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My dignity, my rights: kafala sponsorship system and exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

The exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia has become a significant concern in global labour migration discourse. This exploitation is largely attributed to the Kafala sponsorship system, under which employers (Kafeels) assume full control over the employment and immigration status of domestic workers. Such control restricts workers' ability to change employers, leave the country, or exercise basic labour rights, thereby increasing their vulnerability to abuse. This study examines the Kafala system and its role in facilitating the exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Findings indicate that employers use the system to justify breaches of contract, impose excessive workloads, enforce forced labour, assign multiple workstations, confiscate travel documents, and restrict access to phones and the Internet. The study concludes that the authority conferred on employers by the Kafala system underpins these exploitative practices. To mitigate such abuses, the study recommends legislative reforms that limit employer powers under the system, reassessment of the bilateral labour agreements with Saudi Arabia, and strengthen the protection of migrant domestic workers' rights. These measures are critical for safeguarding migrant labour and promoting ethical labour migration practices.

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