



Safeguarding workers' welfare in the Middle East

The Middle East is currently experiencing a remarkable economic surge, marked by significant advancements in construction and technology that have thrust the region onto the global stage. This surge is fueled by the Middle East's visionary commitment to diversify its economic landscape beyond oil dependency. Consequently, the Middle East is rapidly evolving into a global hub for innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable growth, captivating attention from around the world.

In this era of rapid economic expansion, the Middle East stands as a testament to forward-thinking governance. Governments across the region have strategically prioritized infrastructure development, technological innovation, and economic diversification as fundamental pillars of their long-term vision. This comprehensive approach not only strengthens their economic resilience but also positions the Middle East as a pivotal global player, propelling a dynamic and promising future amidst the ever-evolving global landscapes. It is a journey towards sustainable development that promises to leave an enduring impact for years to come.

Amidst this remarkable economic vibrancy, the region recognizes the indispensable role played by migrant workers and acknowledges the significance of this invaluable human capital. Furthermore, the Middle East has taken a proactive stance in addressing the longstanding issues and challenges faced by these workers. In the ensuing discussion, we will delve into some of these challenges and explore the measures being undertaken by the Middle East to rectify them.

Labor exploitation and rights violations

Labor exploitation is a pressing global concern that affects not only the Middle East but also countries worldwide. Migrant workers frequently endure violations of

their labor rights, including extended working hours, inadequate wages, and unsafe working conditions. These issues persist due to gaps in legal protection and insufficient enforcement mechanisms. To address these challenges, significant efforts have been made to strengthen labor laws and regulations, with a focus on ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions, and reasonable working hours. Moreover, there is a strategy in place to improve enforcement mechanisms, holding employers accountable for violations and establishing accessible channels for workers to report abuses without fear of retaliation.

Labor exploitation is a pressing global concern that affects not only the Middle East but also countries worldwide. Migrant workers frequently endure violations of their labor rights, including extended working hours, inadequate wages, and unsafe working conditions.

Employer-linked migration systems and mobility constraints

The practice of employer-linked migration systems that restrict workers' mobility is not limited to specific regions and is a global issue. Such systems can lead to conditions akin to forced labor, as they typically mandate worker reliance on employer consent for job changes or leaving the host country. To tackle this problem, various initiatives and labor reforms have been undertaken to either replace or amend these systems, with the goal of providing workers with increased freedom of movement and the capacity to switch employers without unwarranted constraints.

Delayed or non-payment of wages

Delayed or non-payment of wages is a pervasive issue primarily affecting blue-collar workers worldwide, jeopardizing their financial stability and their ability to meet basic needs. To tackle this challenge, a robust approach has been adopted. Strict wage protection systems have been established, compelling employers to ensure timely wage disbursement. Furthermore, penalties for non-compliance have been introduced as a deterrent. Workers are provided with transparent payroll information, and accessible avenues have been created for them to report wage-related grievances promptly.

Lack of occupational health and safety

Ensuring occupational health and safety is a global concern, particularly in industries like construction and manufacturing. Workers often face hazardous conditions without adequate safety measures. To address this issue, a comprehensive approach has been implemented. Occupational health and safety regulations have been rigorously enforced, accompanied by regular inspections to monitor compliance. Employers are required to provide appropriate safety training, equip workers with necessary safety gear, and conduct hazard assessments to minimize workplace accidents and mitigate long-term health issues.

Inadequate accommodation and living conditions

Inadequate accommodation and living conditions are widespread concerns for migrant workers, impacting their health and well-being on a global scale. To address this issue, a proactive approach has been taken. Housing standards have been established and are rigorously enforced to ensure that workers are provided with safe and decent living conditions. Employers are encouraged to provide suitable accommodations, thereby alleviating overcrowding and improving the overall quality of living for these individuals. ➤

Delayed or non-payment of wages is a pervasive issue primarily affecting blue-collar workers worldwide, jeopardizing their financial stability and their ability to meet basic needs

Limited access to legal recourse

Limited access to legal recourse is a challenge faced by workers globally, hindering them from pursuing resolutions for workplace grievances due to language barriers, lack of awareness regarding their rights, and concerns about potential reprisals. To address this issue effectively, a multifaceted approach has been implemented. Accessible legal aid services have been established to provide guidance in multiple languages, ensuring that workers have the necessary support to navigate legal processes. Additionally, comprehensive educational initiatives have been introduced to inform workers about their rights and protections. Furthermore, strong measures are in place to safeguard whistleblowers from any form of retaliation, thereby promoting a culture of accountability and fairness.

Cultural and social challenges

Navigating the cultural and social challenges that arise from a workforce with diverse cultural backgrounds can be complex, potentially resulting in feelings of isolation and mental health issues among workers. To address this multifaceted concern, a holistic approach has been adopted. Cultural integration programs, along with orientation sessions, have been implemented to facilitate workers' adjustment to their new environment. These initiatives not only help them adapt but also cultivate a sense of belonging and community. Additionally, support networks have been established to provide workers with the necessary resources and assistance to navigate the challenges associated with cultural differences, ultimately promoting their overall well-being and integration.

Discrimination and harassment

Promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity is crucial in addressing discrimination and harassment related to factors such as nationality, ethnicity, or gender. This involves the implementation of anti-discrimination policies, setting clear behavioral expectations in the workplace, and launching awareness campaigns to educate both employees and employers about the significance of embracing diversity and cultivating a welcoming atmosphere. Additionally, robust mechanisms for reporting and swiftly addressing incidents of discrimination or harassment have been established to ensure a safer and more equitable working environment for everyone.

Accessible legal aid services have been established to provide guidance in multiple languages, ensuring that workers have the necessary support to navigate legal processes

Grievance system

Establishing a robust grievance system within workplaces is paramount for fostering a culture of transparency and accountability. By providing avenues such as welfare forums, hotlines, and anonymous reporting systems, employees are empowered to voice concerns without fear of reprisal, ensuring their welfare is prioritized. It is essential for organizations to prioritize these systems as integral components of their worker welfare strategy, ensuring diligent implementation and accessibility for all employees. Ultimately, a well-established grievance system not only safeguards employee rights but also contributes to a harmonious and productive work environment where grievances are addressed promptly and effectively.

While challenges persist globally, organizations within the region are increasingly taking proactive steps to set a positive example in the realm of workers' welfare. However, there remains a considerable amount of work yet to be accomplished in this field. Moving forward, it is crucial to not only define strategies but also to translate them into tangible actions within the workplace. Practical measures must be implemented, coupled with regular compliance reviews, to ensure their effectiveness in safeguarding the well-being of workers. This includes a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the protection and rights of all workers in the workplace. ●

By **Daniel Gribbin**, Director, Climate and Sustainability Leader and **Dina Fakh**, Partner, Worker Welfare Leader, Deloitte Middle East

Navigating the cultural and social challenges that arise from a workforce with diverse cultural backgrounds can be complex, potentially resulting in feelings of isolation and mental health issues among workers