

Protecting Ugandan Migrant Domestic Workers in the Gulf States: Addressing the Funding and Protection Gaps in Labour Externalisation. A policy brief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Labour migration from Uganda, particularly to the Gulf States and Middle East, has grown rapidly, driven by high domestic unemployment, low wages, and the prospect of better earnings abroad. Between 2016 and 2024, nearly 294,000 Ugandans were placed in formal overseas employment, predominantly in domestic and care work, contributing to record remittances of USD 1.67 billion by December 2025. Despite these economic gains, Ugandan migrant domestic workers face systemic exploitation and challenges, including excessive recruitment fees, debt bondage, gender-based abuse, limited legal protection, and inadequate consular support.

Uganda's labour migration governance is hampered by fragmented laws, weak enforcement of Bilateral Labour Agreements, non-ratification of key ILO Conventions 181 and 189, underfunded institutions, and underutilised digital systems for monitoring and complaints. Support for returning workers, psycho-social care, and collective representation through unions remains largely absent.

This policy brief highlights these critical gaps and proposes actionable recommendations, including passing a comprehensive labour migration law, ratifying key ILO Conventions, introducing gender-responsive safeguards, strengthening recruitment oversight, expanding embassy support, improving digital monitoring, and establishing a national reintegration framework and migrant welfare fund. Implementing these measures will ensure labour migration remains safe, dignified, and rights-based, aligning Uganda's economic benefits with the protection of its citizens abroad.

1.0. BACKGROUND

While labour migration is not new, recent years have seen a sharp increase in the number of Ugandans; particularly domestic workers, nurses, teachers, and construction workers—migrating to the Gulf States and the wider Middle East. Women are over-represented in the statistics of those migrating to those Countries. The Ugandan diaspora was estimated at about 3 million people in 2015, with traditional destinations

including Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, the UK, and the USA, but labour migration to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE has expanded rapidly, with thousands leaving annually for low- and semi-skilled jobs¹.

This outward migration is driven largely by high unemployment and low wages in Uganda compared to higher earnings abroad. Domestic workers in Saudi Arabia earn between USD 225 and USD 500 per month, while factory workers in Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia earn between USD 350 and USD 700 per month². By contrast, many skilled public-sector workers in Uganda earn far less: nurses and allied health workers average about USD 85 per month, and the highest-paid primary school teachers earn around USD 264 per month³. Uganda also lacks an effective minimum wage, with the last

MINIMUM WAGE
6000
UGX (1.5 USD)
PER MONTH

rate set in 1984 at UGX 6,000 (about USD 1.50) per month. In 2021, the median monthly earnings were UGX 200,000 (about USD 57), and 42% of

employed persons earned less than two-thirds of this median⁴.

Uganda's labour market is further characterised by high informality and vulnerability, with over 66% of workers engaged under oral contracts, 22% exposed to occupational hazards, and persistently low wages across sectors⁵. These conditions have accelerated labour migration, especially among young people and women. While migration contributes significantly to remittances and government revenue, extensive evidence documents systematic exploitation and abuse of Ugandan migrant workers in the Gulf, particularly in domestic and care work.

This Policy Brief draws insights from a research study conducted by Voices For Labour (VFL) entitled: An evaluation of government services, migration-related costs, protection gaps, and access to justice mechanisms for Ugandan domestic migrant workers in the Gulf States including other sources of secondary literature. It highlights key protection gaps and proposes

¹ IOM (2022) : strengthening recruitment and information provision between Uganda and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia

² Nampeewo(2021) : The illusion of greener pastures: Violence and justice for female Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East: Strathmore Law Journal, 1, June 2021; UCCA Advocacy brief 2023: Between Exploitation & Work: Realising the right to work of Ugandan Migrant Workers in the Middle East;

³ Ibid

⁴ UCCA Advocacy brief 2023: Between Exploitation & Work: Realising the right to work of Ugandan Migrant Workers in the Middle East;

⁵ ILO(2024): Return and reintegration in Uganda: Lessons from the FAIRWAY Programme, also see the Uganda National Migration Policy, 2025 accessible at : https://www.immigration.go.ug/sites/default/files/NATIONAL%20MIGRATION%20POLICY%202025.15th%20August%202025__CL%20-%20Final__signed%20copy.pdf

policy recommendations to strengthen Uganda's labour migration governance and protect migrant domestic workers, particularly in the Gulf States.

2.0. OVERVIEW OF LABOUR EXTERNALIZATION IN UGANDA

In 2005, the Government of Uganda launched the Labour Externalization Programme under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) to provide safe, orderly, and regular pathways for Ugandans seeking employment abroad⁶. Prior to this, labour migration occurred without any formal legal or institutional framework. To regulate the process, Uganda enacted the Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers Abroad) Regulations, 2005, aimed at promoting equality of employment opportunities, protecting the dignity and rights of Ugandan migrant workers, ensuring deployment only to countries with labour and social protection laws or relevant international commitments, and licensing recruitment agencies⁷. The External Employment Unit was established the same year to enforce

these regulations, which were later repealed and replaced by the Employment (Employment of Ugandan Migrant Workers Abroad) Regulations, 2021.

Since the programme's inception, labour migration particularly to the Gulf and Middle East has expanded significantly. Between 2016 and 2024, approximately 293,973 Ugandan migrant workers were officially placed in overseas employment, largely in the care and domestic work sectors⁸. However, these figures reflect only migrants using formal recruitment channels captured in the External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS) and do not account for those migrating through informal or irregular pathways. As such, the actual number of Ugandan migrant workers in the Gulf States is likely substantially higher.

3.0. REVENUE FROM LABOUR EXTERNALIZATION.

Uganda is among the top ten Sub-Saharan African countries receiving remittances, with inflows from labour externalisation rising steadily over the past decade and reaching a record

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Supra Note 5

⁹ Sebuliba.J. (2025): Harnessing the Potential of Uganda's Growing Diaspora Remittance Flows : <https://eprcug.org/blog/harnessing-the-potential-of-ugandas-growing-diaspora-remittance-flows/#:~:text=Uganda%20has%20experienced%20a%20steady,%2Dterm%20socio%2Deconomic%20mobility>

USD 1.42 billion by January 2024⁹ and USD 1.67 billion by December 2025¹⁰. According to the 2023 World Bank report, about 40% of remittances originate from the United States and the United Kingdom, where Ugandans are mainly employed in healthcare, finance, and education, while the Middle East—particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—accounts for approximately USD 500 million (35%), largely contributed by domestic workers, security personnel, and construction workers¹¹. These remittances significantly support household welfare, poverty reduction, and national development.

In addition to the remittances, the Ugandan government earns approximately UGX 30 billion in non-tax revenue each year from the labour externalization sector through licence fees, application fees, job order approvals, vacancy fees and penalties for late renewals.

4.0. KEY PROTECTION GAPS AND CHALLENGES

i. Fragmented and Inadequate Legal Framework

Uganda lacks a comprehensive labour migration law that holistically governs recruitment, deployment, protection,

dispute resolution, and reintegration of migrant workers. Instead, labour externalization is regulated through scattered regulations, policies, and bilateral labour agreements (BLAs), creating gaps, overlaps, and weak accountability. This challenge is compounded by Uganda's non-ratification of key ILO Conventions, notably Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers and Convention No. 181 on Private Employment Agencies, which are central to regulating recruitment practices and protecting workers in private households. As a result, national laws fall short of international labour standards that Uganda has committed to uphold.

ii. Weak and Non-Transparent Bilateral Labour Agreements

While Uganda has signed Bilateral Labour Agreements with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and a Memorandum of Understanding with UAE, their implementation remains weak and largely symbolic. Many of these agreements lack clear enforcement mechanisms, timelines, sanctions for non-compliance, or accessible complaint pathways for workers. In practice, BLAs function more as diplomatic instruments than enforceable protection tools. In addition

¹⁰ The National Budget Framework Paper 2026/27: <https://finance.go.ug/publications/national-budget-framework-paper-fy-2026-27>

¹⁰ Ibid note 9

these existing BLA's do leave so many protective clauses for the Ugandan migrant workers contrary to the AU Guidelines on developing Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs).

Moreover, these agreements are often gender-blind, despite the fact that women especially domestic workers form the majority of Ugandan migrant workers in the Gulf and face heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and isolation. The absence of explicit gender-responsive safeguards significantly limits the protective value of these agreements.

iii. Weak Oversight of Recruitment and Persistent Exploitation

Oversight of recruitment agencies and foreign employers remains inadequate. Although Uganda has legal caps on recruitment fees limiting to only UGX 20,000/= and further excluding domestic workers from paying any placement fees, migrant domestic workers continue to pay between UGX 200,000 and UGX 5,000,000, depending on the destination¹². These costs push many workers into debt bondage even before departure. Pre-departure training is often rushed, compliance-driven, and inconsistent, leaving workers

poorly informed about their rights, contracts, and complaint mechanisms. Furthermore, there is very limited inspection of the Recruitment agencies. In the Financial year 2024/2025, only 107 external recruitment agencies were inspected in compliance with safe labour migration¹³.

iv. Underutilised Digital Systems and Limited Worker Awareness

Digital tools such as the External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS) exist to enhance transparency and tracking, but they remain underutilised due to low awareness, limited digital literacy, and poor integration with other systems. Many migrant workers are unaware of these platforms or unable to use them independently, weakening monitoring and early intervention when abuses occur.

v. Inadequate Consular Protection and Access to Justice

Uganda's embassies in the Gulf States are severely under-resourced, with currently only one labour attache and no legal officers, shelters, and emergency funds. As a result, consular support is often reactive rather than

¹² Voices For Labour (2025) : An evaluation of government services, migration-related costs, protection gaps, and access to justice mechanisms for Ugandan domestic migrant workers in the Gulf States

¹³ <https://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GLSD2-25-Report-on-the-Ministerial-Policy-Statement-for-the-FY-2025-26-.pdf>

preventive and inaccessible to the most vulnerable workers especially the domestic workers whose movements are restricted and the undocumented migrants or those whose documents have been confiscated by employers.

Migrant domestic workers face language barriers, fear of retaliation, lack of legal aid, and employer control over movement and exit, all of which limit their ability to report abuse. Existing complaints mechanisms in the Ugandan legal framework largely exclude foreign employers and undocumented workers, leaving many cases unresolved.

vi. Absence of Reintegration, Psycho-social, and Collective Protection Measures

Uganda lacks a national reintegration framework to support returning migrant workers, whether they return voluntarily or in distress. Reintegration support covering livelihoods, health, psycho-social care, and social protection is largely absent, increasing the risk of re-migration under unsafe conditions. Psychosocial and mental health support is not explicitly recognised in the Regulations or BLAs, despite widespread evidence of trauma among

returnees.

Additionally, trade unions and migrant workers' associations are inadequately recognised and engaged in migration governance, limiting collective representation and worker-led protection mechanisms.

vii. The funding gap

At present, the Employment Services Programme under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development which includes the department responsible for labour externalization receives only approximately UGX 2.299 billion in funding annually¹⁴. This is despite the department generating approximately UGX 30 billion in non-tax revenue annually¹⁵ for the Government of Uganda, revealing a big mismatch between its revenue contribution and the resources allocated to it. Notably, UGX 0.109 billion of this funding was provided by the ILO, rather than drawn from the revenues the programme itself generates .

¹⁴ Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development Ministerial Policy Statement FY 2024/25 : https://budget.finance.go.ug/sites/default/files/Sector%20Spending%20Agency%20Budgets%20and%20Performance/Ministry%20of%20Gender%2C%20Labour%20and%20Social%20Development_16.pdf, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development Ministerial Policy Statement FY 2025/26: <https://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GLSD2-25-Report-on-the-Ministerial-Policy-Statement-for-the-FY-2025-26-.pdf>

¹⁵ The National Migration Policy 2025 : https://www.immigration.go.ug/sites/default/files/NATIONAL%20MIGRATION%20POLICY%202025.15th%20August%202025__CL%20-%20Final__signed%20copy.pdf

5.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enact a Comprehensive Labour Externalisation Law

Develop and pass a standalone labour externalization law covering recruitment, deployment, protection, access to justice, and reintegration, with clear enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Alternatively in the meantime, His Excellency the President of Uganda is urged to assent to the Employment Amendment bill 2022 which contained some clauses on labour externalisation and the protection of Ugandan Migrant Workers Abroad.

2. Ratify and Domesticcate Key ILO Conventions

Prioritise ratification of ILO Conventions 189 and 181, and accordingly domesticcate them to strengthen protections for domestic workers and regulate private recruitment agencies.

3. Strengthen and Enforce Bilateral Labour Agreements

Review all BLAs to include enforceable protection clauses, clear dispute resolution mechanisms, compensation frameworks, timelines, and penalties for violations, and make all agreements publicly accessible.

4. Introduce Gender-Responsive Migration Governance

Integrate explicit safeguards for women migrant workers, including protections against gender-based violence, access to shelters, legal aid, psychosocial services, and specialised consular support.

5. Tighten Regulation of Recruitment Agencies and Brokers

Enforce strict penalties for illegal fees, regulate informal brokers, and expand mandatory bank guarantees or insurance schemes to ensure compensation for exploited workers.

6. Strengthen Pre-Departure Training

Increase the training period and ensure rights-based and gender-sensitive training, and integrate digital literacy and contract literacy into all programmes.

7. Strengthen Embassy Capacity and Labour Attaché Deployment

Increase funding for missions in the Gulf, deploy more labour attachés and legal officers, establish shelters, and create emergency response funds for migrant workers in crisis.

8. Improve Digital Monitoring and Complaints Systems

Upgrade EEMIS into a user-friendly, multilingual platform with offline functionality, anonymous reporting, and integration with embassy and CSO support systems.

9. Establish a National Reintegration Framework and Migrant Welfare Fund

Develop a comprehensive reintegration policy and a migrant welfare fund to support returnees with livelihoods, health care, psychosocial support, and skills recognition.

10. Institutionalise Worker Representation and Access to Justice

Formally recognise migrant workers' associations and trade unions in migration governance, establish a specialised migrant workers' tribunal, and allow workers with ongoing complaints to remain in destination countries under temporary protection.

6.0. CONCLUSION

Labour externalisation has delivered substantial economic gains for Uganda, yet the majority of the Ugandan migrant workers particularly women in domestic work remain unprotected due to systemic underfunding and weak

regulation. Without increased and ring-fenced funding, stronger enforcement, and gender-responsive safeguards, labour migration will continue to expose Ugandans to exploitation. Aligning economic returns with effective protection is essential to ensure that labour externalization is safe, dignified, and rights-based.

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