[**Slave to the game**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1722574/slave-to-the-game)

[Rafia Zakaria](https://www.dawn.com/authors/410/rafia-zakaria) Published November 23, 2022 Updated about 4 hours ago

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

Listen to article

IN May of this year, Gianni Infantino, the head of the FIFA World Cup Organisation said that the workers who built the grand football stadiums in Qatar venues for the World Cup, could feel “dignity and pride” in their work. Infantino was criticised for his statement because it is well-known that the conditions confronting the workers have been far from ideal.

This Sunday, the [Cup finally began](https://www.dawn.com/news/1721861), but the workers continued to suffer. According to the *New York Times*, thousands of workers are still waiting to be paid for their work on and in these venues. Nepal, which is second only to India in the number of workers that it sends to Qatar, has lost workers in the thousands since construction began in 2010. Nepalese workers claimed that they have been waiting to be paid for months and months now.

An investigation by an international news network, possible only because some workers became so desperate that they took the risk of allowing in journalists with cameras, revealed squalid conditions with no proper sanitation, food or water.

Anyone walking around the construction compound at night would have security called on them because they may appear to be escaping. It is not necessary though, because employers confiscate their passports as soon as they arrive, and the workers cannot leave without them. Dead workers are sent home in coffins, allegedly with little explanation to their loved ones of what happened and none of the wages they hadn’t already received.

The focus on the workers’ conditions has made Qatar sensitive to criticism it is receiving, but carrying out actual reform would mean changing the legal structure on which the country’s labour system is based. Not only would this require a reformation of the kafala system but also create some mode of citizenship for the many generations of Pakistanis, Egyptians, Palestinians and others who have lived there for generations.

In the absence of any effort to address these reforms and pass labour laws that would make it harder to exploit workers, Qatar has settled for superficialities. Outside the Al Bayt stadium is a large mural whose ostensible purpose is to recognise the sacrifices of the workers that built the stadium. It features tiny photographs of the workers, impossible to see individually unless the viewer gets very close.

The fact is that most workers, Pakistani or Nepali or Filipino, are irrelevant and replaceable, and live entirely at the whim of their employers.

While the World Cup is bringing attention to Qatar’s labour practices, its sins are indistinguishable from those in its general environment in the oil-rich Gulf. The recent release of the show Dubai Bling on Netflix similarly sanitises the lives of hedonistic consumption for mass viewership.

The workers that make the grandiose lifestyles possible don’t appear on screen. The fact is that most workers, Pakistani or Nepali or Filipino, are irrelevant and replaceable, and live entirely at the whim of their employers. All Gulf states feature two parallel universes: the Qataris roaming Doha’s malls make 20,000 euros a year and those they are served by as they try to send even a few hundred euros home to their families. Most other Gulf countries feature just such disparities.

News articles in Pakistan when the World Cup began, tried to draw Pakistan into the competition by reminding everyone that the balls being kicked around in Qatar have all been manufactured in Pakistan. The ‘other’ Pakistani connection, of all the unpaid workers, stranded workers and even dead workers is left unexamined.

The utter lack of opportunities in Pakistan itself is so deplorable that even these thankless jobs akin to slavery are considered ‘opportunities’ in that they possess the possibility of income. The fact that workers think in this way is not a testament that things are not that bad over there but that things are so awful back home that young Pakistanis look at this kind of slavery as something better.

The issue of the workers is not the only global conundrum around the World Cup. Some consideration must also be given to the fact that it is the first time that the event is being held in the Middle East. This means that it is also the first time that citizens of countries like Egypt or Palestine could watch a World Cup football match.

Most such events are held in the Western world and in countries where it is difficult if not impossible to travel for the average citizen of non-Western countries.

This second truth complicates matters because it draws suspicion towards the intentions of European nations who have made more of a fuss over human rights violations than they normally do.

Is it racism towards the non-white world taking leadership of the sport, or is it genuine concern about the workers? Interestingly, the same European countries frowning at the World Cup show no concern whatsoever while buying gas and oil from Gulf states; ignoring that workers working in that sector are also exploited, made to live in disgusting habitations and forced to work on minimal pay.

In the meantime, according to the *New York Times*, the Qataris are not working too hard to mend their ways. Hundreds and hundreds of workers were left without food and water or shade or shelter on Sunday when the first match was to be played. These workers were the ones who had been hired to work the concession stands at the stadium but did not know what to do when they were denied access inside.

The men were from India and had been guaranteed food and shelter in return for working during the World Cup. For this, they were supposed to be paid very little. Who knows whether they will ever see the money; they definitely did not see the opening match. Qatar became the first host team in the World Cup to lose its very first match to Ecuador.

*The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.*

[**rafia.zakaria@gmail.com**](http://mailto:rafia.zakaria@gmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, November 23rd, 2022*