

Qatar’s Fourth Universal Periodic Review: Key Takeaways and Human Rights Implications

Mohammed left his small village in Ghana with a heart full of dreams. He had heard stories of Qatar from the glittering skyline, the promise of better wages, and the chance to provide for his family. His journey, like that of hundreds of thousands of other migrant workers, was one of hope, sacrifice, and resilience.

What is the UPR?

The Universal Periodic Review (or UPR) is a United Nations process where every country’s human rights record is reviewed by other Member States of the United Nations. This happens every few years and allows countries to:

- Share what they’re doing to protect human rights
- Receive recommendations from others
- Commit to improvements

The UPR is overseen by the United Nations Human Rights Council and is one of the only mechanisms where all UN countries are treated equally no matter their status or influence.

Background

Since its first UPR in 2010, Qatar has undertaken several reforms aimed at enhancing human rights protections. Notable advancements have included legislative changes to improve labour conditions and initiatives promoting women’s enhanced participation in public life.

Despite these efforts, concerns remain regarding the full implementation and enforcement of these reforms. In addition, challenges persist in areas such as freedom of expression, association, and the rights of migrant workers, indicating the need for continuous attention and further action.

Cycle Highlights

Ahead of Qatar’s fourth Universal Periodic Review, civil society organisations provided detailed shadow reports highlighting persistent concerns around migrant rights, labour law enforcement, and civic space. Notably, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, Migrant-Rights.org, and the Labor Justice Coalition reported ongoing issues such as wage theft, passport confiscation, lack of independent trade unions, and limited legal protection for domestic workers. The submissions stressed that despite formal reforms, practical barriers to justice along with fear of retaliation remain widespread phenomena.

Civil society and external observers also called for Qatar to ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention and to fully do away with all remaining elements of the Kafala system. Additionally, concerns were raised regarding restrictions on freedom of expression and association, including the absence of a legal framework enabling independent NGOs to operate on the ground. These inputs reinforced many of the recommendations made by reviewing States, adding depth and urgency to the calls for more accountable and inclusive reforms.

What is the Kafala system?

The Kafala system is a sponsorship-based employment framework that has governed the status of migrant workers in many Gulf countries, including Qatar. Under this system:

- Workers must be “sponsored” by their employer to enter and remain in the country
- Employers have significant control over workers’ mobility, including their ability to change jobs, leave the country, or renew their residency permits

This often creates power imbalances and has led to situations of exploitation, such as passport confiscation, wage being withheld, and imposed restrictions on workers trying to leave abusive jobs.

In recent years, Qatar has introduced reforms to reduce the scope of the Kafala system, for instance by allowing workers to change employers without permission needed, and by introducing a non-discriminatory minimum wage. However, some challenges remain and many civil society actors note that elements of the system persist in practice.

During the November 2024 review, Qatar accepted 245 and noted 72 out of the 317 recommendations made by Member States.

What happens after recommendations are made?

When it is a country’s turn to be reviewed through the UPR, it receives recommendations from other United Nations Member States. The country under review then responds to each recommendation and in doing so, has the following choices:

“Accept” it ➤ The country agrees with the recommendation and commits to take action on it.

“Note” it ➤ The country does not fully agree and does not commit to implement the recommendation. This does not necessarily mean it rejects it, but it signals hesitation or disagreement.

“Partially Accept” it or “Pend” it ➤ Sometimes, the country may accept a recommendation in part only or say it needs more time to consider it.

Depending on the response chosen by the country under review, this can help show where the country stands on different issues, and what it is willing, or not, to change.

Recommendations and predominant themes revolved around the following:

- Overall, key
- Labour Rights: Calls for the full implementation of labour reforms, protection of migrant workers, and the abolition of the kafala system.
- Women's Rights: Suggestions to enhance legal protections against domestic violence and to ensure equal rights in matters such as nationality laws.
- Freedom of Expression and Association: Encouragement to amend laws that restrict these freedoms and to support the work of civil society organizations.
- International Treaties: Recommendations to ratify key international human rights instruments, including the Optional Protocols to the ICCPR and the Convention Against Torture.

Member States expressed a broad range of views that, while varying in tone and emphasis, collectively pointed towards a need for deeper structural reform and stronger implementation. The prevailing sentiment thus can be said to have reflected a recognition of Qatar's legislative steps—particularly regarding labor reforms and human rights institutional development—whilst underscoring gaps between policy and practice.

Typically, delegations from Western Europe, North America, and parts of Latin America commended the country's collaboration with international mechanisms, including its extended cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, many of these same States vocalised a wish for greater transparency, legal safeguards for freedom of expression and association, and the elimination of discriminatory practices, particularly against women and migrant workers. In practice, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Australia called for enhanced protection for human rights defenders and journalists, while the United States urged the repeal of legal restrictions that criminalise peaceful dissent and inhibit civic engagement.



At the same time, other States from the Global South—including several from Africa and the Middle East—adopted a more cautious tone or “hands off” approach, often commending Qatar’s development trajectory while encouraging the country to proceed with reform at a pace it deems appropriate. These contributions illustrate not only differing regional norms but also strategic alliances and evolving diplomatic relationships with Qatar, whose global influence has grown notably in recent years through international mediation efforts, investment partnerships, and high-profile hosting of global events.

Spotlight on Migrant Workers

The fourth UPR cycle appropriately reaffirmed that migrant workers remain a central focus of international scrutiny toward Qatar. While previous cycles may have emphasised legislative gaps and structural constraints, this latest round brought forward a more refined and important conversation: one that acknowledged recent reforms but constructively questioned their practical enforcement, impact and sustainability beyond global event cycles, such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

In that sense, Qatar’s introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage, reform of the exit permit system, and initiatives to allow workers to change employers without permission were welcomed as concrete steps in dismantling elements of the kafala system. These steps yearned recognition from several delegations and civil society. On the other hand, States also raised concerns that these reforms, while promising on paper, can fall short in their implementation, particularly due to obstacles such as employer resistance, limited awareness among workers, and weak monitoring mechanisms.

Moreover, the specific situation of domestic workers—who are often excluded from standard labour protections—was raised by both Member States and NGOs, who concretely urged Qatar to extend the scope of existing reforms and ensure legal safeguards for this particularly vulnerable group. In contrast to past cycles, the language of this session was more precise and enforcement-oriented, speaking to a growing demand for measurable progress and accountability beyond legislative goodwill.

Qatar’s Path Forward

Qatar has expressed its commitment to implementing the accepted recommendations in an objective and transparent manner.

As the nation moves forward, the focus will be on translating these commitments into tangible outcomes. This includes:

- Strengthening institutional frameworks to support human rights protections.
- Enhancing collaboration with international bodies and civil society organisations.
- Ensuring that reforms are effectively enforced and that rights holders can access remedies when violations occur.

Qatar's fourth UPR presents an opportunity to build upon past achievements and to address ongoing challenges in the promotion and protection of human rights. Meaningful engagement with international mechanisms, coupled with genuine and concrete domestic implementation efforts, will be crucial in advancing the nation's human rights agenda.

This process also suggested that the international community is increasingly looking beyond reform commitments and now expects Qatar to demonstrate that systems of accountability and redress are functioning—especially for low-wage and vulnerable migrant populations. As the global spotlight shifts toward the upcoming World Social Summit in Doha, expectations are likely to grow that these reforms will lead to lasting change, embedded in both law and institutional practice

QCPD endorses the UPR's outcome and remains committed to supporting these efforts through advocacy, monitoring, and collaboration with stakeholders at all levels, starting with the affected persons and vulnerable groups on the ground.

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