

## Sri Lankan maids face abuse in Gulf: rights group

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Gulf Arab governments, including those of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are failing to curb serious abuses faced by Sri Lankan maids in their countries, a U.S.-based rights group said on Wednesday.

"Governments in the Gulf expose Sri Lankan domestic workers to abuse by refusing to guarantee a weekly rest day, limits to the workday freedom of movement and other rights that most workers take for granted," said Jennifer Turner, a women's rights researcher for Human Rights Watch (HRW).

More than 660,000 Sri Lankan women work in homes abroad, almost 90 percent in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Lebanon, the group said in a statement marking the release of a 131-page report on the treatment of Sri Lankan domestic workers.

HRW said it found that employers routinely confiscate maids' passports and confine them to their workplace, while some also withhold wages for months or years at a time.

Abuses often begin with labour agents in Sri Lanka, who charge heavy fees and often misinform the women about jobs, it said. Once abroad they typically work 16-21 hours a day.

The New York-based watchdog said labour laws in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Lebanon exclude migrant domestic workers from the protection offered to other labour, including limits on work hours, paid holidays and a weekly day of rest.

Human Rights Watch also finds that the Saudi policy, which requires employers to approve exit visas for domestic workers to leave the country, can trap them and increase the risk of abuse.

### STANDARD CONTRACT

The UAE introduced a standard contract for domestic workers this year and last month said it planned to introduce a law to protect their rights. It has also established a special commission to combat human trafficking, which often affects female domestic workers.

The UAE voiced disappointment at the report saying it was not based on thorough research, ignored its efforts to safeguard the interests of workers and adopted an offensive approach.

"We regret that the HRW report lacks credible research methodology. In the future, we encourage HRW to visit the country and view the progress on the ground before publishing its conclusions," Minister of State for National Council Affairs Anwar Gargash told the official news agency WAM.

"Many of the key recommendations outlined by HRW in its report have already been met, or are in progress ... We are doing our best to ensure that no person living, working and contributing to this society undergoes any such form of abuse."

Kuwait also has a standard contract and the group said Saudi Arabia has proposed an

appendix to the labour law two years ago, but has yet to publish it.

The Saudi labour ministry has acknowledged that there are problems with workers' rights, but the government often also says that Islamic law ensures protection for both Muslims and non-Muslims and reminds foreigners that they are guests.

Human Rights Watch also urged the Sri Lankan government to improve regulation and monitoring of recruitment agents and services for abused workers abroad.