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LABOUR MIGRATION FROM MYANMAR TO GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) COUNTRIES:

Challenges, Risks, Protections,
and Policy Gaps

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have long been major destinations for migrant workers, with foreign nationals comprising a significant portion of the workforce.

The six GCC member states—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—are among the world's largest recipients of migrant workers, with an estimated 30 million individuals employed across various sectors.

Many of these workers, particularly in hospitality and construction, come from countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. While Myanmar workers represent a smaller share of the overall migrant workforce, their presence is steadily growing. The demographic composition of Myanmar migrant workers in the GCC is evolving, reflecting diverse educational backgrounds, socio-economic conditions, geographical origins, religious beliefs, and ethnicities. They are primarily employed in hospitality, construction, manufacturing, and domestic services—sectors characterised by labour-intensive jobs and, often, poor working conditions.

This brief examines the challenges, risks, and protections surrounding Myanmar migrant workers in the GCC and the policy gaps that must be addressed to better safeguard their rights.

Background: Myanmar's labour migration

Migration in search of employment has long been a vital livelihood strategy for the people of Myanmar, helping families and communities cope with periods of economic hardship and political instability. More than four years after the military coup in February 2021, the country continues to face escalating political turmoil, economic decline, widespread armed conflict, and the looming threat of forced conscription. These conditions have driven millions to seek opportunities abroad as a means of survival.

The crisis is further compounded by Myanmar's heightened vulnerability to natural disasters, including floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and landslides.^{1,2,3} On March 28, a powerful earthquake struck along the Sagaing Fault, killing thousands of people and devastating communities across six regions and states of Myanmar; Sagaing, Mandalay, Magway, Bago, Shan, and Naypyidaw. The UN estimates that the earthquakes have affected more than 17 million people (33% of the total population).^{4,1} As of 7 May, 3,791 people have died, 5,106 have been injured, and 88 remain missing in six regions and states of Myanmar.^{5,1}

The disaster also disrupted economic activities, including the garment sector, with the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA) reporting that approximately 100,000 garment factory workers, mostly from local production and home textile, were also impacted as they could not work due to the suspension of production facility operations.^{6,1}

Currently, more than 10% of the Myanmar labour force is working abroad, with approximately 2.44 million Myanmar documented migrant workers employed in Thailand and Malaysia alone.^{7,1} Other main destination countries include Singapore, China, Japan and Korea.

According to the World Bank, an estimated USD 1.5 billion was remitted by Myanmar migrants in 2023, approximately 2% of Myanmar's GDP. This estimate does not include millions that are informally remitted through brokers or hand-carried back home.^{8,1} The high costs, complexity, and lengthy procedures associated with formal recruitment through licensed agencies have led many migrant workers to rely on unlicensed brokers or pursue irregular migration channels. These informal networks, which predate modern labour migration management systems, continue to facilitate labour migration movement in the absence of accessible and efficient legal pathways. However, the involvement of unscrupulous intermediaries, coupled with limited access to accurate and impartial information, significantly increases migrants' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

11 UNDRR (2021). Disaster Risk Reduction in Myanmar Status Report 2020. <https://www.undrr.org/media/48533/download?startDownload=20250404>

21 IFRC (2022). Myanmar: IFRC Country Plan. https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Myanmar_Country_Plan_2022.pdf

31 SIPRI (2024). Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet: Myanmar. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/01_sipri-nupi_fact_sheet_myanmar_may_0.pdf

41 UN (2025). Myanmar: UN chief calls for urgent access as quake toll mounts. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1161841#:~:text=Millions%20in%20desperate%20need,dignity%20of%20women%20and%20girls>

51 GNLM (2025). Mandalay quake toll hits 3,791 as global aid flows in. https://cdn.digitalagencybangkok.com/file/client-cdn/gnlm/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/8_May_25_gnlm.pdf

61 Just Style (2025). Myanmar earthquake impacts 100,000 garment workers. <https://www.just-style.com/news/myanmar-earthquake-impacts-100000-garment-workers/>

71 Ministry of Labour Thailand (September 2024) and Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia (September 2023).

81 ILO (2024). TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note Myanmar. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/QBN%20Q3%202024_MYANMAR_final.pdf

Migration pathways and challenges of Myanmar migrant workers to GCC

Workers from Myanmar migrate to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries through two main pathways. The first route, where individuals obtain a passport for visit (PV) from Myanmar and a visitor visa from the destination country, and then seek employment after arrival. The second is a formal recruitment process, carried out under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the governments of Myanmar and the destination country. In this formal channel, workers are required to obtain a passport for job (PJ) from Myanmar and a valid work permit issued by the host country. Regardless of the pathway, workers often rely on employment agencies or brokers to facilitate the process and each route presents its own set of challenges.

Challenges faced by Myanmar migrant workers using the Passport for Visit (PV) to seek employment in GCC countries.

Due to the high costs, complexity, and lengthy procedures associated with formal recruitment, most Myanmar migrant workers to the GCC choose this route. Once they secure a job offer from a local employer, they go through the process of having the employer sponsor them for a work visa. As a result of many workers opting for this route, Myanmar authorities have imposed restrictions on citizens leaving the country on visitor visas.

- **Flight denials:** Since August 2024, authorities have been denying conscription-age young adults, particularly men, from boarding flights at Yangon Airport, citing incomplete documentation.^{9,10,11,12} In October 2024, it was reported that an increasing number of young travellers were turned away at Myanmar's Yangon International Airport despite holding valid passports and travel documents for their trips abroad. These individuals were denied boarding without clear explanations from airport authorities.¹³

In addition to pre-departure challenges, individuals travelling on visitor visas in search of employment face significant risks on arrival in destination countries, including;

- **Legal and immigration risks:** Working with a passport for visit (PV) without a proper work visa violates immigration laws, potentially leading to detention, fines, and permanent bans from re-entry into destination countries.^{14, 15}

9 RFA (2024). Myanmar junta authorities prevent young adults from leaving the country by air. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/junta-authorities-prevent-young-adults-from-leaving-country-by-air-08092024155342.html>

10 The Irrawaddy (2024). Myanmar's Junta Has Tightened Its Conscription Noose at Airports. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-junta-has-tightened-its-conscription-noose-at-airports.html>

11 Mizzima (2024). Myanmar junta tightens the screws in conscription drive. <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/08/20/13020>

12 RFA (2024). Junta stops 50 young people from departing Yangon airport in single day. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/junta-young-people-blocked-yangon-airport-08232024150243.html>

13 Mizzima (2024). Young travellers denied boarding at Yangon International Airport despite valid documents. <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/10/17/15137>

14 Muhami (2024). Accepting a Job or Looking for Employment While on a Visit Visa in the UAE. https://muhamiaa.com/articles/accepting-a-job-or-looking-for-employment-while-on-a-visit-visa-in-the-uae/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

15 Gulf Labour (n.d). Gulf Labour: Do Not Work While on a Tourist Visa as it is illegal. https://gulf-labour.com/working-while-on-a-tourist-visa-illegal/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- **Lack of worker protections:** Without a proper work visa, migrants are not legally entitled to labour rights, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and abuse without legal recourse.¹⁶
- **Unsafe working conditions:** Migrant workers without legal status may be subjected to hazardous work environments, including exposure to extreme temperatures, without adequate safety measures or protections.¹⁷

However, even for legally employed Myanmar migrant workers, the ongoing crisis at home has placed many, particularly male migrant workers, in a difficult position. To avoid conscription, they may feel compelled to accept informal and therefore often exploitative employment in the GCC, with poor wages or working conditions.

The official channel: passport for job (PJ) under MoU challenges

While formal recruitment can provide a more secure pathway, it is often hindered by high costs, slow processing times, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. In recent years, Myanmar's military government, the State Administration Council (SAC), has attempted to strengthen diplomatic ties with the GCC to facilitate labour migration through official channels.^{18,19} However, new restrictions have increased the complexity and unpredictability of the migration process in several areas.

- **Mandatory remittances:** In September 2023 the Myanmar Ministry of Labour mandated that migrant workers abroad must remit at least 25% of their monthly salary to their families in Myanmar²⁰ through official banking channels, Remittance Business License (RBL) holders, or international money transfer services connected to banks, prohibiting transfer through illegal Hundi systems, which are the most commonly used informal money transfer mechanism within and to Myanmar. In this system, a sender provides money to a broker, who deducts a fee either directly or through exchange rate differences. A recipient in Myanmar then receives the equivalent amount in Myanmar Kyats (MMK) within their community.²¹ This mandatory remittance can be made monthly or quarterly, with at least 25% of the total earnings required to be sent back each quarter. This requirement is enforced under Section 31 (b) of the Overseas Employment Law, under Order No. 108/2024, issued on 28 August 2024. Failure to do so would result in workers being prohibited from leaving the country for short-term employment, and ineligible for Overseas Worker Identification Cards (OWIC)²² or passport renewals.²³

¹⁶ The Guardian (2024). 'Many migrant workers will die': the likely human cost of awarding the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/11/world-cup-2034-migrant-workers-saudi-arabia-exploitation-abuse?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁷ The Guardian (2024). Migrant workers exposed to deadly 45C temperatures in Gulf – report. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/nov/05/migrant-workers-exposed-deadly-45c-temperatures-gulf-human-rights-report?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁸ GNLM (2024). Myanmar pursues MoUs for sending workers to Middle East <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/myanmar-pursues-mous-for-sending-workers-to-middle-east>

¹⁹ GNLM (2024). UAE Ambassador calls on MoL Union Minister. <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/uae-ambassador-calls-on-mol-union-minister>

²⁰ ILO (2024). TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note Myanmar. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/QBN%20Q3%202024_MYANMAR_final.pdf

²¹ COAR (2023). Hundi Networks: Transferring into Post-Coup Myanmar. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/hundi-networks-transferring-post-coup-myanmar>

²² An Overseas Worker Identification Card (OWIC) is a mandatory document issued by the Ministry of Labour in Myanmar that all individuals legally travelling abroad for employment must possess, essentially acting as a registration card for migrant workers leaving the country to work overseas, required for anyone with a 'PJ' type passport intended for job purposes and is typically valid for five years.

²³ GNLM (2024). MoL Union Minister directs 25% of workers' remittances via official channels. <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/mol-union-minister-directs-25-of-workers-remittances-via-official-channels/>

The employment agencies are required to facilitate the money transfer processes and submit these monthly remittances to the Myanmar Ministry of Labour as monthly reports without fail. Yet, the initial measure proved ineffective. In response, the Ministry of Labour temporarily suspended over 70 licensed agencies that failed to provide proof of the required 25% wage remittance by migrant workers, with suspensions to be lifted pending full compliance.^{1,2}

- **Income tax:** Effective since October 2023, a 2% income tax on foreign earnings was ordered to be paid in foreign currency.³ Under Section 22(c) of the Amended Union Tax Law 2023, non-resident Myanmar citizens can offset taxes paid abroad against the tax payable in Myanmar, provided the applicable taxes on their income have already been paid in the foreign country. Myanmar has signed 'Avoidance of Double Taxation Agreements' with India, Laos, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam, but these agreements do not include any countries in the GCC.⁴
- **Stricter documentation:** Since May 2024, new passport applications and renewals require a biometric 'smart card' for approval and cross-border travel.⁵
- **Travel restrictions:** In June 2024, the Myanmar military implemented new regulations prohibiting the conversion of a passport for job (PJ) to a passport for visit (PV). Previously, due to the lengthy and complex formal recruitment process associated with PJ passports, many workers opted to convert their PJ passports to PV passports and travel on visitor visas. This policy change was introduced as a measure to prevent men of the conscription age from circumventing mandatory military service, further restricting their ability to seek employment opportunities abroad through alternative channels.⁶
- **Ban on signing work contracts:** In August 2024, workers with PJ passports who were entitled to work overseas, particularly those in the 23–32 age group, faced restrictions from leaving the country at Yangon International Airport if they could not provide adequate documentation.⁷
- **Military recall of overseas workers:** In November 2024, Myanmar's Ministry of Labour ruled that it could recall overseas workers for military service, holding employment agencies responsible for enforcing the return of workers if ordered.⁸

1 ILO (2024). TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note Myanmar. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/QBN%20Q3%202024_MYANMAR_final.pdf

2 Mizzima (2024). Myanmar junta pressures overseas employment agencies over worker remittances. <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/07/15/11753>

3 GNLM (2023). Income tax on salaries of Myanmar nationals working abroad must be paid in foreign currency from October. <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/income-tax-on-salaries-of-myanmar-nationals-working-abroad-must-be-paid-in-foreign-currency-from-october>

4 Internal Revenue Department (n.d.). Avoidance of Double Taxation Agreements of Union of Myanmar. <https://www.ird.gov.mm/en/content/avoidance-double-taxation-agreements-union-myanmar>

5 RFA (2024). Myanmar now requires biometric 'smart card' to exit country by border. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/smart-card-border-pass-05202024164811.html>

6 Mizzima (2024). Junta imposes stricter rules on passport-type conversions amid rising emigration tensions. <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/06/17/10901>

7 Mizzima (2024). Myanmar junta tightens the screws in conscription drive <https://eng.mizzima.com/webpkgcache.com/doc/-/s/eng.mizzima.com/2024/08/20/13020>

8 RFA (2024). Myanmar junta can order migrant workers home to fight, agency says. <https://www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2024/11/15/myanmar-workers-conscription>

- **Expanded work contract prohibitions:** In January 2025, men between the ages of 18 and 35 seeking employment abroad with PJ passports were prohibited from departing. Additionally, those with previously signed contracts are being denied OWIC and sent back from the airport.⁹ This regulation could lead to an outflow of female migrant workers replacing their male family members. If so, many of them are likely to work in the GCC countries as domestic migrant workers or in other low-skilled jobs, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

According to IHRB's report on "Respecting the Human Rights of Women Migrant Workers During Recruitment"¹⁰ women migrant workers face systemic discrimination, restrictive migration policies, and gendered labour markets that expose them to exploitation throughout the migration cycle. Many endure recruitment debt, low wages, job deception, and coercive working conditions, particularly in domestic work, where they are excluded from labour protections and vulnerable to abuse. Financial burdens and remittance obligations force them to tolerate wage theft and mistreatment, while language barriers and lack of legal awareness prevent access to essential services. Upon return, they may face compulsory health tests, social stigma, family breakdown, and inadequate reintegration support, pushing many toward unsafe re-migration. Weak coordination between origin and destination countries further limits access to justice, leaving women trapped in cycles of precarity and abuse.¹¹

Challenges faced by Myanmar recruitment agencies deploying workers

These newly imposed migration restrictions also create significant obstacles for recruitment agencies in Myanmar, leading to increased administrative burdens, limited worker mobility, and fewer job placement opportunities. These challenges, in turn, have a direct impact on the rights of migrant workers and companies should be aware of these issues and take them into account when conducting their due diligence.

- **Failure to comply with remittance requirements:** Recruitment agencies are under significant pressure to ensure that workers remit 25% of their wages through designated channels, as failure to comply could result in the agency's suspension. The agencies contend that they cannot force workers to remit money to their families; they can only explain the situation and report back.¹²
- **Restricted access to documentation and recruitment hurdles:** The additional requirement for biometric 'smart cards' and the ban on converting passport for job (PJ) to passport for visit (PV) (PV) create challenges for them by causing delays

⁹ Myanmar Labour News (2025). <https://www.myanmarlabournews.com/posts/>

(Burmese Version)

¹⁰ IHRB (2024). Respecting the human rights of women migrant workers during recruitment: A short report for businesses. https://ihrb-org.files.svdcn.com/production/assets/uploads/reports/ShortReport_Respecting_the_Rights_of_Women_Migrant_Workers_During_Recruitment.pdf?dm=1726490077

¹¹ IHRB (2024). Respecting the human rights of women migrant workers during recruitment: A short report for businesses. https://ihrb-org.files.svdcn.com/production/assets/uploads/reports/ShortReport_Respecting_the_Rights_of_Women_Migrant_Workers_During_Recruitment.pdf?dm=1726490077

¹² Mizzima (2024). Myanmar junta pressures overseas employment agencies over worker remittances. <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/07/15/11753>

in processing worker applications and limiting options for workers facing delays in securing overseas employment, ultimately complicating the recruitment process.

- **Uncertainty and lack of transparency:** The lack of clear written directives from authorities creates uncertainty for the agencies, leaving them without proper guidance on managing ongoing applications and contracts and complicating their operations.
- **Risk of military recall and workforce disruptions:** Recruitment agencies have also expressed burden due to the responsibility of managing conscription issues for their workers, adding immense pressure to their operations. Even after they facilitate the workers' employment abroad, the military retains the authority to recall them at any time, creating significant uncertainty. If workers are suddenly ordered to return for military service, it will create serious complications for agencies. And if they refuse to comply, the agencies are left in a difficult position. This uncertainty threatens not only their ability to operate but also the trust and security of the workers relying on them.^{13, 14}
- **Limitations on male workers and workforce shortages:** Myanmar recruitment agencies further encounter considerable challenges in placing male workers abroad, mainly due to restrictions on work contracts and a rising number of flight denials for individuals aged 18 to 35. These limitations reduce the pool of available candidates, as many employers set age caps at 35 for eligibility, further complicating the agencies' ability to secure employment opportunities for these workers.¹⁵
- **Restricting Agencies to 50 Worker Requests Per Month:** The Myanmar Ministry of Labour under the SAC has announced new restrictions on the number of job offer requests that licensed overseas employment agencies may submit to the Ministry. Under the revised policy, agencies are now only permitted to submit requests for up to 50 workers per month for employment in Thailand under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) system¹⁶ and 15 for Japan, 10 for South Korea, 5 for Singapore, 20 for Malaysia and 10 workers per agency per month for all other countries.¹⁷ However, some agencies reported delays in the approval process and the number of workers approved monthly to be inconsistent.

13 RFA (2024). Myanmar junta can order migrant workers home to fight, agency says. <https://www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2024/11/15/myanmar-workers-conscription/>
 14 Irrawaddy (2024). Junta Leans on Labor Agencies to Bring Conscripts Home. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/junta-leans-on-labor-agencies-to-bring-conscripts-home.html>

15 Myanmar Labour News (2024). Foreign employment agencies having difficulties finding workers due to age limit restriction. <https://myanmarlabournews.com/en/posts/foreign-employment-agencies-having-difficulties-finding-workers-due-to-age-limit-restriction>

16 Myanmar Labour News (2025). Military Council Limits Each Agency to Submitting Only 50 Worker Requests Per Month. <https://myanmarlabournews.com/en/posts/military-council-limits-each-agency-to-submitting-only-50-worker-requests-per-month>

17 Myanmar Labour News (2025). Only 10 Workers Per Month Allowed for All Others Except For Five Countries. <https://myanmarlabournews.com/en/posts/only-10-workers-per-month-allowed-for-all-others-except-for-five-countries>

Exploitation risks and workplace conditions in GCC countries

Available information on the working conditions and exploitation faced by Myanmar migrant workers in the GCC region can predominantly be found regarding female

domestic workers.^{18, 19, 20, 21, 22} Additionally, testimonies shared by the workers themselves, particularly on TikTok and other social media platforms, provide further insight into their experiences.

These reports highlight issues such as exploitation by recruitment agents, mistreatment by employers, and harsh working conditions, including excessively long hours, irregular sleep and meal schedules, inadequate food, the requirement to work in multiple households, sexual harassment, wage theft, delayed payments, low wages relative to the workload, and passport confiscation.

In Oman, where Myanmar does not have an embassy or consulate, only a designated Non-Resident Ambassador based in Saudi Arabia, Myanmar female migrant domestic workers, who are not officially recognised as workers under Myanmar Law, face significant challenges in seeking assistance and remediation for their grievances. However, there is very little information on the experiences of Myanmar migrant workers in other sectors within the GCC.



¹⁸ Frontier Myanmar (2024). No protection for Myanmar domestic workers in Oman. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/no-protection-for-myanmar-domestic-workers-in-oman/>

¹⁹ DVB (2024). Myanmar women seeking work abroad deceived by job agencies. <https://english.dvb.no/myanmar-women-seeking-work-abroad-deceived-by-job-agencies/>

²⁰ BNI (2023). Reports Reveal Sexual Abuse and Arbitrary Beatings of Domestic Workers in Oman, Including Those from Rakhine. <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/reports-reveal-sexual-abuse-and-arbitrary-beatings-domestic-workers-oman-including-those>

²¹ BHRRC (2023) Oman: Myanmar domestic workers report withheld passports & difficulty changing employers, while agencies fail to take action. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/oman-myanmar-domestic-workers-have-their-passports-withheld-by-brokers-and-report-difficulty-changing-employers-leading-to-human-rights-abuse-incl-forced-labour>

²² Ibid.

Recent GCC country social protection schemes

In recent years, several GCC countries have undertaken legal reforms to enhance social protection measures for migrant workers, reflecting a growing recognition of the need to improve their working conditions and rights. These initiatives include extending employment injury and unemployment insurance, broadening access to health insurance, and reevaluating end-of-service entitlements. While the implementation of these measures varies across countries, Myanmar migrant workers in formal employment appear to be generally included in these social protection reforms.

- **Kuwait:** In 2021, Kuwait introduced compulsory health insurance for migrant workers in the private sector (Dhaman).^{23,24}
- **Bahrain:** The establishment of monthly contributions to an end-of-service indemnity (EOSI) fund within the government agency, the social insurance organization (Law No. 14/2022) aims to provide migrant workers with secure, timely, and traceable access to their financial entitlements, while ensuring greater transparency, accountability, and protection against employer misconduct.

Migrants' healthcare is covered through mandatory employer-funded health insurance under Law No. 23/2018²⁵. The purpose of this system is to ensure that all migrant workers have equitable access to healthcare, protect them from high medical costs, support public health through early intervention, and standardize healthcare provisions across employers.

- **Qatar:** The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund to disburse unpaid dues and benefits by employers, including wages and EOSI, following court decisions for migrant workers' access to healthcare in Qatar to be covered through mandatory employer-funded private health insurance (Law No. 22/2021).²⁶
- **UAE:** Introduction of voluntary pensions to replace EOSI for private sector employees and free zones²⁷ (COM No. 96/2023).

Mandatory private employee-funded unemployment insurance for national and migrant workers in all sectors (Federal Decree Law No. 13/2022).

23 ILO (2024). New reforms for the extension of social protection to migrant workers in the GCC countries. <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Infographic%203%20recent%20reforms.pdf>

24 Arab Times (2021). Mandatory 'health' starts at KD 130. <https://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/mandatory-health-starts-at-kd-130/>

25 ILO (2024). New reforms for the extension of social protection to migrant workers in the GCC countries. <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Infographic%203%20recent%20reforms.pdf>

26 Ibid.

27 The UAE offers investors more than 40 multidisciplinary free zones, in which expatriates and foreign investors can have full ownership of companies. These zones are characterized by their highly efficient infrastructure and distinct services that facilitate smooth workflows, saving businesses considerable time and effort.

Establishment of Workers' Scheme as an employer-funded insurance alternative to the Banking Guarantee System to protect the rights and financial dues of private sector and domestic workers.²⁸

- **Oman:** In 2023, a new social protection system was launched in the Sultanate of Oman to facilitate the gradual inclusion of migrant workers in national social insurance cash benefits for maternity and paternity, sickness and employment injury insurance. It also establishes a national provident fund to replace the current EOSI system (Sultani Decree No. 52/2023).^{29, 30}
- **Saudi Arabia:** In 2025, Saudi Arabia announced the new National Policy for the Elimination of Forced Labour committing to eradicate all forms of forced labour. It reflects the Kingdom's commitment to this goal, as stipulated in Article 28 of the Basic Law of Governance issued by Royal Decree No. (1/90) dated 27/08/1412AH, which states "The state shall facilitate employment opportunities for every capable person and enact laws that protect both the employee and the employer." In line with this commitment, several laws and regulations were issued to safeguard rights, eliminate forced labour, and prohibit its practice.³¹



28 ILO (2024). New reforms for the extension of social protection to migrant workers in the GCC countries. <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Infographic%203%20recent%20reforms.pdf>

29 Ibid.

30 ILO (2023). Far-reaching reforms in Oman set new benchmark for social protection in the region. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/far-reaching-reforms-oman-set-new-benchmark-social-protection-region>

31 HRSD (2025). The National Policy for the Elimination of Forced Labor in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. <https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/sites/default/files/2025-02/The%20National%20Policy%20for%20the%20Elimination%20of%20Forced%20Labor%20in%20the%20Kingdom%20of%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>

Policy responses of major destination countries in Asia to the evolving migration patterns of Myanmar workers

As migration patterns for Myanmar workers continue to evolve, countries across the region have implemented policy adjustments to address the challenges faced by Myanmar migrant workers. These measures reflect the shifting dynamics of migration amid Myanmar's ongoing political and economic instability. While some policies prioritise the protection and welfare of Myanmar migrant workers, others have inadvertently heightened their vulnerability.

- **Singapore:** In February 2025, Singapore's Ministry of Manpower announced that due to Myanmar's ongoing state of emergency, martial law in several townships, and increasing travel restrictions, employment agencies were urged to stay informed about conditions in labour-sending countries. They are advised to update employers on potential travel challenges, assist if needed, and consider recruiting workers from a broader range of approved countries to enhance business resilience and continuity.³²
- **South Korea:** In January 2025, the Korean Ministry of Justice announced that it would grant legal residence permits to Myanmar citizens facing difficulties renewing their passports while working in South Korea. Currently, more than 6,000 Myanmar citizens living in the Republic of Korea are using the humanitarian (G1-99) visa.^{33, 34}
- **Thailand:** In December 2024, Thailand's Department of Employment announced updates to the work permit renewal process for migrant workers from the CLMV. The revised process includes a new requirement for approval from the worker's country of origin.³⁵ This change has raised concerns among labour rights advocates and migrant workers themselves, who warn that it could increase the risk of conscription for millions of Myanmar nationals in Thailand.³⁶

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an estimated 4.1 million Myanmar nationals reside in Thailand. As of 1 January 2025, data from Thailand's Department of Employment shows that 2,270,382 Myanmar nationals are registered migrant workers, the highest number in recent years. They account for 68% of all registered migrants in Thailand. Among them, 88% (2,002,770 workers) obtained legal status through in-country registration windows under Cabinet Resolutions, which permit undocumented workers to remain in the country. In contrast, only 11% (261,010 workers) entered through the formal MoU system.

32 Singapore Ministry of Manpower (2025). EA Alert: Reminder to monitor situation in labour-sending countries. <https://www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/employment-agencies/ea-alerts/2025/ea-alert-040225-ea-alert-reminder-to-monitor-situation-in-laboursending-countries.pdf>

33 DVB (2025). Myanmar citizens whose passports expire in Korea will be granted extended residency permits. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsPXHC_hkpo (Burmese Version)

34 Mizzima (2025). South Korea says it will not allow passport renewals with Myanmar's NUG approval. <https://eng-mizzima-com.webpkgcache.com/doc/-/s/eng-mizzima.com/2024/12/21/17557>

35 Thailand Ministry of Labour, Department of Employment (2024). 5 Basic Steps for Applying for Work Permit Renewal for Workers of 4 Nationalities: Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, and Vietnamese. https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1021836379982817&id=100064693926438&rid=FyXxQPtBsP8y7fx3

36 RFA (2025). New Thai rule gives Myanmar junta greater power to block workers: activists. <https://www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2025/02/11/myanmar-thai-re-registration-02112025/>

- **Malaysia:** In March 2024, Malaysia launched a “Migrant Repatriation Program”, where undocumented migrants were encouraged to voluntarily surrender themselves to authorities with the promise of being repatriated to their home countries instead of being detained, aiming to manage the large population of undocumented workers without resorting to harsh enforcement measures. However, many Myanmar migrants fear being arrested on their return or forced to serve in the military. It is estimated that about 300,000 of the nearly 800,000 Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia are undocumented.³⁷
- **Japan:** Following the 2021 Myanmar military coup, the Japanese government allowed Myanmar residents to extend their stay for six months, with the possibility of extension³⁸, under a “Designated Activities” visa, issuing 15,172 such visas by December 2023. Most of these individuals had entered Japan under a technical intern training visa. While the “Designated Activities” visa process has become more stringent, it remains ongoing.³⁹

Given the growing challenges faced by Myanmar migrant workers, including heightened travel restrictions, conscription risks, and difficulties in renewing documentation, GCC countries play a crucial role in shaping policies that prioritise the protection and welfare of Myanmar migrant workers. Instead of imposing additional barriers that may increase their vulnerability, GCC countries have the opportunity to implement measures that ensure the safety, legal status, and rights of Myanmar migrant workers.

Business responsibility in the GCC supply chain

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), all businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights, with human rights due diligence (HRDD) as a core requirement.

Companies operating in the GCC should pay particular attention to vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, ensuring ethical recruitment practices to prevent exploitation. Many businesses rely on overseas recruitment agencies, but weak legal protections, limited oversight, and a lack of transparency in sending countries create heightened risks, including excessive recruitment fees, forced labour, misleading contracts, retention of identity documents, and debt bondage—all recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as indicators of forced labour.

To address these risks, businesses must integrate HRDD into recruitment processes, ensuring agencies comply with local laws and international standards. Growing regulatory frameworks, such as the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and ILO

³⁷ Frontier Myanmar (2024). Unwanted in Malaysia, Myanmar migrants live in fear. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/unwanted-in-malaysia-myanmar-migrants-live-in-fear/>

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2023). Specified visa: Designated activities (Long Stay for sightseeing and recreation). https://www.mofa.go.jp/ca/fna/page22e_000738.html

³⁹ Japanese Times (2024). Japan fine-tunes issuance of humanitarian visas. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/09/27/japan/politics/moj-myanmar-deportation>

guidelines, hold companies accountable for preventing exploitative hiring practices.⁴⁰

Ethical recruitment is both a business responsibility and strategic advantage, ensuring workforce stability, brand reputation, and legal compliance. The ILO “Training Toolkit on Establishing Fair Recruitment Processes”⁴¹ and the “Fair Recruitment Toolkit in Practice” hosted online by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) Academy provides practical tools and self-paced training to support fair hiring. Designed for HR, procurement, human rights, sustainability, and ethics professionals, these resources help businesses engage suppliers, service providers, and subcontractors while promoting transparent and responsible recruitment.⁴²

The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) has worked for many years to promote the welfare of migrant workers globally. In particular, IHRB has highlighted flawed recruitment processes and, particularly, the payment by workers of recruitment fees as problematic, creating situations of debt bondage that heighten vulnerability to exploitation. IHRB advocates for a recruitment model based on the “Employer Pays Principle”⁴³, which would see these costs paid or reimbursed by the employer. As noted previously, many workers will be using the services of agencies, either going through the regular or irregular pathways. In either case, Myanmar migrant workers are likely paying recruitment costs to secure employment. IHRB’s “Promoting Fair Recruitment & Employment: Guidance Tool for Qatar” also supports fair hiring.⁴⁴ However, given the current situation in Myanmar, meaningful implementation of the Employer Pays Principle is highly unlikely to be achieved without a formal and structured process.

Businesses need to recognize that Myanmar migrant workers may be facing not only traditional risks faced by migrant workers but also political risks and threats to their safety stemming from the ongoing instability back home. Businesses should collaborate with NGOs and civil society organizations to provide legal support, housing, and counselling, ensuring fair and safe working conditions. By proactively addressing recruitment risks and protecting migrant workers’ rights, businesses strengthen ethical labour practices, enhance supply chain integrity, and contribute to sustainable workforce management.

40 Anthesisgroup (2025). How Businesses in the Gulf Can Practice Responsible Recruitment. <https://www.anthesisgroup.com/insights/how-business-es-in-the-gulf-can-practice-responsible-recruitment>

41 ITCILO (2014). Training Toolkit on Establishing Fair Recruitment Processes: Self-guided. <https://www.itcilo.org/courses/training-toolkit-establishing-fair-recruitment-processes>

42 WBCSD (2025). New e-course empowers businesses to strengthen fair recruitment practices. <https://www.wbcsd.org/news/e-course-fair-recruitment-practices/>

43 IHRB (n.d.). The Employer Pays Principle: Part of IHRB’s Responsible Recruitment Gateway. <https://www.ihrb.org/projects/employer-pays-principle>

44 IHRB (2020). Promoting Fair Recruitment and Employment- a guidance tool for hotels in Qatar. <https://www.ihrb.org/resources/report-promoting-fair-recruitment-and-employment-hotels-qatar>

CONCLUSION

The migration of Myanmar workers to GCC countries is largely influenced by economic difficulties, political instability, restrictive domestic policies and heightened vulnerability to natural disasters. While formal recruitment channels offer some protection, high costs and bureaucratic obstacles push many workers toward irregular migration, increasing their exposure to legal risks, exploitation, and unsafe working conditions.

Myanmar's recent policy changes, such as mandatory remittances, taxation on foreign income, stricter documentation requirements, and military recall provisions, have further restricted migration opportunities, particularly for men.

As a result, more women may be pushed into precarious migration, facing heightened risks of exploitation, debt bondage, and abuse, especially in sectors with weaker labour protections.

The current migration situation not only poses significant challenges for workers but also creates difficulties for Myanmar recruitment agencies.

Businesses in the region also bear the responsibility of ensuring ethical recruitment, conducting rigorous human rights due diligence, and safeguarding migrant workers from exploitation within their supply chains. International frameworks, including the UNGPs, CSDDD, and ILO guidelines, emphasize corporate accountability in eliminating exploitative recruitment practices and ensuring workers' rights are upheld. Businesses operating in the GCC must fulfil their human rights obligations by applying ethical recruitment standards, eliminating exploitative fees, and improving working conditions, particularly for workers from high-risk countries like Myanmar.

In response to these challenges, GCC countries have a crucial opportunity to lead by example in safeguarding Myanmar migrant workers' rights and well-being. By enhancing legal frameworks, simplifying access to social protections, and addressing the unique vulnerabilities of migrant workers affected by political instability in Myanmar, the region can establish fairer and more humane labour migration practices, ensuring that Myanmar migrant workers in the GCC can work with dignity, security, and fair treatment.



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COVER IMAGE: 705571228 - August 13, 2017: the women are working on the salt field at dawn. Salt field Hon Khoi in Nha Trang, Viet Nam.