How dependency enables exploitation: lessons from migrant labour systems in the EU and Qatar

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Understanding Employer Dependency

Temporary labour migration schemes play an important role in addressing labour shortages in industries that rely on short-term and flexible employment. Historically, sponsorship systems have been widely used to regulate

migrant labour, linking workers' immigration status to their employment with a sponsoring employer (Cholewinski & Guttman, 2023; Beaugrand & Thiollet, 2023). This discouraged workers from reporting abuses, as dismissal in retaliation may jeopardise their legal status in the destination country. Documented abuses include dangerous working conditions, excessive working hours, and inadequate accommodation (Cholewinski & Guttman, 2023; IOM, 2017; ILO, 2024). Recruitment agencies can further exacerbate this imbalance by demanding disproportionate recruitment fees, leaving workers indebted and economically dependent on their employment to retain it, thereby discouraging them from reporting violations (Cholewinski & Guttman, 2023; Beaugrand & Thiollet, 2023).

Growing awareness of these structural risks has prompted governments to introduce more legal protections for workers. The EU adopted a directive in 2014 targeting seasonal workers, which introduced a clear list of rights that Member States are required to implement through minimum harmonisation. It concerns equal treatment, working conditions, accommodation, social security, collective representation, and access to justice (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014). Qatar addresses this issue through a combination of labour law regulations, principally laws Nos. 14, 17, and 21, with law No. 15 targeting domestic workers (Ministry of Justice of the State of Qatar, 2004, 2015, 2017, 2020). Despite these parallel efforts to regulate seasonal work, scholars and international organisations have reported cases of exploitation, undocumented employment procedures, and an overall trend of underreporting by workers. This highlights the need to reassess existing frameworks and identify which measures are effective and where shortcomings remain.

Sponsorship systems are commonly associated with Gulf countries, while their dependency structures can also be found in European practices (Beaugrand & Thiollet, 2023). This shared dependency, as a source of vulnerability, is the premise for the comparative analysis adopted in this brief, which asks: how do the EU Seasonal Workers Directive and Qatar's national legal framework address migrant workers' dependency on employers, and what lessons can be drawn from their implementation and effectiveness?

The scope is to examine how the EU Seasonal Workers Directive and Qatar's national framework address employer dependency, assessing both their regulatory approaches and practical effectiveness. It seeks to identify which shortcomings persist, informing future policy development. Although the two systems differ in structure and scope, with the EU establishing common rules specifically for seasonal workers and Qatar regulating labour more broadly, they address similar challenges. This comparison does not seek to evaluate equivalent legal frameworks, but rather to identify diverse yet effective measures and their shortcomings to draw lessons for future policymaking.

Employer dependency and labour mobility

One revolutionary safeguard introduced by Qatar was the removal of the No Objection Certificate requirement for changing employers, following the adoption of Law No. 19 of 2020 (ILO, 2026). This was a document issued by the employer allowing workers to change jobs. This is a crucial step because, up to this point, if a worker had experienced abuse, leaving their job without the employer's approval could have resulted in an absconding report, which would have changed the migrant worker's regular status. Otherwise, many workers may be reluctant to stay and report the abuse due to potential retaliation (Beaugrand & Thiollet, 2023). This dependency mechanism may enable violations and abuses, as workers are placed in a position where they cannot report or leave. The EU has addressed this by leaving Member States the discretion to decide whether to allow workers to change employers (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014). However, as the Commission points out, its implementation has not yet reached its full potential, as few migrants seem to take advantage of this right, possibly due to a lack of awareness and the complexity of administrative procedures (2026).

Access to justice and worker representation

For these rights to be enforced, they must be supported by some form of representation and complaint mechanisms. Although migrant workers in Qatar are not allowed to join unions, joint committees have been introduced in 2019, through which migrant workers can elect representatives to participate in discussions with employers (ILO 2022). There is also a complaint mechanism in place, which involves referring claims to the ministry of Labour through a digital platform, which, if not settled, are resolved through litigation (labour law). The EU Directive requires that member states implement complaint procedures, allow representation by a third party, and stress the right to join unions. However, as the implementation of similar mechanisms varies from state to state and linguistic and digital barriers persist, there is very little participation by this specific group of workers in unions, and many violations remain unreported (). This may also be linked to a benefit-cost analysis conducted by workers based on the length of their stay, time, and money (2026). Undergoing a lengthy trial that would last longer than their stay in the country would require them to spend a lot of their time, money, and energy travelling, which may deter workers from reporting abuses.

Recruitment regulation and labour inspections

Lastly, effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are crucial to ensuring the practical implementation of workers' rights and creating accountability. In Qatar, inspections target employment agencies by requiring commercial licenses for recruiting new workers and prohibiting the

demand for additional recruitment fees (Qatar Labour Law no. 14, 2004). The recruitment process is crucial, as lengthy procedures have significant economic consequences for employers (Hooper & Le Coz, 2020). The risk of not establishing safe and speedy recruitment procedures is that workers are either hired illegally or through unlicensed agencies that may engage in exploitative practices. These may include demanding excessive sums of money, leaving migrant workers indebted and unable to stop working for extended periods, and increasing their dependence on their employer. Despite these documented practices, the Directive only provides a rule under art. 21 allowing Member States to decide to make recruitment only possible through public agencies (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014). The Commission, however, emphasises the need for greater bilateral cooperation between the sending and receiving countries to monitor this process and limit unfair practices by intermediaries (2026).

In terms of implementation, a report in 2022 has shown that 54% of low-wage workers were paid to come to Qatar, and no further data has emerged since then on the matter, making it difficult to establish whether rules have been met with uniform implementation and whether it has effectively improved the workers' conditions (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). The Commission claims that licensed intermediaries are usually prohibited in Member States from charging workers, but that abuses from unlicensed intermediaries persist before and during the employment period (2026). Overall, inspections during the employment period remain highly fragmented across Member States (2026). Some implement strict monitoring and unannounced inspections, demonstrating both reactive and proactive systems. Others struggle to coordinate inspections among different authority bodies and to implement them uniformly and frequently (2026). Additionally, workers' lack of reporting deprives monitoring agents of crucial intelligence on recurring employer abuses (2026).

What Needs to be Addressed in the Future

Although the importance of providing information to raise workers' awareness of their rights is recognised, further efforts are needed to ensure its effectiveness. Good practices documented in EU Member States and Qatar offer a potential solution: providing workers with multilingual information, in both digital and non-digital formats, directly upon approval of their applications, without relying on employers who may withhold relevant information (European Commission, 2026; ILO, 2022).

Beyond information gaps, other barriers limit workers' access to complaint mechanisms. Both the European Commission and ILO report low participation and persistent underreporting in the EU and Qatar, respectively (European Commission, 2026; ILO, 2022). Fear of retaliation, income loss, and short employment periods, combined with lengthy procedures, further discourage workers from filing complaints. These obstacles call for

improvements aimed at reducing costs and length of complaint procedures, alongside stronger worker representation mechanisms to facilitate communication and reduce vulnerability to retaliation.

Monitoring mechanisms often rely on worker complaints to identify violations, yet fear of retaliation discourages reporting, creating a vicious cycle in which violations stay unreported (European Commission, 2026). More proactive inspections and stronger worker representation could help identify violations that would otherwise remain unreported.

Furthermore, not all Member States have placed the same importance on the possibility of changing employers (European Commission, 2026). This can be a potential obstacle to reducing dependency if not counterbalanced with effective safeguards.

Lastly, the recruitment process is a crucial moment of the employment cycle that can potentially determine the worker's empowerment or lack thereof for two reasons. More effort is needed from the EU to improve bilateral collaboration with third countries to monitor recruitment agencies and prevent them from indebting workers (European Commission, 2026).

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