

Behind farm walls... Workers under the thumb of abuse



* Wall of a house or farm in the Jordan Valley, photo by Muhammad Zakaria, Habr website

Report by Munira al-Shatti

On a farm in Deir Alla, three Egyptian workers live in inhumane conditions, detained and isolated from the outside world behind the farm's walls. Upon entering the farm, they handed over their passports to their employer, who demanded them under the pretext of "safeguarding them," a common practice faced by foreign workers coming to Jordan for the first time.

The three workers, all under the age of 24, came to work five years ago. One of them, Othman Emad (a pseudonym to protect the victim's privacy), wishes they had never come. "As soon as the worker arrives in Jordan, the farm owner asks for his passport on the pretext of keeping it safe and ensuring it is not lost, but refuses to give it back to the worker if he asks for it for any reason."

This control is reinforced by the security crackdowns that migrant workers suffer, as employers use them as a means to threaten workers and prevent them from leaving the farm without prior permission. If a worker is caught by the authorities without a passport or work permit, they are forcibly returned to their employer.

Worker Ahmed Mustafa (a pseudonym to protect the victim's privacy) says: "The employer always threatens me with the police because we don't have passports and they will catch us and return us to him. The farm owner always says this, and we want to work, we don't want any problems."

The issue is not limited to the confiscation of passports, but extends to restrictions on freedom of movement and communication. Workers are prohibited from leaving the farm or talking to workers on neighboring farms, and even greeting relatives or acquaintances who work nearby is considered a violation.

The worker recounts his story: "When we go out with the farm owner, we are not allowed to look at the side where there are people, and only the employer can return greetings, otherwise we will face problems with him."

In addition, workers endure grueling working hours exceeding 18 hours a day, starting at 5 a.m. and continuing late into the night, with a short break of no more than two hours in the summer and one hour in the winter, according to what they agreed upon.

Worker Othman Emad says, "The employer wants us to work day and night, summer and winter. One day, he asked us to work in the rain with our clothes wet, insisting that we continue, arguing that workers come to work, not to rest in winter."

Working without rest

Although employment contracts include the right of Egyptian migrant workers to weekly leave, this clause remains merely a text on paper that is not implemented on farms in the Jordan Valley. The workers interviewed by the author of this report confirm that all days of the week are considered mandatory working days, regardless of their health condition, and that those who are absent for one day are fined the equivalent of 15 days' wages. One of the Egyptian workers in the Deir Alla area recalls an incident in which he was injured by a thorn, causing severe swelling in his foot and preventing him from walking. "I missed one day of work because I couldn't walk on my foot, but the farm owner wouldn't let me go to the doctor. He told me to burn it with fire and go back to work."

This neglect of health is not an isolated case, but reflects a recurring reality among migrant agricultural workers, where medical care is lacking and workers are denied their most basic human rights to rest or treatment.

In addition to being denied weekly leave, migrant workers are prohibited from traveling to Egypt to visit their families except under harsh conditions. Annual leave, if granted, does not exceed two to three months, is unpaid, and requires the worker to secure a replacement for the entire period of his absence.

On one occasion, a worker was forced to find a replacement so that he could travel for treatment and visit his family after his foot became severely infected as a result of negligence. However, when he returned to Jordan, he was not allowed to work anywhere else but the same farm until his employer agreed to release the replacement and hand over his passport and work permit.

Article 4 of the Agricultural Workers Regulation No. 19 of 2021 stipulates that agricultural working hours shall be eight hours per day, not exceeding 48 hours per week, spread over six days per week. However, in reality, agricultural workers work long hours for monthly wages that do not exceed 300 dinars, which migrant workers do not receive monthly. Instead, they are paid a portion of their salary not exceeding \$200 every four or five months to send to their families. They do not receive any personal expenses throughout the year, and the rest of their wages may be paid at the end of the season, with a deduction of for food and drink, according to worker Othman Imad, which is what happened to him at work. He added: "I didn't know what money looked like, and I didn't know a quarter of a dinar, because the farm owner transfers the money to my family and doesn't give me any money at all." The season may end, but without the employer paying the rest of the accumulated wages, referring to their colleague on the farm who returned to Egypt without receiving the rest of his accumulated wages, amounting to 1,700 dinars.

"A body without a soul"

On another farm about four kilometers from the main road, the workers spoke to the reporter from behind a door for fear that their employer would see them, confirming that they were living under the same conditions of confinement, restrictions, and deprivation.

"Nothing has changed. Our passports and work permits are confiscated, we are not allowed to leave, we are not allowed to talk, everything is forbidden, but we have to say 'yes, sir'."

One of them says that they feel like "bodies without souls," working without rest, deprived of freedom of movement and speech, and subjected to a system based on fear and threats.

Scarce food and contaminated water

The farm owner is required to provide food and water for workers at his own expense throughout their employment period, according to a verbal agreement between the two parties. However, what is actually provided is not enough to cover basic needs, as breakfast is limited to ten falafel balls and half a dinar worth of bread, while two meters of water per week are purchased for them to drink.

The water for bathing and washing clothes is taken from an agricultural pond full of algae, which emits foul odors, making it unfit for human use and threatening the workers' health with serious skin and respiratory diseases.

While talking to the worker outside the farm fence, he asked to leave immediately when they heard the sound of his employer's vehicle, to avoid any problems between them that could lead to him losing his job and the worker being deported, because he is forbidden from talking to anyone!

Fifteen migrant workers live in similar conditions on another farm. as the reporter observed during her field visit. The difference here is that the employer pays only half the monthly wage and allows the workers to go out once a month to transfer money to their families in Egypt, provided that he accompanies them himself. They are transported in a large Diana car to the exchange office and then returned to the farm.

Although their two-year employment contracts have expired, these workers cannot move to another employer until they obtain a "clearance certificate" from their current employer, who in some cases requires them to pay a sum of money that he himself determines in exchange for granting it. Workers are forced to pay because there is no legal means to protect them from employer abuse if the employer refuses to issue the clearance certificate required for them to move.

Where is the oversight?

The executive director of the Labor House and former secretary general of the Ministry of Labor, Hamada Abu Najma, believes that the continuing violations against migrant workers in the agricultural sector are mainly due to the lack of qualified inspectors in the Ministry of Labor, which began its oversight of this sector late in 2021 after the issuance of the Agricultural Workers Regulation. Prior to that, inspections were limited to work permits without checking for labor violations.

According to Abu Najma, there are only about 200 inspectors in the ministry, noting that a large number of them hold administrative positions, while vast agricultural areas require larger teams and increased field efforts, which poses a real obstacle to oversight. In his view, the solution begins with increasing the number of inspectors, providing them with specialized training and adequate transportation to reach remote farms, and employing technology to locate agricultural units to facilitate inspection tasks. He also stresses the importance of educating workers and employers about legislation prohibiting the withholding of passports, pointing out that many of them are unaware that this act violates passport law and is punishable by law.

Abu Najma calls for closer coordination between the ministries of labor and agriculture, explaining that the latter is working on a project to number and register agricultural units, which will facilitate the inspection process and reduce violations. He believes that the reasons for the violations are shared between the migrant worker, the employer, and the Ministry of Labor itself, due to the lack of actual complaints despite the existence of a "protection" platform in the ministry, which deals with complaints in complete confidentiality.

According to a report by the Tamkeen Association for Legal Aid and Human Rights issued at the end of 2023, the withholding of official documents is common among most migrant workers. The association's monitoring showed that the majority of workers do not carry passports, residence permits, or work permits because their employers keep them. The results showed that 63% of workers were afraid before joining their jobs that their identity documents would be confiscated to restrict their movement and prevent them from changing jobs. The report also revealed that 61% of workers live in constant fear of detention or deportation by the authorities or

employers, which threatens their livelihood and exposes them to administrative detention.

The report noted that many employers do not enroll workers in social security, despite this being mandatory under Article 20(c) of the Social Security Law, which constitutes a clear legal violation.

In early 2024, four Jordanian human rights organizations issued a joint policy paper to promote the rights of Egyptian workers, noting that Jordan's low ranking in international indicators of modern slavery and human trafficking is directly linked to the reality of Egyptian labor. The paper called on the government to adopt the proposed recommendations to improve Jordan's international ranking and strengthen the national human rights system.

Among the cases documented by Tamkeen was that of an Egyptian worker on a farm in the northern Jordan Valley who worked for 15 years without pay or a renewed work permit, during which time he was beaten, humiliated, and prevented from communicating with his family in Egypt. He lived in a place designated for charcoal production, in poor health and psychological condition. He suffered from chronic illnesses without treatment. The association reported the case to the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, which visited the site and documented the violations. The case was referred to the public prosecutor and is still under appeal.

Tamkeen recommended the need to provide safe and easy channels for filing complaints without fear of reprisals, emphasizing the importance of Jordan's ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

Although Jordan has ratified several international conventions, such as those on forced labor and equal pay, it has not yet acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers, whose ratification is a necessary step to strengthen legal protection and improve the working and living conditions of migrant workers.

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