

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Its Commitment to Human Rights in Protecting Workers and Improving the Work Environment

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Introduction

Labor rights are universally recognized as fundamental components of human rights. They are essential not only for ensuring individual dignity but also for fostering sustainable economic and social development¹. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has long asserted that “labor rights are human rights,” highlighting their central role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8, which promotes “decent work for all”²

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has made explicit commitments in this area. Article 28 of its Basic Law of Governance declares that the state shall “facilitate employment for every able-bodied person” and shall enact laws that “protect the rights of workers and employers and improve the working environment”³. Furthermore, the Saudi Labor Law affirms the right of all workers to a “safe, healthy, and productive work environment,” which is considered a critical factor in enhancing national productivity and competitiveness⁴.

These provisions reflect a broader alignment with global human rights frameworks. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, affirms that “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment”⁵.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- Examine the theoretical relationship between labor rights and human rights.
- Analyze Saudi legislation and recent reforms that protect workers.
- Evaluate initiatives improving wages, housing, and social coverage.
- Assess anti-trafficking laws and protections for vulnerable workers.
- Discuss Saudi Arabia’s international labor agreements and regional role.

The Theoretical Framework of Labor Rights

Understanding labor rights within their theoretical framework provides the foundation for analyzing national labor laws and international obligations. This chapter presents a conceptual

¹ United Nations. (1948) . Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23, 2015. p. 6

² International Labour Organization (ILO). (2017). Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Geneva: ILO, 2017, p. 12.

³ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Basic Law of Governance, 1992, Art. 28

⁴ Saudi Labor Law, 2005, Art. 2

⁵ United Nations, 1948, Art. 23

exploration of labor rights, their significance in modern societies, and their integral connection to broader human rights systems. By establishing this foundation, the study will be better equipped to evaluate how Saudi Arabia aligns with these principles in its domestic labor policies.

The Concept of Labor Rights

Labor rights, also referred to as workers' rights, are a category of legal rights and human rights that pertain to the relationship between workers, employers, and the state. They include the right to fair wages, safe working conditions, non-discrimination, collective bargaining, and freedom of association. These rights have evolved over time in response to industrialization, economic globalization, and growing international awareness of social justice issues⁶.

The importance of labor rights in modern societies cannot be overstated. They serve as critical mechanisms for ensuring social equity, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive economic growth. For example, labor protections help to balance the power dynamics between employers and employees, safeguard the dignity of work, and create the conditions necessary for sustainable development⁷.

Modern constitutions and legal systems have increasingly recognized labor rights as fundamental rights. In many democratic societies, labor rights are enshrined in constitutional provisions, national legislation, and court interpretations. These legal guarantees contribute to building stable and prosperous societies by ensuring that all workers are protected under the rule of law⁸.

International References to Labor Rights

Labor rights have been codified in a number of international legal instruments. The International Labour Organization (ILO), founded in 1919, has been the primary global entity responsible for setting international labor standards through conventions and recommendations. Core conventions such as ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise (1948) and ILO Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining (1949) are considered fundamental⁹.

In addition to the ILO, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966) include explicit references to labor rights, including the right to just and favorable work conditions, equal pay for equal work, and the right to form and join trade unions¹⁰.

Labor Rights Within the Framework of Human Rights

⁶ The new discourse of labor rights: From social to fundamental rights?

Comparative Labor Law and Policy Journal, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2007, pp. 119–142.

⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO). Work for a Brighter Future – Report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, ILO, 2019, p. 8.

⁸ Mantouvalou, Virginia. Are Labour Rights Human Rights, European Labour Law Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2012, pp. 151–172.

⁹ International Labour Organization (ILO). Decent Work Indicators – Guidelines for Producers and Users of Statistical and Legal Framework Indicators, ILO, 2013, p. 5.

¹⁰ **United Nations**. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966, Article 8.

Labor rights and human rights are intrinsically linked, as labor rights protect the dignity, freedom, and equality of individuals in the workplace. From a human rights perspective, the right to work and the conditions under which work is performed are not merely economic concerns but fundamental aspects of a person's identity and well-being¹¹.

In recent decades, scholars and international bodies have emphasized the need to regard labor rights as part of the indivisible and interdependent structure of human rights. This approach is supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which states that rights at work are integral to achieving social justice and dignity for all¹².

Moreover, the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work commits member states to respect and promote core labor standards, such as freedom of association, the elimination of forced and child labor, and non-discrimination in employment—regardless of a country's level of development or ratification status¹³.

Core Principles of Labor Rights as Articulated by the Human Rights Commission and the United Nations.

The core principles of labor rights have been endorsed and promoted by both international organizations and national human rights institutions. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8, for example, calls for 'decent work for all' and recognizes that inclusive labor policies are essential to sustainable development and poverty reduction¹⁴.

National human rights commissions, such as the Saudi Human Rights Commission, affirm that labor rights are a cornerstone of human rights protections. In line with Saudi Vision 2030, the Commission has emphasized improving labor conditions, protected migrant workers, and eliminated exploitation in the workplace¹⁵.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011) further outline the responsibility of both states and corporations to protect, respect, and remedy human rights in the context of work. These principles include fair wages, occupational health and safety, and grievance mechanisms for rights violations¹⁶.

The Saudi Labor Law

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a firm commitment to safeguarding workers' rights through comprehensive legal provisions established in the Saudi Labor Law. The law, originally promulgated by Royal Decree No. M/51 dated 23 Sha'ban 1426H (corresponding to 27 September 2005), and subsequently amended, stands as a robust framework to promote

¹¹ Mantouvalou, Virginia. Are Labour Rights Human Rights, *European Labour Law Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2012, pp. 151

¹² International Labour Organization (ILO). Decent Work Indicators – Guidelines for Producers and Users of Statistical and Legal Framework Indicators, ILO, 2013, p. 12.

¹³ International Labour Organization (ILO). Decent Work Indicators – Guidelines for Producers and Users of Statistical and Legal Framework Indicators, ILO, 2013, p. 3.

¹⁴ United Nations. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015. Goal 8.

¹⁵ Saudi Human Rights Commission. Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020, p. 7.

¹⁶ United Nations. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework, 2011. Principles 1–3.

equity, dignity, and safety for all employees within the Kingdom. The law applies to both Saudi and non-Saudi workers, covering private sector employment in a wide range of industries¹⁷.

Among the core provisions, Article 3 of the Labor Law stipulates that 'work is the right of every citizen,' affirming the government's responsibility in ensuring equal opportunities and non-discrimination based on gender, disability, age, or other factors. It further emphasizes the dignity of work and the necessity of a balanced employer-employee relationship¹⁸.

Another pivotal provision is Article 61, which obligates employers to refrain from any act that would violate the dignity or personal freedoms of workers. The article outlines duties such as ensuring a safe work environment, timely payment of wages, and fair treatment—provisions that align with the values of justice and compassion enshrined in Islamic principles and in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 objectives¹⁹.

Furthermore, Article 80 protects employees from arbitrary dismissal by detailing the specific conditions under which a contract may be terminated. This protection fosters job security and strengthens employee confidence in the fairness of the legal system²⁰.

The Saudi Labor Law also addresses working hours and rest periods in Articles 98 to 101, which limit the number of working hours per day and provide for rest, weekly holidays, and additional provisions during Ramadan. These articles ensure a humane and balanced working schedule²¹.

In line with the Kingdom's unwavering dedication to international labor standards, the Saudi Labor Law is periodically reviewed and updated to reflect emerging best practices and enhance protections for all categories of workers. These provisions highlight the Kingdom's progressive and humanitarian approach to labor regulation, underscoring its leadership in the region and beyond.

Amendments and Reforms That Have Strengthened Worker Protection in the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has undertaken a series of substantial amendments and policy reforms to strengthen worker protection in accordance with its long-term development strategy, Vision 2030. These reforms aim to modernize the labor market, promote justice and transparency, and ensure that workers' rights are respected and upheld across all sectors.

One of the most important milestones was the amendment of key provisions of the Saudi Labor Law through Royal Decree No. M/134 (30 July 2019). This reform package addressed a wide range of worker protection issues, including fair termination practices (Article 77), proper classification of employment contracts (Article 38), and maternity rights (Article 149). For

¹⁷ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Saudi Labor Law (Royal Decree No. M/51, 27 September 2005, as amended).

¹⁸ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Saudi Labor Law, 2005, Art.3.

¹⁹ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Saudi Labor Law, 2005, Art.61.

²⁰ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Saudi Labor Law, 2005, Art.80.

²¹ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Saudi Labor Law, 2005, Art.98-101.

instance, Article 77 now stipulates clearer compensation standards in cases of contract termination, thereby preventing exploitation and arbitrary dismissal²²

Another critical initiative is the Wage Protection System (WPS), launched by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. This system mandates all private sector employers to pay their employees' wages electronically through banks, enabling government monitoring. By 2019, the WPS had become fully operational, covering companies of all sizes and ensuring timely wage payments. The program helps eliminate the issue of unpaid or delayed salaries, which had been a challenge for some low-wage workers²³.

In terms of occupational health and safety, the Saudi government introduced additional legal obligations for employers under Articles 121 to 127. These amendments mandate the provision of protective gear, regular safety training, and accident reporting systems. Companies failing to comply face administrative penalties. This legal framework ensures a safer work environment and demonstrates Saudi Arabia's commitment to international labor standards²⁴.

The Anti-Harassment Law (Royal Decree No. M/96, 2018) was a landmark in protecting both male and female workers from psychological and physical harm in the workplace. This law criminalizes all forms of harassment, imposes severe penalties, and obliges employers to establish clear complaint mechanisms. Article 1 of the law states that "harassment in any form shall be subject to criminal liability," reinforcing a culture of respect and professionalism²⁵.

In promoting gender equality, several reforms have targeted women's inclusion in the workforce. These include the elimination of previous occupational restrictions, facilitation of maternity leave, and establishment of daycare centers in large companies. Such measures are crucial for meeting Vision 2030's goal of increasing female labor force participation from 22% to 30%²⁶.

Additionally, the Labor Reform Initiative (LRI) launched in 2020 has further empowered foreign workers by replacing restrictive sponsorship mechanisms with a more flexible framework. The LRI allows migrant workers to change jobs without employer consent, access exit/re-entry visas independently, and obtain final exit permits. These improvements are aligned with ILO principles and have been welcomed as a historic step toward fair migration practices in the region²⁷.

The Impact of These Reforms on Enhancing Job Mobility and Professional Autonomy

As part of its ambitious Vision 2030, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched a landmark labour market reform by abolishing the traditional sponsorship (kafala) system and implementing the

²² Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD). Saudi Labor Law (Royal Decree No. M/51, 27 September 2005, as amended by Royal Decree No. M/134, 30 July 2019).

²³ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD). Wage Protection System Implementation Guide, 2020. Riyadh: MHRSD. P. 13.

²⁴ Saudi Labor Law, 2020, pp. 52–56.

²⁵ Anti-Harassment Law (Royal Decree No. M/96, 2018). Official Gazette (Umm al-Qura), Issue No. 4712, 19 Ramadan 1439H. Art. 1. P.2.

²⁶ Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. National Transformation Program Document, 2016. Riyadh: Vision 2030 Office. P.18.

²⁷ ILO Report, 2021, pp. 9–12.

Labor Reform Initiative (LRI). Announced by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) in November 2020 and enforced in March 2021, this reform marked a major shift in the Kingdom's approach to expatriate labour rights and market flexibility.

Under the previous kafala system, expatriate workers' ability to change jobs, travel, or leave the country was largely dependent on their employer's consent. This often led to restrictions on labour mobility and compromised workers' autonomy. With the introduction of the LRI, expatriate workers in the private sector can now transfer employment upon contract expiration without the need for employer approval, and they can also obtain exit, re-entry, and final exit visas independently through digital platforms like Absher and Qiwa²⁸.

These reforms significantly enhanced job mobility by reducing worker dependence on individual sponsors and fostering a more competitive and transparent labour market. Employers are encouraged to retain workers based on merit and working conditions, while employees gain the freedom to pursue better job opportunities. This shift has contributed to improved worker satisfaction and overall market productivity. Furthermore, it addresses concerns long raised by international organizations regarding freedom of movement and fair labour practices²⁹.

The reforms also align the Saudi labour system with international standards of decent work, as promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations. By removing structural barriers and promoting contractual clarity, the LRI strengthens the legal and operational framework for both employers and employees. It also supports the Kingdom's goals of Saudization and economic diversification by promoting a results-oriented labour environment.

Importantly, these measures have enhanced Saudi Arabia's international standing in labour rights. The ILO has recognized the Kingdom's leadership among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in pioneering labour reforms that prioritize workers' dignity and autonomy³⁰. The positive reception of the LRI from the private sector and international community underscores its success and relevance.

The management of migrant labor in Saudi Arabia has undergone significant transformation with the abolition of the kafala system and the introduction of the Labor Reform Initiative (LRI). This section will provide a comparative analysis of the old and new systems, focusing on key differences in managing migrant labor, with an emphasis on workers' rights, mobility, and professional autonomy. The comparison will highlight the improvements that the new system has brought to the labor market and its alignment with international labor standards.

²⁸ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD). (2021). Labor Reform Initiative Guide. Riyadh: MHRSD Publications, p. 6.

²⁹ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Towards Fair Migration and Decent Work. Geneva: ILO Publications, pp. 5–9.

³⁰ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Towards Fair Migration and Decent Work. Geneva: ILO Publications, p. 9.

The Labor Reform Initiative: Freedom, Flexibility, and Autonomy

With the introduction of the Labor Reform Initiative (LRI) in 2021, Saudi Arabia embarked on a significant shift in labor management, moving away from the rigid structure of the kafala system toward a more flexible and worker-centered model. The LRI grants migrant workers the right to change employers upon contract expiration or mutual agreement, without the need for the employer's approval. Additionally, the reform allows workers to obtain exit and re-entry visas independently, using the Absher and Qiwa platforms, which removes the dependency on the sponsor for such decisions.

One of the most notable improvements under the LRI is the enhanced job mobility it provides. Migrant workers now have the ability to seek better job opportunities in the Saudi labor market without fear of being tied to a single employer. This change not only strengthens workers' professional autonomy but also introduces a more dynamic and competitive labor market. Employers are now incentivized to improve working conditions and offer better benefits to retain skilled workers, creating a more balanced power dynamic between employers and workers³¹.

Moreover, the new system provides workers with greater job security, as they no longer need to worry about being trapped in exploitative conditions due to employer control over their exit visas or employment contracts. The reforms also align Saudi Arabia's labor practices with international standards, particularly those set by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which emphasizes workers' rights to freedom of movement and protection from exploitation³².

Aspect	Kafala System	Labor Reform Initiative (LRI)
Employer Control	Sponsors had complete control over workers' mobility, employment, and visas.	Workers can change employers independently and obtain exit visas without employer consent.
Job Mobility	Highly restricted, workers needed sponsor approval to change jobs.	Workers can move between employers freely, improving job flexibility.
Exit Visas	Dependent on the sponsor's approval for exit and re-entry visas.	Workers can apply for exit/re-entry visas independently through online platforms.
Worker Autonomy	Low autonomy; workers were dependent on sponsors for various aspects of life and work.	High autonomy; workers now have more control over their professional lives and mobility.

³¹ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). *Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Towards Fair Migration and Decent Work*. Geneva: ILO Publications, pp. 9–12.

³² International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). *Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Towards Fair Migration and Decent Work*. Geneva: ILO Publications, pp. 9–12.

Power Imbalance	Significant power imbalance, with employers holding disproportionate control over workers' lives.	The LRI reduces power imbalances, encouraging fairer employer-employee relationships.
International Standards	Violated international labor standards by restricting workers' rights to mobility and fairness.	Aligns with international labor standards, particularly those of the ILO, focusing on fair labor practices.

The Labor Reform Initiative has addressed and resolved many long standing concerns and issues raised by human rights organisations and of the kafala system.

Furthermore, the LRI has contributed to increased worker satisfaction. The ability to freely move between employers fosters a sense of security and fairness, while employers are now incentivized to offer better working conditions, which in turn enhances productivity. Additionally, the reform has helped boost the competitiveness of Saudi Arabia’s labor market by attracting highly skilled professionals who might have been deterred by the restrictive nature of the kafala system.

An effective labor inspection system is a cornerstone of labor protection and the enforcement of workers' rights. In Saudi Arabia, the responsibility for this critical function lies with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD).

Through a robust inspection mechanism, the Kingdom ensures that employers maintain fair labor standards, safeguard occupational safety, and uphold human dignity in the workplace

The Kingdom’s Efforts to Improve the Work Environment

Wage Protection Programs

Saudi Arabia has taken significant steps to enhance the work environment through regulatory and institutional reforms, particularly in the area of wage protection. Recognizing the critical role that timely and transparent compensation plays in ensuring worker satisfaction and economic productivity, the Kingdom introduced the Wage Protection System (WPS) under the supervision of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD).

How These Programs Ensure Timely Payment of Wages to Workers.

The Wage Protection System (WPS) was launched in 2013 to guarantee that all workers in the private sector receive their wages on time and in full. The system mandates that employers deposit workers’ salaries into bank accounts through authorized local banks, thus creating a digital payroll record that can be monitored by the Ministry. This approach prevents wage delays, underpayment, or manipulation of wage records³³.

Employers are required to upload salary payment data into the Mudad platform, which is integrated with the WPS and enables real-time tracking of compliance. If discrepancies or

³³ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD). (2022). *Wage Protection System Report*. Riyadh: MHRSD, p. 11.

delays are detected, the Ministry automatically flags the case and may issue warnings, fines, or suspend government services to the non-compliant employer³⁴.

As of 2023, WPS compliance is mandatory for all private sector establishments, including small enterprises, marking a major leap in labor rights protection in the Kingdom³⁵.

Saudi Arabia demonstrates its adherence to Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the right to "just and favorable remuneration"³⁶.

Their Impact on Promoting Financial Transparency in the Labor Market

The implementation of the Wage Protection System has significantly contributed to enhancing financial transparency in the Saudi labor market. By requiring electronic documentation of all salary payments, the system eliminates informal practices, unrecorded transactions, and non-compliant employers who previously operated without regulatory oversight³⁷.

Also, the data collected through WPS supports broader policy-making and strategic planning. For instance, the MHRSD can identify sectors with high rates of non-compliance and allocate inspection resources accordingly³⁸.

Saudi Arabia's approach aligns with ILO Convention No. 95 on the protection of wages and SDG Goal 8, which promotes decent work and inclusive economic growth. The success of WPS has prompted the Ministry to explore expansion into new areas, including wage transparency for domestic workers and integration with housing and insurance systems³⁹.

Standards Enforced by the Kingdom to Ensure Adequate Housing for Workers.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring that workers—especially migrant laborers—are provided with adequate and humane living conditions.

One of the most prominent frameworks is the Ministerial Decision No. 185/2020, issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD), which establishes comprehensive guidelines for labor housing in terms of space, hygiene, safety, privacy, and essential services. According to this regulation, the minimum space per worker is specified, with limits on the number of occupants per room, requirements for natural ventilation and lighting, and the provision of separate sanitary facilities to ensure health and dignity⁴⁰.

Furthermore, the Saudi Labor Law (Article 82) mandates employers to provide workers with adequate housing or housing allowances, emphasizing that accommodation must comply with health and safety standards to protect workers from environmental hazards and overcrowding⁴¹.

³⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). *Saudi Arabia: Progress in Wage Protection*. Geneva: ILO, p. 19.

³⁵ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD). (2023). *Labor Market Indicators Bulletin*. Riyadh: MHRSD, pp. 7–10.

³⁶ United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Art. 23.

³⁷ Al-Mutairi, H. (2022). "Transparency and Reform in the Saudi Labor Sector." *Middle East Labor Law Review*, 14(2), p. 44.

³⁸ MHRSD, 2023, p. 10

³⁹ ILO, 2022, p. 27

⁴⁰ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Ministerial Decision No. 185/2020 on Labor Housing Standards, Riyadh, 20 July 2020.

⁴¹ Royal Decree No. M/51, Saudi Labor Law, Article 82, Riyadh, 23 September 2005.

In addition, the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) guidelines, integrated into Saudi labor regulations, stress the necessity of safe and hazard-free accommodation, including protection from extreme temperatures, fire risks, and overcrowding. Employers are required to conduct regular maintenance and ensure that housing units meet structural and environmental safety criteria⁴².

The Kingdom also requires companies employing large numbers of foreign workers to register their housing facilities and submit to periodic inspections by MHRSD officials. These inspections aim to enforce compliance and promote accountability regarding workers' welfare⁴³.

Moreover, municipal and health authorities participate in monitoring labor housing, especially in industrial zones with high worker density. These authorities ensure the cleanliness of facilities, availability of potable water, proper waste disposal, and overall suitability of the living environment⁴⁴.

By implementing these standards, Saudi Arabia reinforces its commitment to upholding the dignity and welfare of workers. These initiatives align with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 goals, which seek to improve quality of life and enhance the labor market's global reputation⁴⁵.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's efforts to improve the living conditions of migrant laborers have far-reaching implications beyond mere compliance with legal standards. Enhanced accommodation and related services play a critical role in safeguarding the physical health, mental well-being, and social stability of these workers, who constitute a significant portion of the Kingdom's workforce.

Improved housing conditions directly impact workers' physical health by reducing exposure to overcrowding, poor sanitation, and environmental hazards. Studies have shown that cramped and unsanitary living quarters can increase the risk of communicable diseases, respiratory infections, and other health problems⁴⁶. By enforcing minimum space requirements, ensuring proper ventilation and lighting, and maintaining clean facilities, Saudi regulations actively work to mitigate these risks and promote a healthier living environment⁴⁷.

Health and Social Insurance

The protection of workers' health and social well-being is a fundamental pillar in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's strategy to promote human rights in the labor sector. The Kingdom's measures are vital in safeguarding workers from economic and health-related vulnerabilities, and they reflect the its broader commitment to sustainable development and social justice under Vision 2030.

⁴² Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Guidelines, Riyadh, 15 March 2019.

⁴³ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Annual Report on Labor Housing Inspections, Riyadh, December 2022.

⁴⁴ Saudi Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Labor Housing Monitoring Report, Riyadh, 10 April 2021

⁴⁵ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Riyadh, April 2016.

⁴⁶ World Health Organization, Housing and Health Guidelines, Geneva, 2018.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Ministerial Decision No. 185/2020 on Labor Housing Standards, Riyadh, 20 July 2020.

The Role of Health Insurance in Creating a Safe and Secure Work Environment

Health insurance is an essential component of the labor protection framework in Saudi Arabia. The implementation of Compulsory Cooperative Health Insurance (CCHI) has been a landmark policy in this domain. Since its enforcement in 2005, all employers in the private sector are legally obligated to provide health insurance coverage for their employees through accredited insurance companies⁴⁸.

The CCHI Council continues to update and expand the scope of coverage, integrating digital health platforms and complaint mechanisms to improve efficiency and transparency in service delivery⁴⁹. These developments reflect the Kingdom's ongoing efforts to modernize its labor health systems and enhance overall worker welfare.

The Benefits of Social Protection Schemes for Workers

In addition to health insurance, social protection schemes form another cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's strategy to safeguard workers' rights and promote human development.

The General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI) administers several programs targeting both Saudi nationals and, to a certain extent, foreign workers. These include work injury insurance, end-of-service benefits, and retirement pensions, which provide financial support during periods when workers are unable to earn income⁵⁰.

While retirement pensions and unemployment benefits may not be universally available, many are entitled to end-of-service gratuities, regulated by the Saudi Labor Law (Articles 84–87).

The Kingdom's Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking and Labor Exploitation

As part of its ongoing commitment to upholding human rights and protecting all individuals within its territory, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken firm steps to combat human trafficking and labor exploitation, recognizing the global nature of these crimes and their harmful impact on vulnerable populations, particularly migrant laborers.

Saudi Legislation Against Human Trafficking

Saudi Arabia acknowledges that labor exploitation is not only a violation of individual rights but also a serious threat to social justice and national integrity. To address this challenge, the Kingdom has enacted strong anti-trafficking laws and developed reporting and protection mechanisms to shield workers from abuse. This section outlines the legal instruments and institutional procedures designed to combat human trafficking and labor exploitation within the Kingdom.

Protection of Domestic Workers and Guaranteeing Their Rights

In recognition of the vulnerability of domestic workers due to the unique nature of their employment within private households and often limited access to institutional protection, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has implemented a range of legal frameworks and governmental initiatives to safeguard their rights. This section examines both the specific legal provisions

⁴⁸ Council of Cooperative Health Insurance, CCHI Law and Regulations, Riyadh, 10 January 2005.

⁴⁹ CCHI, Digital Transformation Strategy Report, Riyadh, 2023.

⁵⁰ General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI), Social Insurance Law, Riyadh, 2021.

enacted for domestic workers and the programmatic efforts initiated by the government to ensure their dignity, security, and well-being.

Beyond legal protections, the Saudi government has introduced a series of institutional and digital programs aimed at enhancing oversight, transparency, and worker support. These initiatives are integral in operationalizing the legal standards and creating a more humane environment for domestic labor.

1. Musaned Platform

Launched in 2014 by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Musaned is a digital platform that streamlines the recruitment and employment process of domestic workers. It provides a standardized, transparent process that includes:

Verified recruitment agencies and registered contracts.

Electronic tracking of applications and employment status.

A built-in grievance system that allows workers to submit complaints directly⁵¹

2 .Awareness and Educational Campaigns

The government has published multilingual educational materials and launched nationwide awareness campaigns. These are aimed at educating employers and workers about their respective rights and responsibilities under Saudi law⁵²

3 .Shelter and Support Centers

Saudi Arabia has established shelter facilities in major cities for domestic workers who have experienced abuse or contract violations. These centers provide temporary accommodation, medical and psychological care and access to case management and justice mechanisms.

4 .Enforcement and Sanctions

The Ministry enforces strict monitoring and penalization mechanisms against violators. Sanctions may include suspension of recruitment privileges, fines, and in severe cases, referral to the Public Prosecution Office for criminal charges⁵³

5 .Bilateral Labor Agreements

To regulate the recruitment process and improve the protection of migrant workers, Saudi Arabia has signed several bilateral agreements with countries of labor origin (e.g., the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka). These agreements cover:

Minimum wage benchmarks.

Standardized employment terms.

Joint mechanisms for resolving cross-border labor disputes^{54, 55}.

⁵¹ Ministry of Human Resources, Musaned User Guide, Riyadh, 2023.

⁵² Ministry of Human Resources, Awareness Materials for Domestic Labor Rights, Riyadh, 2022.

⁵³ Ministry of Human Resources, Shelter and Legal Aid Services for Vulnerable Domestic Workers, 2023.

⁵⁴ Saudi Press Agency (SPA), Penalties Imposed on Recruitment Violations, January 20, 2024

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bilateral Labor Agreements with Countries of Origin, Riyadh, 2022.

The Kingdom's Role in International Cooperation to Promote Labor Rights

Introduction

As part of its growing influence on the global stage, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has embraced international cooperation as a strategic pathway to promote and safeguard labor rights. The Kingdom recognizes that the advancement of labor standards is not confined to national legislation alone, but also depends on active engagement with international institutions and a commitment to shared global values. This chapter explores Saudi Arabia's legal alignment with international conventions and its evolving role as a regional leader in the promotion of workers' rights.

Saudi Arabia has progressively aligned its national labor policies with international labor standards through its engagement with global organizations, particularly the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Saudi Arabia has acceded to a number of key international conventions that reflect its dedication to improving labor conditions, protecting workers' rights, and promoting social justice.

1 .United Nations Conventions

Saudi Arabia is a signatory to several human rights conventions under the UN framework, including:

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969): This treaty obligates states to eliminate discrimination in all forms, including in the workplace⁵⁶
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Saudi Arabia in 2000, which includes commitments to eliminate gender-based workplace discrimination⁵⁷

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified in 1996, which addresses child labor and obliges the Kingdom to protect children from economic exploitation⁵⁸

Although Saudi Arabia has entered reservations on some articles due to consistency with Islamic law, its accession to these treaties reflects its engagement with international human rights mechanisms.

2 .ILO Membership and Core Conventions

Saudi Arabia joined the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1976 and has since ratified several of its core conventions. These include:

ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour (ratified in 1978)⁵⁹

⁵⁶ United Nations Treaty Collection, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1969.

⁵⁷ UN Women, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – Saudi Arabia, 2000.

⁵⁸ UNICEF, Convention on the Rights of the Child: Saudi Arabia, 1996.

⁵⁹ International Labour Organization, Ratifications of ILO Convention No. 29 by Saudi Arabia, 1978.

ILO Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour (ratified in 2001)⁶⁰

ILO Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration (ratified in 2020)⁶¹

ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Employment (ratified in 2021)⁶²

ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ratified in 2001)⁶³

These conventions form the foundation of the Kingdom's international labor commitments and are supported by national legislation such as the Saudi Labor Law and executive regulations.

3. Engagement in ILO Programs and Reviews

Saudi Arabia has participated in various ILO technical cooperation programs, particularly those related to labor inspection systems, occupational safety, and skills development. Moreover, the Kingdom regularly submits national reports under the ILO supervisory system, which serves as a mechanism for evaluating compliance with ratified conventions⁶⁴

4. Membership in Other Global Labor Platforms

In addition to the ILO and UN bodies, Saudi Arabia is an active member of the G20 Employment Working Group, where it contributes to global discourse on fair employment, youth and female labor participation, and protection of vulnerable workers⁶⁵.

The Contribution of These Agreements to the Development of the Labor Environment Within the Kingdom

The international conventions ratified by Saudi Arabia and its ongoing cooperation with international organizations have significantly influenced the evolution of the Kingdom's labor policies and institutional frameworks. These contributions can be observed in multiple dimensions of labor governance, worker protection, and policy development.

Alignment of National Legislation with International Standards

The Kingdom's ratification of core International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions has necessitated the harmonization of domestic laws with global labor standards. This alignment is most evident in the following reforms:

The Saudi Labor Law (amended in 2015 and 2021) was updated to reflect obligations under ILO conventions, particularly those related to equal pay, minimum age, and the prohibition of forced labor⁶⁶

Regulations on domestic workers (2013) and labor contracts have been refined to ensure fairness, transparency, and non-discrimination, aligning with the Kingdom's commitments under the ILO Convention No. 189 (though not ratified, used as a guideline)⁶⁷

⁶⁰ ILO, Ratifications of Convention No. 105, 2001.

⁶¹ ILO, Ratification of Convention No. 100 by Saudi Arabia, 2020.

⁶² ILO, Ratification of Convention No. 138 by Saudi Arabia, 2021

⁶³ ILO, Ratification of Convention No. 182 by Saudi Arabia, 2001

⁶⁴ ILO, NORMLEX – Saudi Arabia: Reports under Article 22 of the ILO Constitution, 2023.

⁶⁵ G20 Employment Working Group, Saudi Arabia's Contributions to Global Labor Discussions, Riyadh, 2022.

⁶⁶ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Labour Law Amendments, 2021.

⁶⁷ International Labour Organization, Domestic Workers Convention No. 189 – Guidance for Non-Ratifying States, 2019.

Institutional Modernization and Digital Systems

Saudi Arabia's international commitments have driven institutional modernization in labor governance. Key examples include:

The establishment of the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT) in line with the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons⁶⁸

The Wage Protection System (WPS), mandated for all employers, was introduced to guarantee timely and documented wage payments, which is consistent with ILO recommendations⁶⁹

Digital platforms such as Musaned, Qiwa, and Absher have enhanced transparency, labor mobility, and monitoring of employer-employee relationships⁷⁰

These digital innovations were largely shaped by the need to comply with international reporting obligations and improve monitoring mechanisms.

Better Protection for Migrant Workers

International collaboration has also played a role in the Kingdom's focus on migrant labor rights:

Bilateral agreements with labor-sending countries (e.g., India, the Philippines, Bangladesh) were signed in the framework of ILO guidance to regulate recruitment practices and improve the living and working conditions of expatriates⁷¹. This also included the abolition of the Kafala system's restrictive elements.

Capacity Building and International Technical Assistance

The ILO and other international organizations have provided technical cooperation and training support for Saudi labor inspectors, occupational safety officers, and policy planners. Examples include:

ILO-sponsored workshops on labor inspection and occupational health (Riyadh, 2022)⁷²

Participation in the UN Global Compact, where Saudi institutions commit to labor principles within corporate social responsibility frameworks⁷³

This technical assistance has raised the competencies of local institutions and helped instill a culture of rights-based labor governance.

Enhancing the Kingdom's International Reputation

By actively engaging in global labor forums and aligning its domestic framework with international conventions, Saudi Arabia has improved its image as a reform-driven state. Its inclusion in dialogues such as:

The G20 Employment Working Group

The Regional Conference on Migration (Abu Dhabi Dialogue)

⁶⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Saudi Arabia: Country Profile on Human Trafficking, 2022

⁶⁹ ILO, Saudi Arabia: Implementation of the Wage Protection System, 2020.

⁷⁰ Saudi Vision 2030, Digitization of Labor Governance: Qiwa, Musaned, Absher, 2021

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (KSA), Bilateral Labor Agreements with Sending Countries, 2023.

⁷² ILO, Occupational Safety Training in the GCC: Saudi Arabia Country Report, 2022.

⁷³ UN Global Compact, Participants from Saudi Arabia, 2023.

...underscores the Kingdom's role as a credible voice in regional and global labor governance⁷⁴.

Saudi Arabia as a Regional Model in Worker Protection

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has emerged in recent years as a pioneering force in the Middle East when it comes to the protection of labor rights and the promotion of decent work conditions.

How the Kingdom Has Emerged as a Leading Example in the Middle East for Labor Rights Protection

Saudi Arabia's ascension as a regional model for labor protection is the result of multifaceted strategies encompassing legal reforms, institutional strengthening, digitization, and a focus on the rights and dignity of workers. Several elements distinguish the Saudi approach in the Middle Eastern context.

Comprehensive Legal Frameworks

The Saudi Labor Law, with its amendments in 2015 and 2021, has been at the forefront of reforms ensuring clarity in labor contracts, setting minimum wage guidelines, enforcing timely wage payments, and safeguarding against unjust termination. These amendments brought Saudi legislation into closer alignment with international labor standards, making it one of the most advanced in the Gulf region⁷⁵

Further, Regulations governing domestic labor issued in 2013 and updated regularly, ensure protection for a sector historically underregulated in the region⁷⁶ Saudi Arabia also implemented detailed bylaws regarding occupational safety, health standards, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Institutional Oversight and Enforcement

The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD) has significantly expanded its inspection and enforcement capabilities. By 2023, over 1.5 million inspection visits were conducted using smart technologies to monitor compliance across various sectors⁷⁷ Platforms such as Qiwa and Musaned are examples of digital systems that promote transparency in hiring, contract management, and rights enforcement — features that are less developed in many neighboring countries⁷⁸

Ending the Abuses of the Kafala System

A major differentiator for Saudi Arabia was its 2021 labor mobility reform, which curtailed the most exploitative elements of the Kafala (sponsorship) system, including the requirement for employer consent to change jobs, travel, or exit the country⁷⁹ This reform stands in stark

⁷⁴ G20 Employment Working Group, Labour Market Reforms in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, 2022.

⁷⁵ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Labour Law Amendments, 2021.

⁷⁶ Saudi Gazette, Regulations on Domestic Workers Announced, 2013.

⁷⁷ HRSD Annual Report, Labor Inspection and Monitoring Statistics, 2023.

⁷⁸ Vision 2030 Portal, Qiwa and Musaned: Enhancing Labor Market Transparency, 2022

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia's Reform of the Kafala System, 2021.

contrast to countries like Kuwait and Bahrain, where similar sponsorship systems are still more restrictive.

According to a 2022 report by Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia's changes have "dramatically shifted the regional conversation around migrant labor rights"⁸⁰

Global Acknowledgment and Benchmarks

Saudi Arabia's progress has been acknowledged in ILO and UN Human Rights Council reports, noting its commitment to labor protection and improved enforcement. In the 2022 Arab Labor Organization (ALO) report, the Kingdom ranked among the top three Arab states in terms of labor rights guarantees⁸¹

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's participation in the G20 Employment Working Group, and its ILO Governing Body membership, reflect its rising global stature in shaping labor rights norms.

Regional Influence and Technical Cooperation

As Saudi Arabia leads by example, it has begun to export its best practices through regional cooperation frameworks, such as:

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) labor market harmonization dialogues.

The Abu Dhabi Dialogue, where Saudi Arabia shares digital labor governance tools with labor-sending and receiving countries⁸².

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's evolving commitment to protecting workers and improving the labor environment in alignment with human rights principles. Through a detailed analysis of legislative reforms, institutional developments, and international cooperation, several critical insights emerged:

Major improvements have been made in wage protection, health insurance, and worker accommodation, contributing to greater labor market transparency and worker well-being⁸³.

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⁸⁰ Amnesty International, Migrant Labor Reform in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia as a Catalyst, 2022

⁸¹ Arab Labor Organization, Annual Labor Rights Index in the Arab States, 2022

⁸² Abu Dhabi Dialogue Secretariat, Gulf Best Practices in Labor Mobility and Governance, 2023.

⁸³ ILO, Saudi Arabia: Progress in Wage Protection and Living Standards, 2022

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