

# Slavery Persists In Saudi Arabia

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As is well known, slavery was formally abolished in Saudi Arabia as late as 1962, and then only after terrific pressure had been applied to the Saudis by Western governments. And today, when we speak of slavery in the Muslim world, we think of Mauritania (with 600,000 slaves), as [the report in the past hour](#) discussed, Niger (600,000 slaves), Mali (200,000 slaves), and Libya (where slave markets have opened in nine sites during the last two years). Most of us assume that in Saudi Arabia, slavery is no longer tolerated.

But most of us are wrong.

Slavery may have been formally abolished, but the cruel and savage treatment of foreign domestic workers, their inability to free themselves from arduous work conditions because their

employers keep their passports and other documents, amount to slavery in all but name.

A report on one group of domestic slaves – Vietnamese women – by reporter Yen Duong, who interviewed former workers who had made it back to Vietnam, was published last year in Al Jazeera [here](#):

*Overworked, abused, hungry: Vietnamese domestic workers in Saudi Arabia.*

*Women say they are forced to work at least 18 hours a day, denied food, assaulted and refused the right to return home.*

*Pham Thi Dao, 46, says she worked more than 18 hours a day and was given the same one meal to live on – a slice of lamb and plain rice.*

*Dao, 46, was a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia for more than seven months until she returned to Vietnam in April.*

*“I worked from 5am until 1am in the morning, and was allowed to eat once at 1pm,” Dao told Al Jazeera of her experience in the port city of Yanbu. “It was the same every day – a slice of lamb and a plate of plain rice. After nearly two months, I was like a mad person.”*

*According to statistics from Vietnam’s labor ministry, there are currently 20,000 Vietnamese workers in the kingdom, with nearly 7,000 working as domestic staff for Saudi families...*

The same harsh conditions which Vietnamese have endured have also been reported by the Filipino, Indonesian, and Sri Lankan workers, in Saudi Arabia. And they have also been endured by domestic workers in the the Emirates and Kuwait. In addition to the harsh working conditions, there is the persistent threat of sexual assault by their Arab masters. Some domestic workers have been raped and murdered by their Arab employers. Yet it has been almost impossible to bring employers to

justice for such crimes.

Some who escaped have recounted slave-like working and living conditions.

*“I understand that as [domestic] workers we need to get used to difficult working conditions,” said Dao, who is vocal on social media about her experience. “We didn’t ask for much, just no starvation, no beatings, and three meals per day. If we had that, we would not have begged for rescue.”...*

*“As soon as I arrived at the airport in Riyadh, they (employees from a Saudi company providing domestic workers) pushed me into a room with more than a hundred of others,” she said. “When my employer picked me up later, he took my passport and employment contract. Most women I’ve talked to here experience the same thing.”*

By seizing the workers’ passports, the Saudi employers have complete control over them. They cannot leave the country, nor move about inside Saudi Arabia, nor go to work for another employer. And if they don’t have their employment contract, which has been seized by their employer, they have no way of knowing if the onerous conditions they endure violate the contract’s provisions. They are captives of their employer in every sense.

*Like Dao, she said she was given one meal a day and worked 18-hour shifts.*

*Another domestic worker, who requested anonymity, showed Al Jazeera her contract stipulating a nine-hour working day – a standard given the contracts are composed by Vietnam’s labour ministry.*

*Dao shows notes from the Arabic lesson she took before her trip. Vietnamese domestic workers are entitled to classes on language, skills and culture but the sessions are poorly*

*executed, say the workers.*

*When Linh asked to be moved to another family – a workers' right according to their contracts – staff at the Vietnamese broker company shouted at her and tried to intimidate her.*

*She went on a hunger strike for three days until her employer agreed to take her back to the Saudi company..*

*Leaving an employment contract carries a hefty fine, plus the price of a ticket back to Vietnam, if the worker is unable to prove abuse at the hands of their employers.*

*The cost of quitting is usually between \$2,500 and \$3,500.*

If workers get, at best, \$388 per month, that means that if they manage to persuade their employer to give them back their passports and to let them leave, they will still have to come up with between seven and nine months of salary that must be paid back. And that assumes that they will be paid the highest amount (\$388/month) and will have all other expenses, during that period of seven-to-nine months, paid by their employer.

*Tuyet told her partner in Vietnam by phone that she is being abused by the family she works for in Riyadh.*

*Bui Van Sang's partner, Tuyet, works in Riyadh.*

*He said she is being beaten and starved.*

*The Vietnamese broker company asked him for \$2,155 for her return, but refused to put anything in writing, he claimed.*

*Her phone has been taken away and Sang is only able to contact her every two to three weeks, "when her employer feels like [allowing her]".*

These domestic workers are totally at the mercy of their Arab employers. They cannot even contact anyone in the outside

world unless the employer “feels like [allowing her].” They are, essentially, prisoners whose brutal living and working conditions are set by the employer, who answers to no one. That constitutes slavery, whether or not it is called by that name.

*By the time he had raised the \$2,155, the Vietnamese broker company demanded double the payment, he said.*

*He travelled 1,500km from his southern Vietnamese home province of Tay Ninh to the capital, Hanoi, to beg the broker, but was turned away...*

The Vietnamese brokers are akin to slave traders. They round up the “slaves” (domestic workers), hold out the promise of decent work and pay which, once those they traffic in arrive in Saudi Arabia, is simply ignored. The slaves have been delivered, the brokers paid by the Saudi employers, and the living conditions, of 18-hour days, with one meal a day, are now the norm. For beatings and sexual assaults, there is no recourse for these Vietnamese domestics. Meanwhile, Saudi employers hold onto those passports without which these workers cannot leave the country.

*There are no independent organisations in either Saudi Arabia or Vietnam which ensure the safety of domestic workers.*

*In the past few years, reports of abuse have prompted Saudi authorities to suggest amendments to existing labor regulations, but rights groups say they fall short.*

Whatever regulations are talked about, Saudi employers still do pretty much what they want in setting the conditions of work for domestic helpers.

*Workers and their relatives have to rely entirely on the Vietnamese broker companies for support.*

*Linh, the domestic helper in Riyadh, said when she contacted the Vietnamese company that brought her there, they told her the employment contract is only valid in Vietnam, not in Saudi Arabia.*

In other words, the Vietnamese brokers, having been paid by the Saudi employers, have washed their hands of the Vietnamese workers sent to Saudi Arabia. The employment contracts on which these domestic workers were relying are, they now admit, worthless in Saudi Arabia. These women have no guarantee of any rights; whatever their Saudi employer wishes to impose is what they must accept. Hence the 18-hour days, seven days a week, and the single meal each day. How is this not akin to slavery?

*“They [the Vietnamese companies] are supposed to protect our rights, but all they do is yell at us,” Linh said by phone. “Now I just want to leave the country. If I go to the police, at least they’d bring me to the detention centre, and I’d be deported and allowed to leave.”*

*She recently livestreamed a video detailing the treatment that she and many fellow Vietnamese domestic helpers face while working in Saudi Arabia.*

*The video has been viewed 113,000 times.*

*“Many women I know here just want the same thing – they just want to leave,” she said. “But they are afraid, threatened, and don’t even dare to speak out.”*

Their fear is palpable. If they complain of their working conditions, will they be beaten by their employers? Will they be given even more unpleasant or difficult tasks? Will the 18-hour day become a 20-hour day, as one Vietnamese man reported his wife had had to endure, that is with only four hours of sleep allowed? Will even the one slice of meat they are now

given be reduced still further, or will they perhaps not be given meat at all? Will they no longer be allowed to call home even twice a month? Not all Saudi employers are simon-legrees, but a great many appear to be. The point is that domestic workers ought to have rights enshrined in the Saudi law, but they do not. And the conditions which they endure are scarcely distinguishable from slavery.

The Saudis are not alone in such mistreatment of their domestic workers. The Kuwaitis and the Emiratis have been difficult masters, too, but the conditions of domestic workers appear to be especially harsh in Saudi Arabia. The mentality that lies behind this mistreatment rests on two things. First, there is the deep belief that slavery is legitimate, given that Muhammad himself owned slaves, and does not become illegitimate in Islamic societies just because Western pressure has led to its formal prohibition. The slave-owner mentality remains. Second, these domestic workers – Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai, Indonesian, Sri Lankan – are almost all non-Muslims, and the treatment they receive is commensurate with their description in the Qur'an, as being "the most vile of creatures." It would be interesting to compare the working conditions of the non-Muslim domestic workers in Saudi Arabia with those who, from Indonesia, are themselves Muslim. But that's a subject for another occasion.

First published in