highlighting the experience of migrant domestic workers in the Arab Gulf region

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A migrant domestic worker with her employer, Kuwait City, September 2022.  
Credit: Lisa Blaydes

For years leading up to last fall's FIFA World Cup in Qatar, human and labor rights organizations pointed to what they described as the systemic abuse of migrant workers who traveled to the small country on the Arab Gulf to build the stadiums and infrastructure that allowed the global

sporting event to take place.

But a new paper by Stanford political science professor Lisa Blaydes draws attention to a lesser-known migrant population in the Arab Gulf region that is perhaps even more vulnerable to exploitation: women who cook, clean, and care for families as domestic workers in private homes. The paper, "Assessing the Labor Conditions of Migrant Domestic Workers in the Arab Gulf States," was published in January 2023 as part of a special *ILR Review* issue on labor transformation and regime transition in the Middle East and North Africa.

"There's so much more attention paid to [construction workers](#)," says Blaydes, one of the core faculty members of the Stanford King Center on Global Development's research initiative on gender-based violence in the developing world. "When you go to the Gulf, you see them walking around in their orange jumpsuits. Domestic workers are an invisible population. These women work in homes and may not even have the ability to leave those homes very often."

In Blaydes' original survey of several hundred Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers who had previously worked in Arab Gulf states but since returned to their home countries, more than 50% of respondents indicated they had been subject to at least one type of abusive situation, with the most common abuses being economic in nature, such as excessive working hours, late payment, and denial of days off. Smaller percentages of women reported having limited access to food (12%), forced confinement (7%), non-payment of salary (7%), denial of medical treatment (6%), physical abuse (4%), and sexual attacks (2%).

According to estimates compiled by the International Labor Organization in 2019, there are millions of migrant domestic workers in Arab Gulf countries—Saudi Arabia alone has more than 3 million—so

these percentages represent huge numbers of women (the vast majority of domestic workers are women).

"This affects so many people," Blaydes says. "The globalization of care work is really common. If we want to understand the work experiences of lots of women around the world, domestic work is a big part of that."

Blaydes, who spent time as a child in Saudi Arabia, is a senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute and director of the Sohaib and Sara Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University.

Blaydes' research focuses on social, economic, and political issues in the Middle East. Recently, she has turned her attention to Arab Gulf states, where a majority of workers are migrants and where women most often shoulder the burden of maintaining homes and caring for family. As Gulf states prioritize [economic development](#), including by encouraging women to work outside the home, Blaydes decided to study the experiences of people who would be picking up the slack in the households Arab women leave behind: migrant women.

Arab women's ability to accept and remain in jobs is "almost conditional" on the presence of migrant women working within their home, Blaydes says.

"There's a tendency to not think about domestic labor as labor," she says. But, "to understand issues related to gender and labor and the economy, it wouldn't make sense to exclude this population."

For her research, Blaydes designed an original online survey of women in Indonesia and the Philippines—two countries that send large numbers of women to work as domestic workers in Arab Gulf states. Ultimately, 656 women completed the survey, after answering screening questions to determine if they had worked in the Arab Gulf region as domestic

workers. Relative to other Arab Gulf countries, Qatar had the fewest reports of abuse per household; Bahrain had the highest.

For her analysis, Blaydes organized the households the women worked for into three groups:

- Class 1, characterized by relatively low overall likelihood of abuse;
- Class 2, characterized by a high probability of economic abuse;
- and Class 3, characterized by the presence of economic abuse and some form of [physical abuse](#).

The vast majority of households—71%—were categorized as Class 1; about a quarter of households were characterized as Class 2; and 5% of households rose to the level of Class 3. Blaydes found that the likelihood of abuse increases in families with higher numbers of children or where the husband is supporting a second household either because of a divorce or because he has a second wife.

The information from this analysis can be helpful, she says, as governments and policymakers try to address the issue of migrant domestic worker abuse, which is made worse by the kafala system of sponsorship used in most Arab Gulf states. Under the kafala system, workers can only work for their employer sponsor for the length of their contract, usually two years. If the employer breaks the contract, the [worker's](#) visa is canceled, and they are immediately repatriated. This gives employers an incredible amount of power over workers, who may not report abuse for fear of retaliation.

Some efforts at reform are already underway. Blaydes points to the example of the United Arab Emirates, which in 2011 began to allow migrant workers to accept new jobs without approval from their previous employers; according to the International Labor Organization,

Qatar enacted a similar reform in 2020 and, specific to domestic workers, has disseminated Know Your Rights materials and hosted panel discussions with workers about potential reforms. Migrant domestic workers also often receive pre-departure training in their home countries about their rights.

Blaydes says her study can ensure that future interventions to prevent abuse of migrant domestic workers—including trainings, discussions, and even direct assistance from the governments of destination countries—are designed for maximum effect. For instance, she says, migrant women should be told in their trainings that the majority of households do not engage in abusive behavior.

"This kind of information could tell you, actually most households are ok," she explains. "So, if you're in a bad household, it doesn't have to be that way. That's important to know."

Blaydes says expanding the scope of gender-based violence to include not just family members but domestic workers whose labor takes place inside private homes is crucial to understanding economic and global development.

"People don't always think of gender-based violence as a topic related to economic development," she says. "But it's part of human thriving to not be subject to violence."

Blaydes says the King Center's support was integral to her project: It allowed her to conduct a survey large enough to identify women who had worked in Arab Gulf states as migrant domestic workers.

"It's a unique sample—women who have had this very particular experience," she says. "I essentially had to screen the entire online sample of [women](#) from the Philippines and Indonesia. Without the King

Center's support, I wouldn't have even been able to run the initial screen to find them."

**More information:** Lisa Blaydes, Assessing the Labor Conditions of Migrant Domestic Workers in the Arab Gulf States, *ILR Review* (2023). DOI: [10.1177/00197939221147497](https://doi.org/10.1177/00197939221147497)

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