Qatar eases exit rules but concerns linger over abuse of domestic workers

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By [Saeed Kamali Dehghan](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/saeedkamalidehghan)

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Domestic workers in [Qatar](https://www.theguardian.com/world/qatar) must give their employers advance notice before leaving the country, in a new policy that campaigners say raises concerns for those trapped in abusive situations.

As pressure mounts on Qatar to tackle labour exploitation ahead of the 2022 World Cup, it [announced last week](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/20/qatar-end-abusive-exit-permits-most-migrant-workers) that it was abolishing restrictions on leaving the country for nearly all migrant workers, who previously had to obtain their employer’s permission.

But the new decision stipulates that the workers are instead required to inform their employer of their intention to leave 72 hours in advance of their departure.

Campaigners are concerned about the implications of the new requirement in a state with 300,000 citizens which [hosts](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_645168/lang--en/index.htm) 175,000 domestic workers – over half of whom are women, mostly from Asia and Africa.

Rothna Begum, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said the new requirement is “quite problematic”, and amounts to “an appeasement to the employers”.

“In doing so, they haven’t really thought through what it means, because it could still be an exit permit through the back door – which means that effectively domestic workers could still be trapped in the country,” she told the Guardian.

The Qatari ministry of interior [tweeted last week](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/concerns-and-confusion-mount-over-impact-qatars-decision-end-exit-permits) that domestic workers who fail to notify their employer will be deprived of “their rights such as financial obligations, travel tickets and return to work again before the lapse of four years from the date of departure.”

The Twitter message has since been deleted, and Qatari officials have denied that domestic workers could face financial penalties over any failures to inform their employers.

“In order to protect the rights of both employers and domestic workers, domestic workers must notify employers at least 72 hours prior to their departure in order to protect their rights and ensure that they receive their financial benefits. However, any reports suggesting financial penalties for workers failing to notify their employer are patently false and misinformed,” a government spokesperson told HRW.

Begum said workers are left feeling confused, and that the requirement suggests to employers that they could say no, or that they may have some control over the workers’ movements.

“Even more problematic”, Begum said, is a worker who wishes “to leave an abusive situation feeling that they have to inform their employer, or workers who are worried about retaliation, who then may face being confined in the home, [because] the employer now knows they want to leave who may then go and take steps to prevent them from leaving.”

Those steps “could include confining them in the household or taking other steps such as, for instance, filing trumped-up charges against them, so they’re really then trapped in the country, because if you have [a] criminal case against you, you’re not allowed to leave the country.”

Nicholas McGeehan, director of [Fair/Square](https://fairsq.org/), a human rights research and advocacy organisation with expertise in migrant workers’ rights, said the new requirement amounts to seeking permission from the employer.

“It’s a serious problem because this has been really well documented how appalling the abuses of domestic workers are … we’re talking about in some cases serious physical, psychological, sexual abuses in Qatar,” he said.

“And you’re talking about relationships of extreme control and domination. The idea that a domestic worker is going to be happy to simply inform their employer that they’re leaving completely neglects the relationships there and the seriousness of the abuses.”

A 2013 Guardian investigation [found](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/revealed-qatars-world-cup-slaves) abuse and exploitation of migrant workers preparing the emirate for the 2022 games. Research by Amnesty in 2014 [alleged](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE22/004/2014/en/) that domestic workers in Qatar had in some cases faced physical and sexual abuse, and in others, treatment that amounted to “forced labour and human trafficking”.

Despite the reforms, Qatar’s controversial kafala visa sponsorship system, which ties migrant workers to their employers, remains intact, according to HRW. It said kafala, under which workers cannot change employers without a certificate, “facilitates the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers”.

Qatar has expressed intentions to reform the system later this year.

Under kafala, Begum said, “if you flee your employer you can be charged with absconding, [and you are] liable to arrest and risk of deportation.”

“Now in the case of a domestic worker, absconding is literally leaving the house of the employer, so you’re living in your employer’s house and the act of escaping your employer can then lead to criminal charges against you,” she said. “That essentially means that a lot of domestic workers may be trapped in their employer’s household because leaving without permission is not allowed.”

Houtan Homayounpour, head of the International Labour Organization project office in Qatar, however, sounded optimistic about the new reforms.

“This is a huge milestone for Qatar,” he said. “With these reforms all workers, with the exception of military personnel and a very small number of staff in key posts, are free to leave Qatar without having to obtain the permission of their employer. Domestic workers now simply have to inform their employer that they will be leaving and do not have to ask for their approval.”

He added: “The removal of exit permits and the introduction of free labour market mobility [in the coming weeks] will practically mark the end of the kafala system in the State of Qatar.”