**Workers Organizations Role** **in Preventing and Addressing Contemporary Forms of Slavery**

**Submitted to**: Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences

**Submitted by**: Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (holds consultative status with United Nations Economic and Social Council)

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**Introduction:**

Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights presents this report to the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, intending to assist the Rapporteur in the preparation of his report for 79th session of General Assembly. Workers' organizations worldwide play a vital role in preventing and addressing modern slavery, as evidenced by their efforts to protect workers from exploitation by companies and employers. These organizations promote fair labor practices, increase awareness of exploitative working conditions, pressure governments to enact and enforce laws safeguarding workers from exploitation, forced labor, and trafficking, and advocate for policies that uphold workers' rights and ensure decent working conditions. Additionally, they provide support services, including legal aid, to victims of modern slavery and assist exploited workers in accessing justice and remedies.

However, Maat noted that despite the important role played by workers’ organizations in preventing and addressing contemporary forms of slavery, they face severe challenges, obstacles and obstacles in many countries around the world that restrict their ability and limit their effectiveness to carry out this role, including challenges and obstacles related to authorities’ lack of recognition of unions and workers’ organizations in law and practice, and restrictions on the rights to organize and collective bargaining. In light of these issues, Maat submits this report, addressing some of the key questions outlined in the call. Due to word limit constraints imposed by Special Rapporteur, Maat was unable to address all the questions comprehensively.

**Key Questions:**

**Are trade union rights, as protected by ILO Conventions Nos. 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize) and 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining), recognized in domestic legislative frameworks in your country? If so, please provide details including provision for remedies in case of breaches. (Question 1)**

Regarding legislative framework in the Arab Republic of Egypt, it recognizes freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, as outlined in International Labor Organization Conventions No. 87 and 98, which Egypt ratified in 1954 and 1957, respectively. Egyptian Constitution, in Article 15, stipulates that the right to peaceful strikes is protected by law. Furthermore, Article 76 guarantees the right to establish trade unions and federations on a democratic basis, granting them legal personality and freedom to carry out their activities. These organizations contribute to enhancing the competence of their members, safeguarding their rights, and protecting their interests. The state is obligated to ensure independence of trade unions and federations, with dissolution of their boards of directors only permitted through a judicial ruling. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Additionally, Law No. 213 of 2017, which pertains to trade union organizations and protection of the right to organize unions, sets forth the rights of workers to establish and join independent unions and engage in collective bargaining. Article 10 of this law specifically guarantees the right to establish trade unions and federations on a democratic basis. Article 4 ensures the right of workers to form or withdraw from unions. Financial and administrative independence is granted to union organizations through Articles 59 and 64. The dissolution of a union organization's board of directors is prohibited without a judicial ruling, as stated in Article 7. Furthermore, Article 30 affirms that the general assembly of union organization holds the highest authority in formulating its policy and overseeing its affairs in accordance with its bylaws. Article 14 confirms union organization's right to organize peaceful work strikes as defined by its bylaws.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, it is worth noting that Maat has observed that union rights, including the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining, are not recognized in the legislative frameworks of certain Middle Eastern countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Have workers’ organizations in your country played a role in preventing workers from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery, or helping victims to move out of exploitative situations? (Question 2)**

Yes, Maat has also recognized the significant role played by workers’ organizations in several Middle Eastern countries in preventing workers from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery and assisting victims in escaping exploitative situations. These organizations have achieved this by strengthening workers' union rights and ensuring their ability to engage in collective bargaining to secure fair wages and working conditions, as well as by facilitating access to education and vocational skills training. In the Arab Republic of Egypt, for instance, Maat has documented numerous efforts undertaken by General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions to enhance workers' union rights and guarantee their ability to engage in collective bargaining for fair wages and working conditions.

An example of such efforts is the peaceful strike organized by textile and clothing workers in Garment, a ready-made clothing manufacturing company located in Obour City, Qalyubia Governorate, on January 29, 2024. The workers called for improvements in their wages and working conditions, including wage increases, regular increments in the annual grant, and regularization of temporary workers. General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions supported the workers' demands and engaged in collective bargaining with company's management.[[4]](#footnote-4) Through these negotiations, involving representatives from the workers, the company's management, and Labor Directorate, an agreement was reached to enhance the wages and working conditions of the company's employees. This agreement included a 25 percent bonus added to workers' salaries and the consideration of a performance-based increase ranging from 15 to 30 percent of the salary.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Maat has also documented various training and educational programs implemented by trade unions in Egypt to facilitate workers' access to education and vocational skills training. General Union of Agricultural Professions, for instance, conducted several training and vocational programs in 2023 aimed at enhancing the efficiency of workers in the agricultural sector. These programs successfully trained over 1,000 individuals in various agricultural specialties.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, Maat expresses deep concerns about absence of workers’ organizations' role in preventing workers, particularly migrant workers, from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery in several Arab Gulf countries. For instance, in countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the establishment of independent trade unions that advocate for workers' interests is not allowed, leaving migrant workers susceptible to exploitation, forced labor, and other forms of contemporary slavery at the hands of their employers. Reports reviewed by Maat indicate that the laws in Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not grant migrant workers the right to form or join independent unions, and engaging in any unlicensed trade union activities can result in deportation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Are there workers’ organizations dedicated to organizing and defending the rights of workers in certain sectors with higher risks of labor and/or sexual exploitation (e.g. agriculture, fishing, construction, services including hospitality, manufacturing, domestic work, and non-standard forms of employment) or at-risk populations (e.g. indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees, minorities, older workers, workers with disabilities and informal workers) in your country? If so, please provide details (Question 4)**

Yes. Maat acknowledges the presence of specialized workers’ organizations in various countries where it operates, which actively work to organize and defend the rights of workers in high-risk sectors where the likelihood of exploitation is elevated. In the Arab Republic of Egypt, for instance, there are trade unions dedicated to improving working conditions for individuals employed in the fishing, agricultural, and public cleaning sectors. Maat has identified unions representing fishermen, agricultural workers, and cleaning workers in Egypt, which strive to organize and protect the rights of their affiliated workers, particularly considering the substantial labor exploitation risks associated with these sectors.

In India, Maat has also observed the existence of organizations that advocate for the rights of vulnerable groups, particularly women working in the informal sector who face a higher risk of exploitation. One notable example is the Self-Employed Women's Association, a union in India that provides legal assistance and support to women employed in the informal sector, including those working in the garment industry and as domestic workers. These women often endure precarious working conditions, lacking social security and basic protections.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Nevertheless, Maat remains deeply concerned about the absence of specialized unions that defend the rights of vulnerable groups, particularly migrant workers, including domestic workers, in most Arab Gulf countries. Despite numerous reports highlighting the plight of migrant workers, especially female domestic workers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who endure conditions of forced labor such as passport confiscation, non-payment of wages, movement restrictions, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, these countries continue to prohibit the establishment of unions that advocate for the rights of migrant workers. Consequently, migrant workers who engage in unlicensed union activities within these countries face the risk of arrest and deportation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**If applicable, please describe challenges or constraints faced by workers’ organizations in your country to prevent contemporary forms of slavery and protect victims which may include the lack of recognition of trade unions/workers’ organizations or trade union rights in law and in practice; Restrictions on the rights to organize and take collective actions (Question 5)**

The main challenges that impede the crucial roles that workers’ organizations can play, particularly in the Middle East region, stem from the non-recognition of trade unions, workers’ organizations, and union rights by these countries, as well as the failure of Middle Eastern countries to ratify International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions that safeguard freedom of association and collective bargaining. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed on the rights to organize and engage in collective actions in these countries hinder the efforts of workers’ organizations to combat modern forms of slavery and protect victims. For instance, both the State of Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have not ratified ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize (1948)[[10]](#footnote-10) or ILO Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining (1949).[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, the legal frameworks in Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not recognize union rights, such as the right to form and join independent unions, engage in collective bargaining, or carry out legal strikes. Migrant workers, especially in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, face the risk of termination, imprisonment, or deportation if involved in unlicensed union activities. These restrictions imposed by the authorities in these countries obstruct the significant roles that workers’ organizations can fulfill in preventing modern forms of slavery and safeguarding victims.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**What practical recommendations would you make to concerned stakeholders (including Governments, businesses/employers’ organizations, anti-slavery and civil society actors, international organizations and others) to enable workers’ organizations (including centers and federations) to more effectively prevent and address contemporary forms of slavery?**

Maat believes that effectively preventing and addressing contemporary forms of slavery necessitates a comprehensive and multidimensional human rights approach involving all relevant stakeholders. The following recommendations are put forth by Maat for concerned stakeholders, including governments, businesses, anti-slavery actors, civil society, and international organizations:

**Recommendations for Governments:**

* **Ratification and implementation of relevant ILO conventions:** Governments should ratify and implement pertinent ILO conventions, such as Conventions 29 (Forced Labour), 87 (Freedom of Association), and 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining), while ensuring alignment of national laws with these agreements.
* **Strengthening legal frameworks:** Governments should enact and enforce robust laws that combat contemporary forms of slavery, including forced labor, incorporating clear definitions and penalties for perpetrators.
* **Facilitating unionization:** Governments should remove barriers to the formation and activities of unions, particularly in high-risk sectors like construction and domestic work.
* **Capacity-building support:** Governments should provide financial resources and training programs to empower workers’ organizations in identifying and addressing contemporary slavery.

**Recommendations for Companies:**

* **Partnership with workers’ organizations**: Companies should establish partnerships and engage in constructive dialogues with unions and workers’ organizations to identify and address workplace exploitation and other forms of contemporary slavery.
* **Supporting worker education:** Companies should collaborate with unions and workers’ organizations to educate workers about their rights and equip them with the knowledge to recognize labor exploitation and other contemporary forms of slavery.
* **Establishing grievance mechanisms:** Companies should establish effective complaint mechanisms that enable workers to report instances of labor exploitation and other forms of contemporary slavery without fear of reprisal.

**Recommendations to anti-slavery actors, civil society and international organizations:**

* **Partnership with workers’ organizations:** Cooperating with unions and workers’ organizations in establishing awareness campaigns to raise awareness about contemporary slavery and workers’ rights.
* **Providing legal assistance:** Providing free legal assistance to exploited workers and workers’ organizations that take legal action against the perpetrators.
* **Conduct research and advocacy:** Conduct research that determines extent of contemporary forms of slavery in various sectors, and advocate for the adoption of effective policies to address the root causes of contemporary slavery.
* **Technical assistance:** Providing technical assistance to national governments and workers’ organizations to strengthen legal frameworks and build capacity.

1. Constitution of Arab Republic of Egypt of 2014 (amended 2019), link: <https://tinyl.io/AUCX> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Law on Trade Union Organizations and Protection of Right to Organize Unions No. 213 of 2017, link: <https://tinyl.io/AUD1> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Qatar, Us department of state, link: <https://tinyl.io/AUD4> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sponsored by Gibran and Qalyubia Workers Union, success of negotiations to end the sit-in of T&C workers, official page of Egyptian Trade Union Federation, January 31, 2024, link: <https://fbook.cc/5DR8> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A committee to study their rights. sit-in of ready-made clothing company workers ends with payment of a bonus to workers, Sada El-Balad, January 31, 2024, link: <https://tinyl.io/AVB7> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Head of Agricultural Syndicate: We follow state’s controls in granting practice of profession to all agricultural graduates, Akhbar Almsaey, March 3, 2024, link: <https://tinyl.io/AVBc> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Saudi Arabia, Us department of state, link: <https://tinyl.io/AVBm> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION (SEWA), link: <https://tinyl.io/AVVK> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Qatar, Us department of state, link: <https://tinyl.io/AUD4> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Qatar, The ITUC Global Rights Index, link: <https://tinyl.io/AVc5> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Saudi Arabia, The ITUC Global Rights Index, link: <https://tinyl.io/AVYR> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Qatar, Us department of state, link: <https://tinyl.io/AUD4> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)