Mixed Migration Centre

Exploring the climate–labour–mobility nexus for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia

MMC research report,
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Mixed Migration Centre
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An Indian labourer works at the construction site of a building in Riyadh.

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About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

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About this document

This report explores the experiences, vulnerabilities, and future aspirations of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the impacts of climate and environmental factors on migration. The study is based on original data collected between January and March 2025 through individual surveys, interviews and focus group discussions with migrant workers from East Africa, North Africa, South Asia, and East Asia, as well as subject-matter expert interviews. Responding to a significant information gap on this population in Saudi Arabia, the report presents findings on the drivers of migration, recruitment experiences, employment conditions, exposure to environmental risks, and mobility intentions. The analysis provides empirical evidence to inform policymakers, researchers, and humanitarian actors working to enhance migrant protection in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region more broadly.

Key findings

- **Structural drivers of migration**: The vast majority of respondents cited economic hardship, unemployment, and low wages as key drivers for leaving their country of origin. These challenges were especially pronounced among respondents from East and North Africa.

- **Recruitment vulnerabilities**: Migration to Saudi Arabia was often facilitated by intermediaries, including informal brokers and private agencies. Many migrants reported incurring debt to secure employment, with cases of misinformation, hidden costs, and contract discrepancies highlighted in interviews.

- **Precarious and informal work**: A significant portion of migrants had previously engaged in informal work in their countries of origin, and many continued to work in insecure or daily labour arrangements in Saudi Arabia. East African and North African respondents were particularly affected.

- **Widespread remittance pressures**: Sending remittances was a near-universal practice among respondents and often described as a source of lifeline for the families receiving them. However, they also represented a major financial burden, with many migrants experiencing pressure to repay debt and support families despite limited earnings.

- **Exposure to climate-related risks**: While South and East Asian respondents frequently reported climate-related stressors in their areas of origin, nearly all respondents were exposed to extreme heat and/or dust storms in Saudi Arabia. These risks were often normalised or deprioritised compared to other economic concerns.

- **Limited access to protection and support**: Coping strategies for climate-related environmental risks at the workplace were largely self-initiated. Institutional or external support was rare, and employer-provided safeguards were inconsistent across regions and sectors.

- **Persistent discrimination and barriers to services**: Many respondents, particularly from South Asia, reported experiences of discrimination in the workplace and difficulties accessing healthcare, documentation, or grievance mechanisms.

- **Restricted mobility and future uncertainty**: While many respondents wished to stay in Saudi Arabia in the short term, long-term intentions varied. Those in more precarious legal or financial situations were often unable to act on plans to return or move onward, underscoring the constrained nature of (im)mobility.

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia stands as a pivotal hub for migration, home to one of the largest migrant populations in the world.[1] According to government estimates, in 2024, the number of non-Saudis residing in the country stood at 15.7 million, accounting for 44.4% of the total population.[2] The majority of migrants in the country are workers, constituting a staggering 65% of those employed in the private sector[3] and playing a foundational role in sustaining the Saudi economy overall.[4] Migrant workers, hailing predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, North Africa, and increasingly, East Africa,[5] are considered the engine driving significant economic segments.[6] Their contributions are indispensable across various sectors, most visibly in construction, agriculture, domestic work, and services;[7] often employed in low-paid, labour-intensive jobs.[8]

The country's long-standing reliance on foreign labour is deeply embedded in its development model, where migrants perform most manual and service-based lower-skilled jobs that nationals are often unwilling to take.[9] This segmentation has been reinforced by the Kafala sponsorship system, a regulatory framework that ties workers' legal residency to their employer, limiting their mobility, bargaining power, and access to justice.[10] **This creates a glaring paradox: the individuals who form the bedrock of the Kingdom's economic expansion efforts are simultaneously situated in positions of significant structural vulnerability.**[11] Recent reforms aimed at improving labour market flexibility for migrant workers under Saudi Labour Law, such as allowing job transfer without employer consent under certain conditions, have faced significant criticism for their enforcement gaps, limited scope, and lack of effectiveness.[12] Many migrants, especially those in irregular status or informal employment, continue to be placed in precarious situations.[13]

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia face overlapping forms of vulnerability. Poor working conditions, including excessive hours, denial of rest days, and unsafe environments, are common.[14] Investigative reports and human rights organisations have documented cases of unpaid wages, exploitative recruitment practices, and physical and verbal abuse, particularly among domestic workers and labourers.[15] The significant population of migrants who reside and work in the country irregularly are particularly exposed to human rights violations and face the risk of arbitrary detention, often under acute conditions.[16]

Compounding these structural challenges is the climate crisis. Saudi Arabia's already harsh environment — marked by extreme heat, water scarcity, and frequent dust storms — is being intensified by global warming.[17] **Temperatures in parts of the country regularly surpass 50°C, posing severe risks for outdoor workers, many of whom lack adequate protection.**[18] Studies across the Gulf, including on Saudi Arabia, have shown a clear link between climate stressors

1 The Global Migration Data Portal. International Migrant Population (stocks) Trends, accessed April 2025.
2 The Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) (2024). 2024 Population Estimates Statistics.
3 This proportion is calculated based on the GASTAT labour market statistics for Q4/2024, available at: https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/statistics-tabs?tab=436312&category=417515.
4 IMF (2024). Saudi Arabia: 2024 Article IV Consultation – Press Release and Staff Report.
5 The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (2023). Saudi Arabia Migration Profile | McAuliffe, M. and L.A. Oucho (eds.). (2024). Migration and migrants: Regional dimensions and developments.
6 The Institute for National Security Studies (2021) The Future Job Market in the Gulf States: The Challenge of Migrant Workers | Ayman Adham (2023) Structural demand for migrant labour: a bottom-up analysis of labour market segmentation in Saudi Arabia, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49:7, 1746-1767.
7 Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) (2025) The systematic exploitation of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia: The Plight of East African Migrants in Saudi Arabia. | Aysel Heeren (2025) Migration, work and radicalization in Saudi Arabia and UAE. University of Navarra.
8 Ibid | Fakhri J. Hasanov, Jeyhun I. Mikayilov, Muhammad Javid, Moayad Al-Rasasi, Frederick Joutz & Mohammed B Alabdullah (2021) Sectoral employment analysis for Saudi Arabia, Applied Economics, 53:45, 5267-5280
9 Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) (2025) The systematic exploitation of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia: The Plight of East African Migrants in Saudi Arabia. | Sobaih, A.E.E.; Elnasr, A.E.A. Local versus Foreign Worker Perceptions, Commitment and Attitudes toward Careers in Restaurants and Cafés: Evidence from Saudi Arabia. Sustainability 2023, 15, 5244
10 Human Rights Watch (2021), Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient | Walk Free (2023) The Global Slavery Index 2023, Minderoo Foundation.
11 Michal Rutkowski & Johannes Koettl (2020) Saudi Arabia announces major reforms for its migrant workers. World Bank Blogs. | Kali Robinson (2022) What Is the Kafala System?. Council on Foreign Relations
12 Annas Shaker (2024) Saudi's Labour Reform Initiative: An Overview. Migrants Rights | Human Rights Watch (2021), Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient.
13 Ibid.
14 Human Rights Watch (2024) Saudi Arabia: 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
15 Ibid | Abdi Latif Dahir and Justin Scheck (2025) Why Maids Keep Dying in Saudi Arabia. New York Times.
16 Migrant-rights.org and Global Detention Project (2024), Saudi Arabia: Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. | MMC (2024) Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue.
17 MMC (2024) Climate Change Impacts on Mobility in the Middle East: What do we know?
18 Ibid. | Dargin, J. (2023) Beyond "green pledges": Saudi Arabia and society-centred climate reforms. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

and migrant labour conditions, including acute heat-related illnesses, dehydration, and increased accident risks at the workplace.[19] Heat-related fatalities among migrant workers are a grim reality. Tragically, **since 2016, around 21,000 migrant labourers engaged in the construction of Saudi Arabia's ongoing megacity NEOM project are believed to have perished, with heat exposure noted as one of the contributing causes.**[20] While Saudi Arabia has pledged green reforms under its Vision 2030 strategy, climate governance remains top-down and technocratic, with limited attention to how environmental stress impacts migrant communities.[21]

These dynamics take on heightened urgency in light of Saudi Arabia's recently confirmed role as host of the FIFA World Cup in 2034, translating into several major infrastructure projects. Human rights groups and trade unions are drawing parallels with Qatar's 2022 experience, marked by widespread exploitation and thousands of deaths of migrants working under unsafe conditions, to which heat stress is a major contributing factor.[22] Many warn of similar or worse risks in Saudi Arabia, given the scale of required construction and existing migrant labour rights and protection deficits.[23]

Despite their centrality to the country's functioning and their rising vulnerability, **migrant workers in Saudi Arabia remain understudied and underrepresented in public discourse.** Data on this population is scarce, and field-based research remains limited. Understanding the migration experiences, labour conditions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and how these are affected by the country's harsh climate is crucial to informing policies and programmes centred around their protection and safeguarding their rights.

About this research

This research project is part of a broader regional initiative examining the climate–mobility nexus in diverse contexts across the Middle East, including four case studies in Iraq (Al-Qadissiyah), Syria (Al-Hasakeh), and Yemen (Aden and Al Maharah). Unlike the other case studies, which focus on the role of climate change in shaping mobility outcomes from countries of origin, **this standalone research examines conditions and experiences in a country of destination, offering a rare, field-based perspective on the realities of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.**

While developed within a climate-focused research framework, the study takes a necessarily broader view in order to meaningfully capture how climate and environmental stressors intersect with migrants' everyday lives. **In the context of Saudi Arabia, understanding the impacts of climate risks requires examining the wider structural and social conditions that shape migrant workers' exposure, vulnerability, and capacity to adapt and/or move.** Labour arrangements, legal constraints, access to protection, and economic pressures all play a central role in determining how migrants experience climate risks and whether or how these risks translate into mobility outcomes. The study therefore situates climate-related experiences within this wider landscape, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways and barriers that shape (im)mobility in context.

Alongside this report, the project produced an area-based case study for each of the four aforementioned locations. A synthesis document was also developed to consolidate the findings, drawing out cross-cutting insights across these locations and also including a summary of results from the Saudi Arabia case. All project outputs are available at: [add links]

19 MMC (2024) Climate Change Impacts on Mobility in the Middle East: What do we know?. | Human Rights Watch (2024) Saudi Arabia: 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.

20 Nick Ames (2024) Saudi Arabia's World Cup bid gathers pace – but at what cost to human life?. The Guardian. | Ceri Jones (2024) Saudi hits back at claim of 21,000 deaths due to safety violations. Health and Safety International

21 Dargin, J. (2023) Beyond "green pledges": Saudi Arabia and society-centred climate reforms. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

22 Pete Pattinson (2021) Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded. The Guardian. | Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2025) Saudi Arabia: ILO complaint brought by global union deemed admissible | Nick Ames (2024) Saudi Arabia's World Cup bid gathers pace – but at what cost to human life?. The Guardian.

23 Ibid.

2. Research scope

This research **project investigates the impacts of climate and environmental stressors on migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on how these factors intersect with broader vulnerabilities and mobility outcomes.** Conducted as part of a wider regional initiative examining the climate–mobility nexus in the Middle East, this case study provides in-depth, field-based insights into the lived experiences of migrant workers engaged in low-skilled labour in Saudi Arabia, a population often employed under precarious conditions and highly exposed to climate-related risks.

The research aims to:

- **Deepen understanding of the perceptions, behaviours, aspirations, and mobility outcomes of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia** in the context of climate and environmental stressors. This includes examining how migrants perceive risks in their living and working environments, whether and how they adapt to changing climate conditions, and how these factors influence their aspirations for the future, including their mobility decisions or (in)abilities. The research also considers prior climate-related experiences in countries of origin, which may shape migrant workers' vulnerabilities, perceptions, and adaptive behaviours after arrival in Saudi Arabia.

- **Amplify the voices of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia who are directly affected by climate risks**, ensuring their lived experiences inform policy discussions and interventions. In line with accountability and inclusion principles, the study aims to provide space for migrant workers to describe the challenges they face, their coping strategies, and the support they need, particularly in light of current gaps in protection and representation.

- **Generate knowledge on the nature and drivers of (im)mobility among migrant workers in Saudi Arabia** facing climate and environmental stressors. The study examines both voluntary and involuntary dimensions of (im)mobility, analysing how factors such as exposure to hazards, employment and living conditions, or financial abilities affect migrant workers' decisions to move, return, or remain in place.

- **Inform evidence-based policies and programmes** that respond to the climate-related challenges faced by migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. This includes identifying concrete measures to reduce vulnerability, such as improving access to adequate housing, healthcare, and climate-resilient work arrangements, while strengthening legal protections and support systems. This research aims to contribute to the development of sustainable and equitable solutions and effective governance frameworks that address the root causes of forced mobility or immobility and facilitate safe and orderly migration pathways for migrant workers affected by climate change while considering the specific legal and socioeconomic vulnerabilities of this population within the Saudi context.

Research questions

The data collection efforts were guided by the following overarching research questions:

- How do migrant workers in Saudi Arabia perceive and experience the impacts of climate and environmental stressors on their livelihoods and well-being?

- How have climate-related events affected the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers in their countries of origin prior to migrating to Saudi Arabia?

- What are the primary drivers of mobility and immobility among migrant workers in the context of climate change, and how do these intersect with legal, social, and economic factors in Saudi Arabia?

- What adaptation and coping strategies do migrant workers employ in response to climate and environmental stressors, and how do these relate to their mobility choices and constraints?

- How do migrant workers assess the outcomes and challenges of migration in relation to their original goals, and what are their current aspirations and needs, particularly in light of climate-related risks?

3. Key terminology

The following definitions were drawn to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency throughout the research.

- **Migrant worker:** A person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which they are not a national. (IOM (2019), Glossary on Migration).
- **Climate-related environmental stressors:** Perceived and experienced long-term meteorological impacts on the ecosystem that may affect the functioning of the biological system (e.g. NCBI (2016) National Center for Biotechnology Information).
- **Climate-related hazards:** Natural meteorological events that pose danger to humans and the environment. These events occur due to deficiencies or excesses of precipitation, destructive winds and anomalous temperatures (based on WMO and UNFCCC terminology around climate-related risks/hazards and extreme events).
- **Resilience:** The ability of individuals, households, communities, cities, institutions, systems, and societies to prevent, resist, absorb, adapt, respond and recover positively, efficiently, and effectively when faced with a wide range of risks, while maintaining an acceptable level of functioning and without compromising long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and well-being for all (IOM (2019) Glossary on Migration).
- **Vulnerability:** The limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm. This limited capacity is the result of the unique interaction of individual, household, community, and structural characteristics and conditions (IOM (2019) Glossary on Migration).

4. Methodology

The research employed a mixed methods design, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data collected between January and March 2025. Fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with a data collection partner, who mobilised a team of field enumerators from within the migrant community.

4.1 Quantitative data collection

The quantitative component of the study involved individual surveys with migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, conducted between 16 January and 12 February 2025. A total of 231 surveys were completed across two key urban centres – Jeddah (123) and Riyadh (108) – both of which host some of the country's largest migrant worker populations.

The survey instrument was designed to capture a wide range of themes related to migrant workers' experiences, vulnerabilities, and mobility outcomes in the context of climate and environmental stressors. Key areas of exploration included:

- Conditions in countries of origin, with attention to climate-related experiences and how these shaped motivations and expectations;
- Migration experiences, including drivers, decision-making dynamics and journey characteristics;
- Working and living conditions, such as access to employer-provided protections and essential services;
- Exposure to environmental risks and stressors in Saudi Arabia, and their perceived impact;
- Adaptation and coping strategies, both individual and employer-supported, in response to climate stressors; and
- Mobility intentions and capacities, including factors influencing the ability or desire to remain, return, or migrate onward.

The quantitative sample included migrant workers originating from four major regions: South Asia, East Africa, North Africa, and East Asia, reflecting the dominant nationalities among workers engaged in low-skill jobs in Saudi Arabia (See table 1 for a breakdown of surveys collected by region of origin). Ensuring representation across these regional groups was essential to explore how migration experiences, vulnerabilities, and climate-related impacts may differ depending on migrants' backgrounds and circumstances.

Table 1. Number of surveys conducted by region of origin[24]

Region of origin	Number of surveys
East Africa	62
East Asia	50
North Africa	53
South Asia	66
Overall	**231**

24 To ensure robustness and account for potential non-responses or data quality issues, a buffer of five surveys per population group was included in the sample design.

Respondents for the four regions were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with the following eligibility criteria:

- Respondents were aged 18 or above;
- Had resided in Saudi Arabia for at least one year, to ensure they had sufficient exposure to local working and environmental conditions.
- Worked in climate-sensitive low-skill occupations, defined as jobs that primarily involve outdoor labour or extended time spent in open environments (e.g., construction, sewage and sanitation, delivery, agriculture, and related services).

Surveys were carried out using a Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) modality, administered on handheld devices. Following consultation with the data collection partner, the survey tool was translated into Urdu and colloquial Arabic, alongside English, to ensure accessibility and comprehension across all targeted nationalities and linguistic groups. This approach helped maximise data quality and inclusiveness for respondents who could not be effectively surveyed in English.

4.2 Qualitative data collection

The qualitative component of the research was designed to explore migrant workers' lived experiences in greater depth, with a focus on how climate and environmental stressors intersect with labour conditions, mobility outcomes, and personal decision-making. Three qualitative methods were used: focus group discussions, in-depth individual interviews, and key informant interviews.

Focus group discussions

Four focus group discussions were conducted with adult male migrant workers engaged in low-skilled climate-sensitive jobs in Saudi Arabia. Participants were grouped by region of origin—South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, and North Africa—to capture shared regional experiences and perceptions. Each discussion brought together 6 to 8 participants and explored collective experiences of environmental stressors in the workplace and living environments, perceived risks, coping mechanisms, and how these challenges influence aspirations and mobility. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, including referrals from survey respondents and local community networks.

The focus group discussions included participants from a range of national backgrounds. The North Africa group consisted of Egyptian participants. The East Africa discussion brought together individuals from Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Participants in the South Asia session were from Pakistan and India, while the East Asia group was composed entirely of Filipino participants.

In-depth individual interviews

Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult male migrant workers from different nationalities and occupational backgrounds, all of whom were or had been engaged in low-skilled, climate-sensitive jobs in Saudi Arabia. Participants were selected to represent four analytically defined mobility outcomes – voluntary immobility, involuntary immobility, voluntary mobility, and involuntary mobility – to better understand how environmental exposure interacts with a range of lived experiences and migration trajectories. Individuals across all four mobility profiles were deliberately identified on the basis of having experienced some degree of climate or environmental exposure in Saudi Arabia, ensuring the relevance of their experiences to the research focus. These interviews helped uncover how such exposures shaped individual decisions, constraints, and adaptive behaviours, structured as follows:

- **Voluntary mobility** (2): Respondents who made the decision to return to their country of origin or move elsewhere, (partly) influenced by environmental challenges.
- **Involuntary mobility** (2): Respondents who were forced to return to their countries of origin or relocate elsewhere, with environmental stressors playing a role in their departure.

- **Voluntary immobility** (3): Respondents who had experienced environmental stressors but had chosen to remain in Saudi Arabia, for instance, due to economic aspirations or perceived relative stability.

- **Involuntary immobility** (2): Respondents who expressed a desire to leave Saudi Arabia, with exposure to environmental risks being at least one of the drivers, but who were unable to do so due to constraints such as financial or legal barriers.

Sampling was purposive and supported by snowballing, with attention to variation in nationality, sector of employment, and lived experience. All voluntary and involuntary mobility interviews were conducted remotely with individuals who had returned to their countries of origin.

Table 2 below provides a breakdown of individual interviews by mobility profile and respondents' countries of origin.

Table 2. Distribution of individual interviews by mobility profile and country of origin

Mobility outcome	Country of origin	Number of interviews	Total per mobility outcome
Voluntary mobility	Egypt (North Africa)	1	2
	Pakistan (South Asia)	1	
Involuntary mobility	Egypt (North Africa)	1	2
	Pakistan (South Asia)	1	
Involuntary immobility	Egypt (North Africa)	1	2
	Somalia (East Africa)	1	
Voluntary immobility	Egypt (North Africa)	1	3
	Sudan (East Africa)	1	
	Philippines (East Asia)	1	
Overall		9	

Key informant interviews

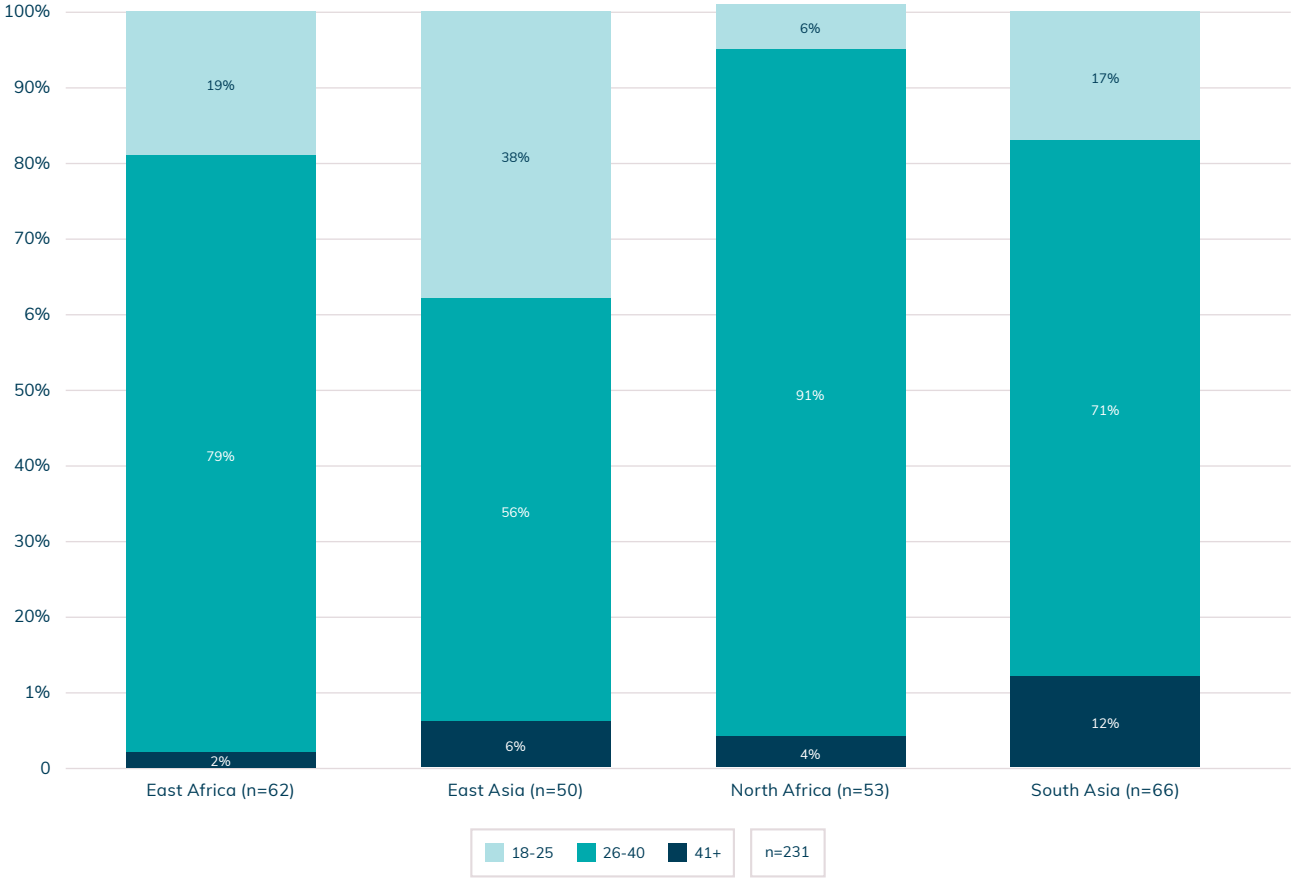
Three key informant interviews were conducted with subject-matter experts on migration, labour, and climate governance in the Gulf. These included researchers, policy advisors, and representatives of organisations working on migrant rights or climate-related risk. The interviews provided valuable contextualisation of the field data, offering insight into policy dynamics, governance gaps, and systemic risks affecting migrant workers.

4.3 Profiles of survey respondents

Gender and age

All survey respondents were men.[25] The majority were between the ages of 26 and 40, making this the most common age group across all regions of origin.[26] This age bracket was especially dominant among North African respondents (91%), then East Africans (79%) and South Asians (71%). Among East Asian respondents, this age group also represented a majority, though less markedly so (56%) (See figure 1).

Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents



Nationalities

Among those from South Asia, the majority were Pakistani (68%), followed by Indian (17%) and Bangladeshi (15%) nationals. North African respondents were overwhelmingly from Egypt (98%), with a small minority from Morocco (one individual). Sudanese nationals made up the largest share (44%) of those from East Africa, followed by Somali (24%), Ethiopian (21%), and Eritrean (11%) respondents. All participants from East Asia were Filipino nationals (A full breakdown of respondents' nationalities by region is presented in Table 1 below). The nationalities represented in the sample broadly reflect the largest migrant communities from each region residing in Saudi Arabia, as documented in the 2022 official national census. [27]

25 Since the research specifically targeted individuals engaged in primarily outdoor, climate-exposed occupations and while efforts were made to reach female respondents, the sample reflects the gender imbalance typically found in these sectors, where women are significantly underrepresented or more difficult to reach. National government statistics estimate that in 2024, men constituted approximately 77% of the total non-Saudi population in Saudi Arabia.

26 The age distribution of the sample broadly aligns with general demographic patterns among the non-Saudi population. According to 2024 estimates by the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, nearly half of non-Saudis fall between the ages of 25 and 39, which constitutes the largest segment of the foreign population.

27 Saudi Arabia General Authority for Statistics, 2022 Non-Saudi Population census.

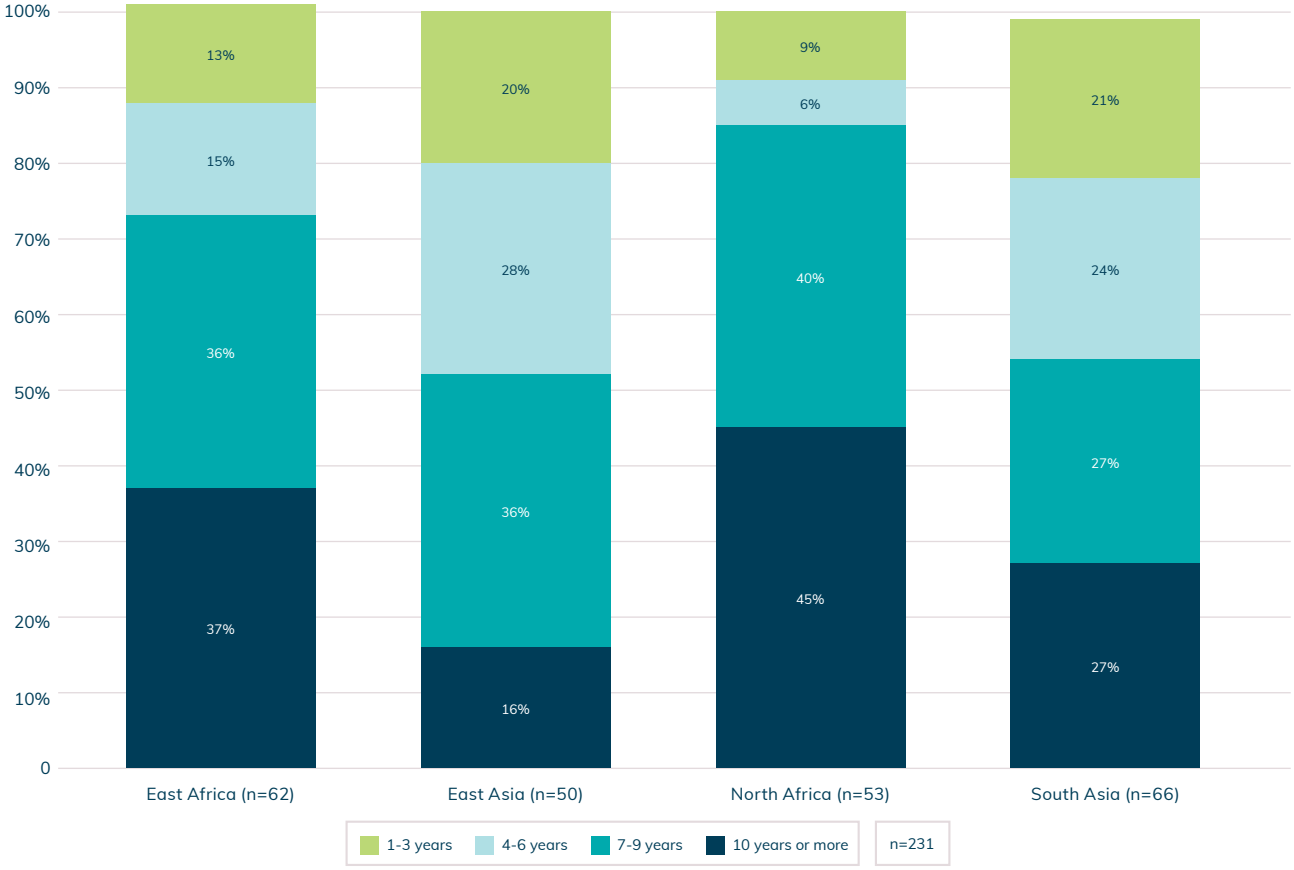
Table 3. Nationalities of respondents by region of origin (count)

Region	Nationality	Count of Respondents
East Africa (n=62)	Eritrea	7
	Ethiopia	13
	Somalia	15
	Sudan	27
East Asia (n=50)	Philippines	50
North Africa (n=53)	Egypt	52
	Morocco	1
South Asia (n=66)	Bangladesh	10
	India	11
	Pakistan	45

Duration of stay in Saudi Arabia

Respondents reported a range of durations spent in Saudi Arabia, with 4–6 years (34%) and 1–3 years (32%) being the most commonly reported timeframes overall. North and East African respondents were more likely to report recent arrivals of 1–3 years, while East Asians were more evenly spread across mid-to-longer durations, including 7–9 years and 10 years or more. South Asians showed a more mixed pattern, with a significant minority reporting stays of 10 years or longer (see Figure 2 for regional variations in reported length of stay). Given the research focus on the potential impacts of climate-related factors on migrant workers' experiences, the study design specifically targeted individuals with a minimum residency of one year in Saudi Arabia. This criterion ensured that survey participants had experienced at least one full cycle of local climate and had sufficient exposure to local working and environmental conditions to meaningfully reflect on their experiences.

Figure 2. Respondents' reported length of stay in Saudi Arabia



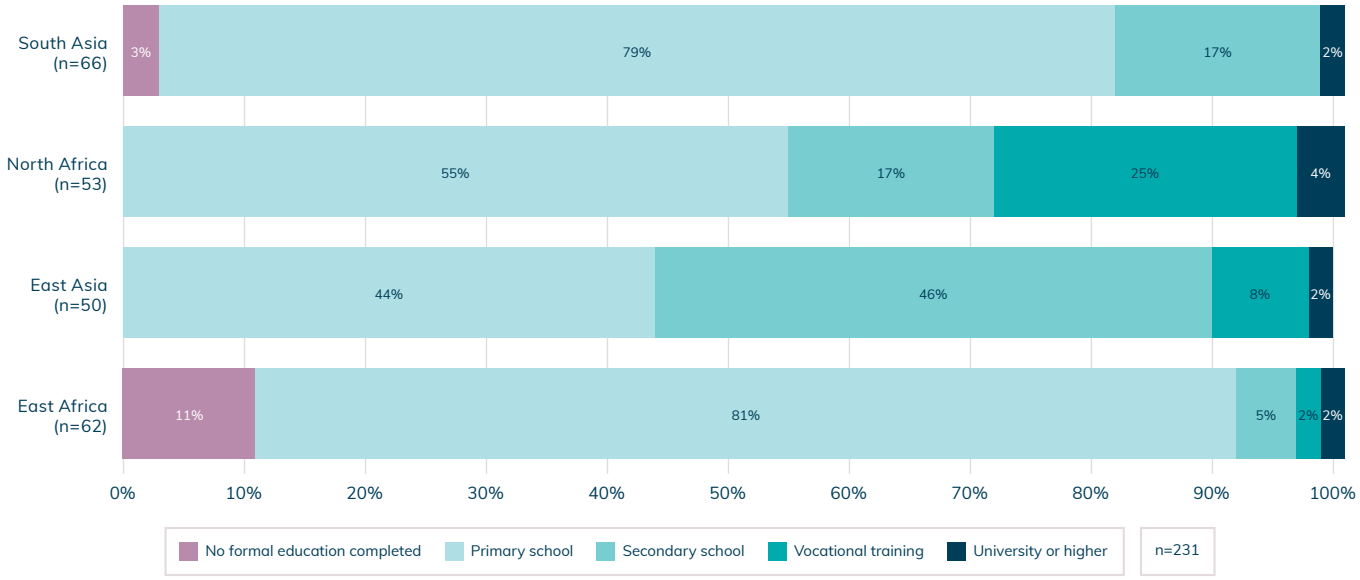
Civil status

Most respondents across all regions reported being married, including 70% of East Asian and 68% of South Asian respondents. Similar majorities were observed among East Africans (60%) and North Africans (59%). Those who identified as single made up a smaller proportion, ranging from 26% among East Asians to 40% among North Africans. A small minority — between 1% and 4% across regions — reported being divorced.

Educational attainment

Overall, the majority of respondents reported having completed only primary education, particularly among East Africans (81%), South Asians (79%), and North Africans (55%).[28] In contrast, East Asian respondents were more evenly split between primary (44%) and secondary (46%) levels of education. Only a small minority reported reaching university-level education, ranging from 2% to 4% across regions. Vocational training was notably more common among North African respondents (25%), while it was rare or absent in the other groups. Respondents with no formal education were mostly concentrated among East Africans (11%) (see Figure 3). These findings reflect what one key informant described as a widespread pattern among migrants engaged in low-skilled work in Saudi Arabia, noting that 'many have little to no formal education'.

Figure 3. Reported educational attainment among respondents



Sectors of employment

This study focused on migrants working in climate-vulnerable sectors, which are typically characterised by predominant outdoor or physically demanding labour and greater exposure to environmental risks.

Survey respondents were asked about the sector of their primary job in Saudi Arabia, defined as the occupation that generated the most income. (See Figure 4)

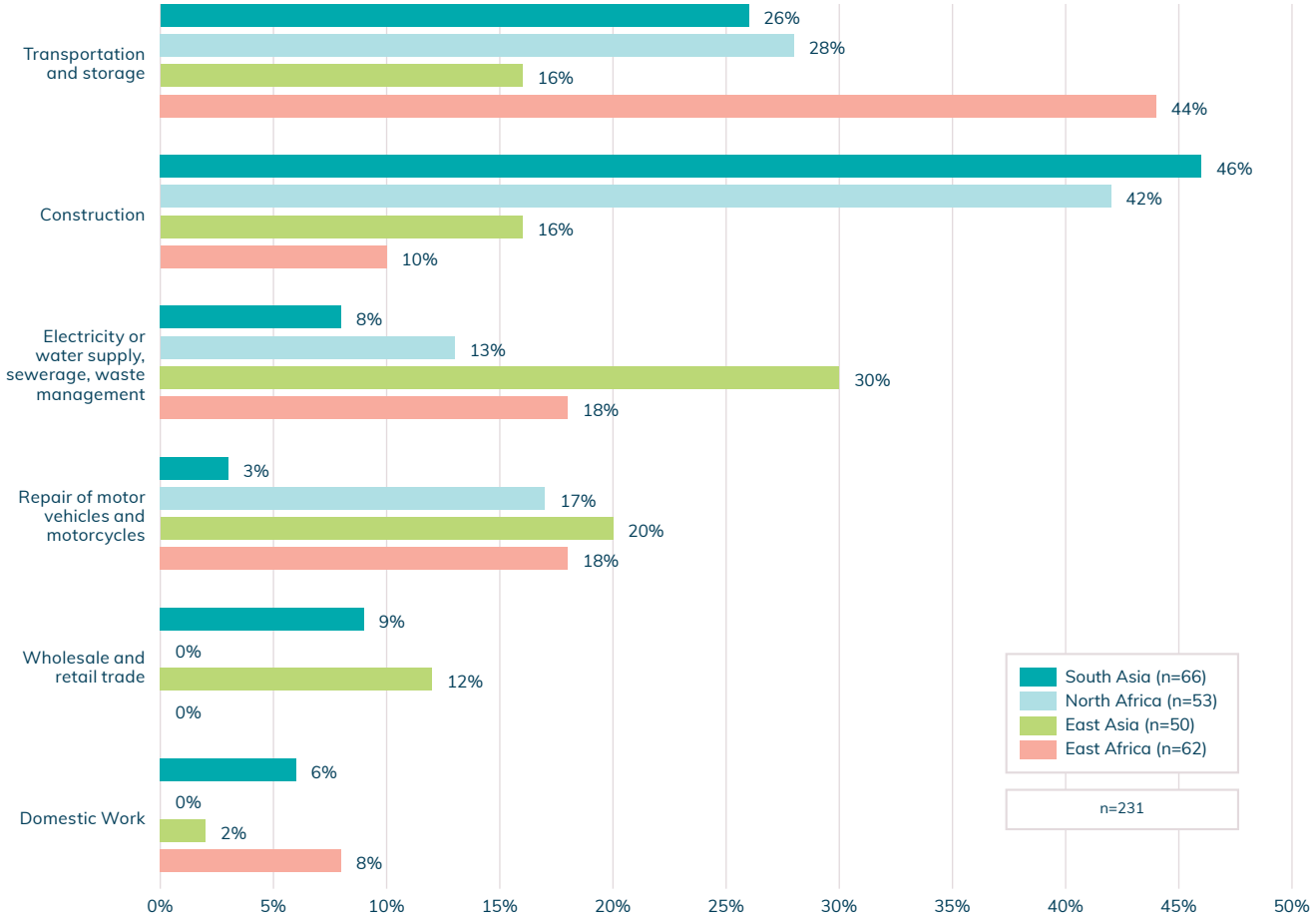
Transportation and storage[29] emerged as the most commonly reported sector overall, particularly among East African respondents (44%), and to a lesser extent North Africans (28%) and South Asians (26%). Respondents from South Asia (46%) and North Africa (42%) most commonly reported working in construction, whereas this sector was less prominent among East Africans (10%) and East Asians (16%).

28 Respondents were specifically asked about formal schooling.

29 Transportation and storage is an official sectoral category based on international labour classifications. It includes activities related to the transport of passengers and freight, as well as warehousing, logistics, and storage services. For the full sectoral classification, see United Nations Statistics Division – ISIC, available at: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/classifications/Econ/isic.

East Asian respondents showed the most diversity across sectors, with 30% working in electricity, water, or waste management, 20% in vehicle repair, and 16% in construction. A smaller number of respondents across all regions were engaged in domestic work, manufacturing, retail, or niche sectors such as pastoralism.

Figure 4. Most prominent sectors of respondents' primary jobs in Saudi Arabia[30]



4.4 Ethical considerations

The research adhered to MMC's ethical standards, with a strong focus on protecting the safety, rights, and dignity of all participants. The following principles guided the design and implementation of data collection:

- **Do no harm**: All efforts were made to minimise risks of psychological distress, stigma, or harm. Special attention was paid to ensuring participants' safety, including conducting interviews in safe and neutral locations, away from their workplaces.
- **Informed consent and confidentiality**: All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained before each interview/discussion, and participants were free to decline or withdraw at any time. Data was anonymised to protect identities and treated with strict confidentiality.
- **People-centred and inclusive**: The research prioritised the voices of migrant workers themselves, ensuring diversity across nationality, sector, gender, and mobility outcome.
- **Trained and ethical data collection**: data collection was conducted by trained enumerators familiar with ethical

30 Other selected responses, not represented in this chart, included manufacturing (1%), Pastoralism (1%), and car wash services (1%).

research practices, including how to manage potentially sensitive topics with care and respect.

- **Responsible data handling**: All data was securely stored and handled in line with data protection standards, ensuring responsible use solely for research purposes.

4.5 Research limitations

This study was designed as an exploratory inquiry into the experiences of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia in the context of climate-related stressors. While every effort was made to ensure a robust and inclusive approach, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study relied on non-probabilistic sampling methods. As such, the findings are not statistically representative of all migrant workers in Saudi Arabia but are intended to offer indicative insights into key trends, challenges, and perceptions.

Second, although participants were grouped by broad regions of origin – North Africa, East Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia – not all nationalities within these regions present in Saudi Arabia were represented. This means that the findings cannot be generalised to all migrant workers from those areas.

Third, the study did not include female migrant workers, despite efforts to do so. This was primarily due to the focus on specific sectors of employment that are male-dominated in Saudi Arabia, such as construction, transportation, and outdoor manual labour. As a result, women, who are more often employed in domestic work, hospitality, or caregiving roles, were not represented in the sample. Domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, a large portion of whom are women, often live in their employers' homes and are subject to restrictions on their mobility and communication. While some male domestic workers were covered in the current study, it is important to note that female workers are often among the most vulnerable to both climate and labour-related risks, and warrant dedicated research attention.

Fourth, the study did not reach irregular migrant workers. Individuals with irregular legal status, such as those who overstayed their visas, fled abusive employers, or entered the country through unofficial channels, are particularly hard to access due to the risks they face, including detention and deportation. Despite being among the most precariously positioned migrants, their perspectives remain underrepresented in the findings.

Finally, the research was geographically limited to the urban centres of Jeddah and Riyadh. These cities host some of the largest populations of migrant workers in the country, but the findings may not reflect the experiences of those living in secondary cities, industrial zones, or rural areas. In particular, migrants engaged in agricultural work, a sector highly exposed to climate stressors, were not covered by this research due to their relative inaccessibility within the selected locations.

5. Research findings

5.1 Conditions in countries of origin

Household characteristics

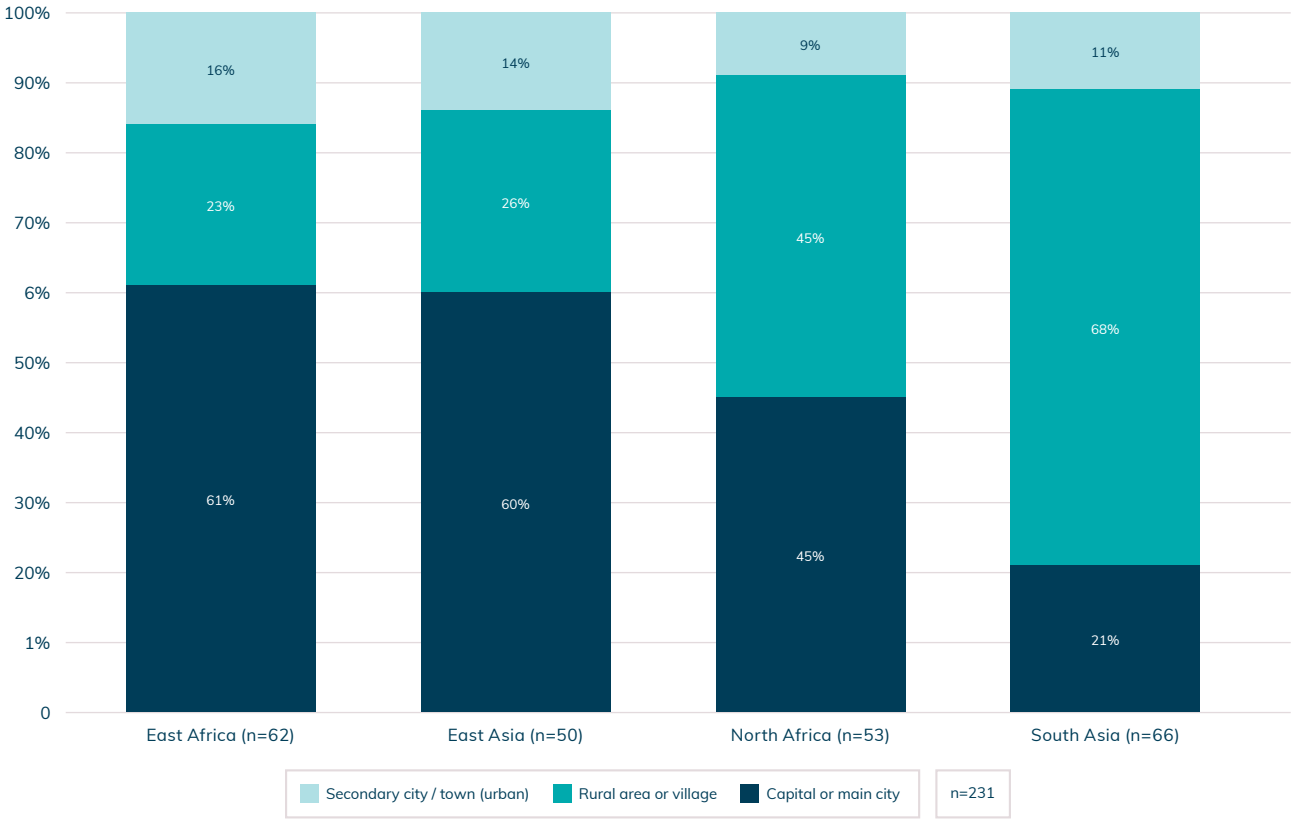
Respondents' households in countries of origin tended to be moderately large, with over 60% reporting four or more household members.

On average, reported household size was 4.2 people. Notably, there were some differences across regions of origin. The largest average household size was found among South Asian respondents (5.6 people), followed by North Africans (4.1 people). In contrast, East Africans and East Asians reported smaller household sizes on average, with 3.6 and 3.1 people, respectively.

When asked to describe the location where their household in their country of origin resides, respondents from East Africa (61%) and East Asia (60%) most commonly reported secondary cities or towns.[31] North African respondents were evenly split between rural areas (45%) and secondary towns (45%). Notably, South Asian respondents were the most likely to report a rural household location, at 68%. Across all regions, residence in a capital or major city was relatively uncommon, reported by just 9% to 16% of respondents (see Figure 5).

The limited reported presence of respondents' households in main urban centres suggests that migration may be influenced not only by factors relating to rural marginalisation, but also by constrained economic prospects or less favourable living conditions in secondary cities and towns. Capital cities, on the other hand, may be perceived as offering either insufficient or out-of-reach opportunities, and as such, these cities might not be seen as viable internal migration destinations. Additionally, residence in rural or secondary urban areas may also reflect varying degrees of household precarity, given the often more limited access to services, infrastructure, and stable livelihoods in such settings.

Figure 5. Type of household location in country of origin, as described by respondents



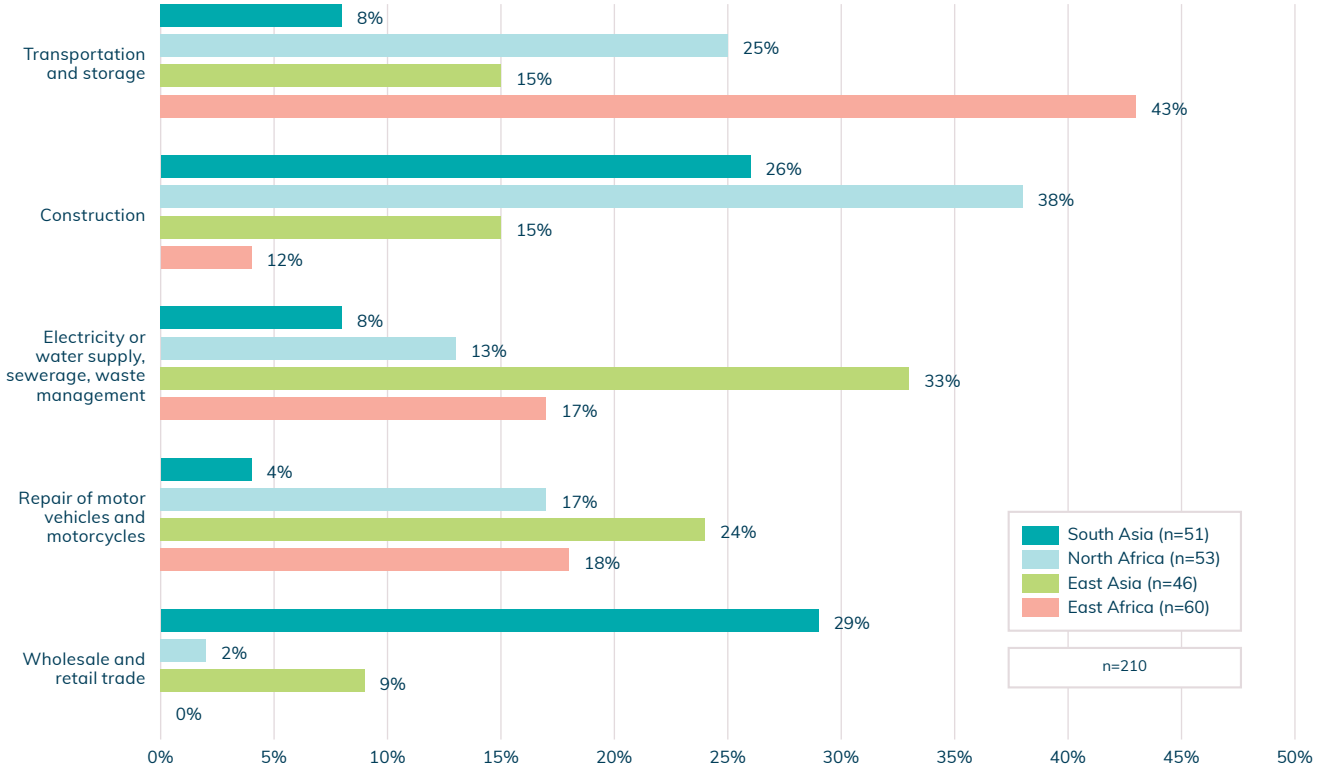
31 "Secondary cities or towns" refers to urban areas that are not the primary capital or largest metropolitan centre of the country. These may include provincial capitals, district towns, or other mid-sized urban settlements that serve as regional hubs.

Occupations in countries of origin

Inquired about their primary occupation before coming to Saudi Arabia, a significant majority of respondents reported being engaged in irregular or informal work, a trend most pronounced among East African (92%), North African (87%), and East Asian (68%) participants. Only a small portion of respondents reported having formal employment, ranging from 5% in East Africa to 18% in East Asia. Notably, self-employment was more common among South Asian respondents (18%), and a few also mentioned studying as their main activity (12%). **The predominance of informal work in respondents' reported employment histories points to the structural limitations often seen in domestic labour markets in countries of origin, with many migrants having navigated unstable or insecure livelihoods prior to their move to Saudi Arabia.**

Pre-migration employment reported by many respondents was concentrated in sectors involving manual labour, often characterized by physically demanding tasks and potential exposure to climate variability. Among those who reported engaging in any form of employment prior to migrating to Saudi Arabia (n=210), most indicated having worked in manual or infrastructure-related sectors, particularly transportation and storage, and construction.[32] These two sectors were especially dominant among East African respondents (43% reporting transportation and storage, n=46) and North African respondents (38% mentioning construction, n=53). South Asian respondents showcased a more varied employment background, with notable shares reporting work in retail (29%) and construction (26%), and almost uniquely among the regions, agriculture (12%). Meanwhile, East Asian respondents most commonly cited employment in electricity, water and waste management (33%), vehicle repair (24%), and construction (15%). (See figure 6)

Figure 6. Top five most commonly cited work sectors prior to migrating to Saudi Arabia, among respondents who reported engaging in any form of employment[33]



32 The question referred to the main type of work or industry in which respondents earned the most income prior to migrating, rather than all activities they may have engaged in.

33 The graph shows sectors that were reported by at least 10% of the respondents. Other less frequently mentioned sectors included agriculture (3%), domestic work (3%), manufacturing (2%) and pastoralism (1%).

Remittances

Saudi Arabia stands as one of the world's foremost sources of international remittances, ranking second globally in 2022 with estimated outflows totalling USD 39.35 billion.[34] This substantial financial flow is fundamentally driven by the Kingdom's large migrant worker population. Consequently, these large-scale outflows represent a structural characteristic of the Saudi economy, intrinsically linking its performance to the financial well-being of numerous sending countries via this channel.[35] Remittances from Saudi Arabia are directed primarily towards nations in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including major recipients like India (estimated $13 billion from Saudi Arabia in 2021), Pakistan, Egypt, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Yemen.[36] For many of these low- and middle-income economies, the inflows are a crucial source of external finance, often exceeding official development assistance and foreign direct investment in volume,[37] and demonstrating notable resilience compared to more volatile capital flows, particularly during global economic downturns.[38]

Reflecting this broader context, **sending remittances was reported as a near-universal practice among surveyed migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, highlighting their critical role in supporting families back home. Beyond their prevalence, remittances were often described as a critical income source and in some cases, the primary financial lifeline for households, pointing to the heavy financial responsibilities borne by migrant workers.**

Overall, 91% of respondents reported regularly sending remittances to their household in their country of origin. This figure reached 100% among South Asian respondents and remained extremely high among North Africans (98%), East Asians (96%), and East Africans (97%). Among respondents who reported remitting (n=226), nearly three-quarters (73%) said their household in their country of origin completely relies on these remittances to meet basic needs or sustain livelihoods, while a further 19% reported partial reliance. Only 8% of all respondents stated that their household does not at all rely on the remittances they send. (see Figure 7)

Figure 7. Does your household currently rely on these remittances for their basic needs or livelihoods? (among respondents who reported regularly sending remittances)

34 IOM (2024) International Remittances. World Migration Report 2024, Chapter 2.
35 IMF (2017) International Remittances, Migration, and Primary Commodities in FSGM; Singh, P. & Abdalla, M. (2021) Migration trends and patterns in South Asia and management approaches and initiatives.
36 Ratha, D. & Plaza, S. (2022) Bilateral Remittance Matrix: New Estimates for 2021. World Bank Blogs | Migration Policy Institute (Accessed 2025) Bilateral Remittance Flows (2021) and International Migrants by Country (2020).
37 The Global Migration Data Portal (2024) Remittances Overview.
38 Georges Naufal (2024) GCC Remittance Flows: Resiliency During Rough Seas - Policy Brief No. 9, April 2024, Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population Programme (GLMM) at the Gulf Research Center (GRC).

Qualitative findings reinforced the central role that remittances play in sustaining families across origin countries, while also highlighting the emotional and financial pressure this places on migrant workers. Participants across all regions described sending money home regularly – often monthly – and referred to these transfers as essential for covering basic needs such as food, education, rent, and healthcare.

> *"I send almost every beginning of the month; it is around 1500 [Saudi Riyal [USD ~399]] and sometimes it is less and sometimes it is more than that... They use it to pay for food, electricity, water and the basics like clothes too."*
> **Somali interviewee**[39]

Several interviewees and focus group participants reported being the sole provider for their household, with no other income to rely on. As one participant in a focus group with East African workers put it: "*My family depends on me 200%; they have no other source of income.*" Another added, "*I alone support my entire family in Sudan.*" **Some respondents expressed concern about rising costs in both Saudi Arabia and their country of origin, which made it increasingly difficult to meet expectations.** A South Asian participant explained, "*Even the rent... we have to give the rent here as well as have to send the amount of rent in India.*"

While remittances were often framed as a responsibility or moral obligation, several interviewees also expressed pride in being able to provide for their families. However, the overall picture emerging from qualitative accounts is one of significant pressure, especially for workers in lower-income or precarious employment. These findings highlight the dual nature of remittances: as both a critical coping strategy for families facing economic and environmental hardship, and a source of personal and financial strain for the workers providing them.

Climate and environmental stressors in areas of origin

Exposure

Survey respondents were asked whether their area of residence in their country of origin had experienced any environment- or climate-related stressors in the five years prior to their departure.

The findings point to stark regional differences in reported environmental or climate-related stressors prior to migration, with a majority of South and East Asian respondents indicating that their areas of origin had been affected by stressors, including flooding, tropical cyclones or severe storms, and extreme temperatures.

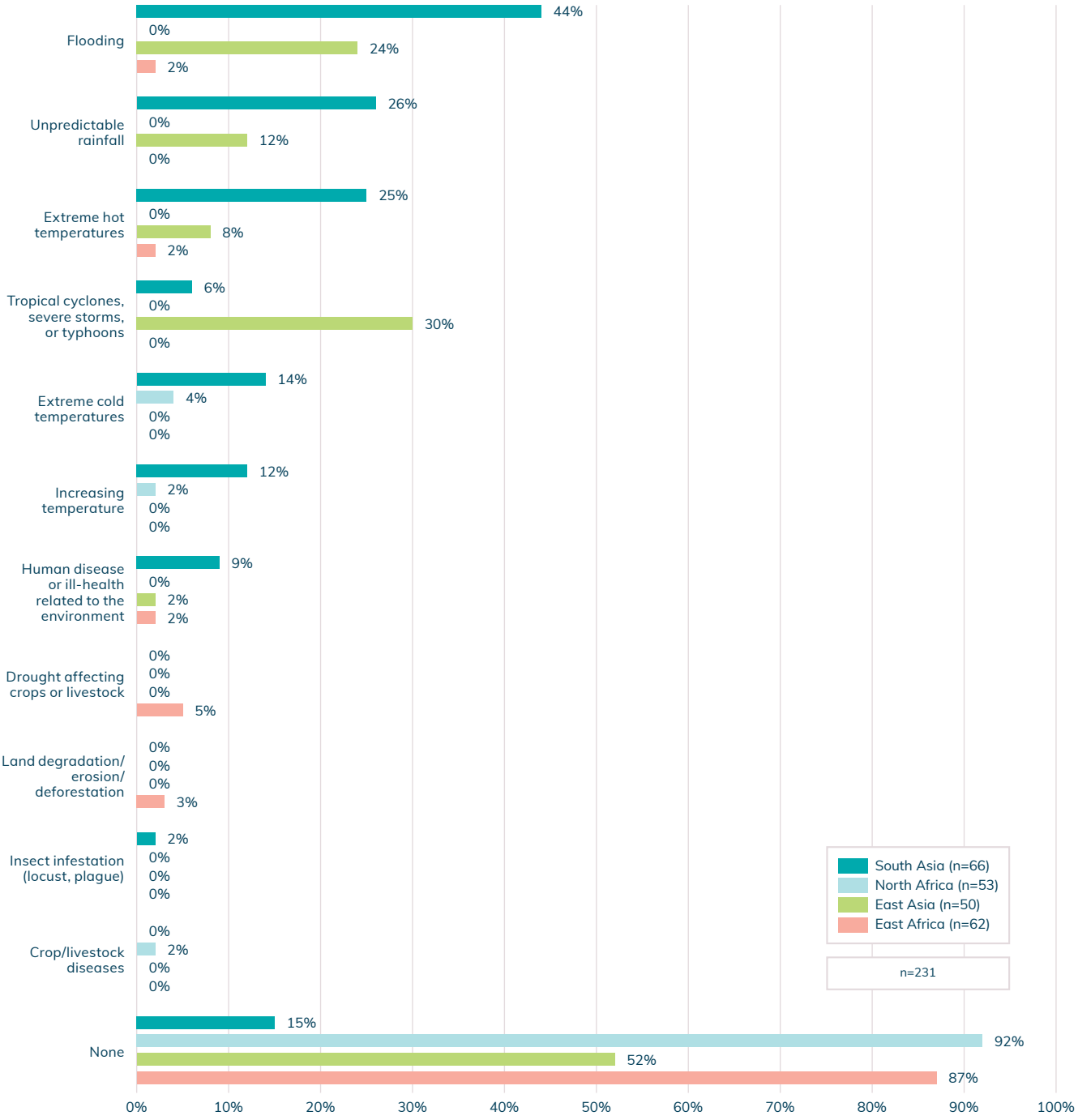
While a majority of respondents (60%) did not report any weather- or environment-related events occurring in their area of residence in the five years prior to migrating, this varied widely by region. The share of respondents who did not report any such events was especially high in North Africa (92%) and East Africa (87%).

In contrast, only 15% of South Asian respondents said the same, indicating that the vast majority (85%) had experienced at least one such event prior to migrating. The most commonly reported hazards among this group were flooding (44%), unpredictable rainfall (26%), and extreme hot temperatures (26%). Smaller proportions also pointed to extreme cold (14%) and increasing temperatures (12%).

Among East Asian respondents, 52% reported experiencing environmental stressors; the most frequent were tropical cyclones or severe storms (30%) and flooding (24%). Very few East African respondents reported any such events, with only isolated mentions of drought (5%) and land degradation (3%). Reporting among North African respondents was similarly limited, with only small percentages citing environmental stressors. (See Figure 8)

39 Involuntary immobility individual interview.

Figure 8. Reported environmental and climate-related events in areas of origin in the five years prior to respondents' migration

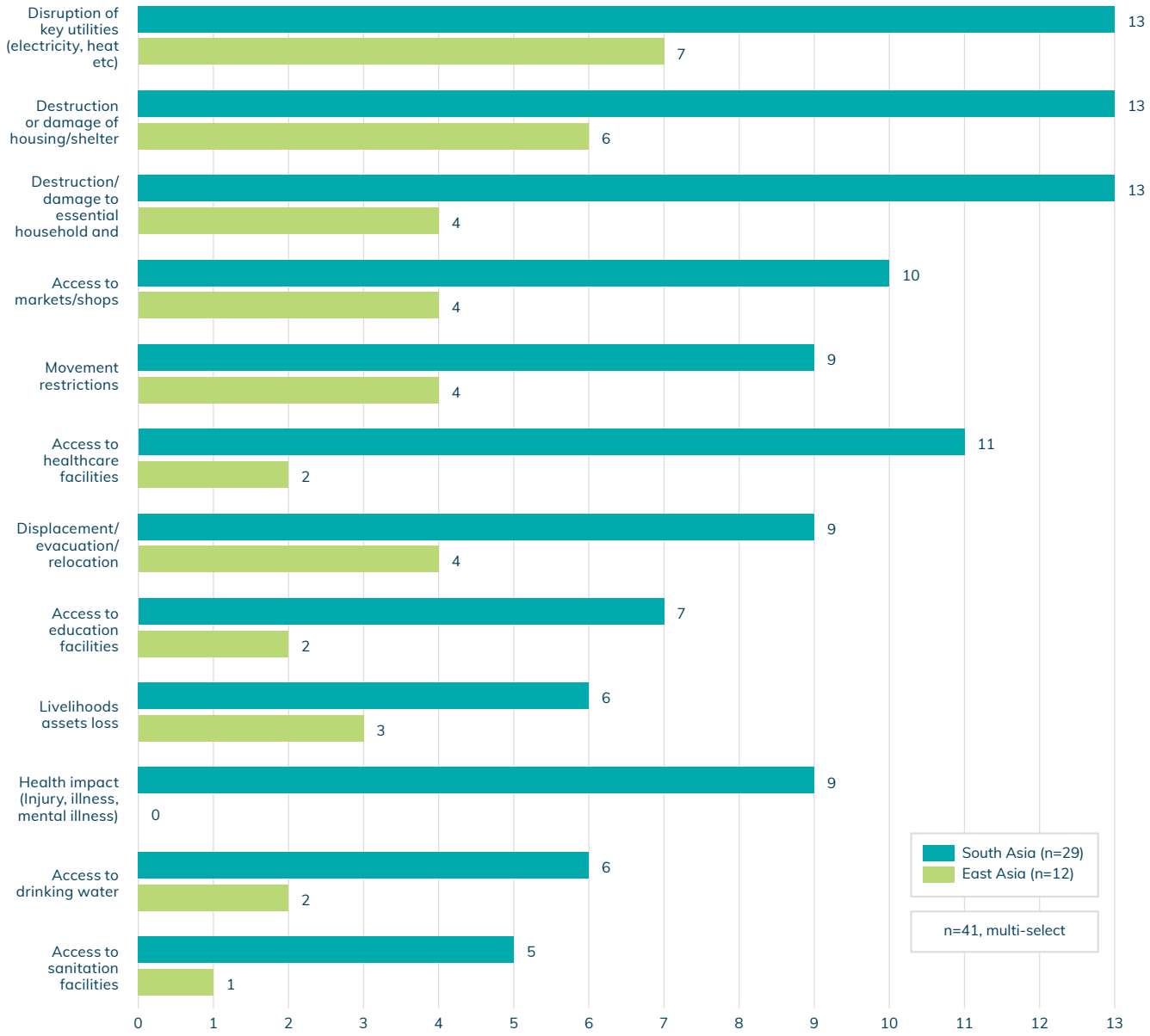


Impacts

Across regions of origin, respondents who reported experiencing environmental events in the five years prior to migration described a wide range of associated impacts that affected them and their households (if applicable), particularly disruptions to housing, utilities, and access to services. Given that South and East Asian respondents were most likely to report such events, the analysis below focuses on these two groups and the impacts associated with the most frequently reported hazards in each region.

Flooding, the most common hazard reported in both South (n=29) and East Asia (n=12), was frequently linked to disruptions to key utilities (such as heating and electricity) (20), damage to homes and essential household items (17), as well as hampered access to markets and healthcare (13) facilities (13). A number of respondents also cited displacement (13), restricted movement (13), and adverse health effects (9). While a small number reported no significant impact, most described multiple disruptions to daily life. (See figure 9)

Figure 9. Most reported impacts of flooding in areas of origin on respondents (and their households) in the five years prior to migration, among South and East Asian respondents who reported exposure to such events during that period[40]



For South Asian respondents who mentioned unpredictable rainfall (n=17), common impacts included utility disruptions (9) and limited access to markets (6). A smaller number also reported damage to housing (4), reduced access to healthcare or sanitation services (4), and some loss of livelihood assets (4). Exposure to extreme hot temperatures was reported by 17 South Asian respondents, more than half of whom cited negative health impacts such as illness, injury, or mental distress (5). Disruption to electricity or heating was also noted by several respondents (5).[41]

One Pakistani interviewee[42] highlighted the frequency and compounding effects of climate events in his area of origin (Rawalpindi), including longer, hotter summers and increased rainfall leading to flooding. He linked these changes to economic strain: "Summertime was very hot. Temperature was very high… increased rainfall and that led to flooding in urban areas… drought affected our crops and that led to increased prices… Your well-being will be compromised when prices of basic needs increase and you bear the heat"

40 Five respondents reported not being impacted. Other reported impacts included destruction or damage of owned environmental assets (3) and tensions or conflict over natural resources (1).
41 Involuntary mobility individual interview
42 Voluntary mobility individual interview

Finally, among the 15 East Asian respondents who reported the occurrence of tropical cyclones or severe storms, movement restrictions (8) and displacement or relocation (7) were the most frequently mentioned impacts, followed by housing damage (6) and utility disruptions (6).

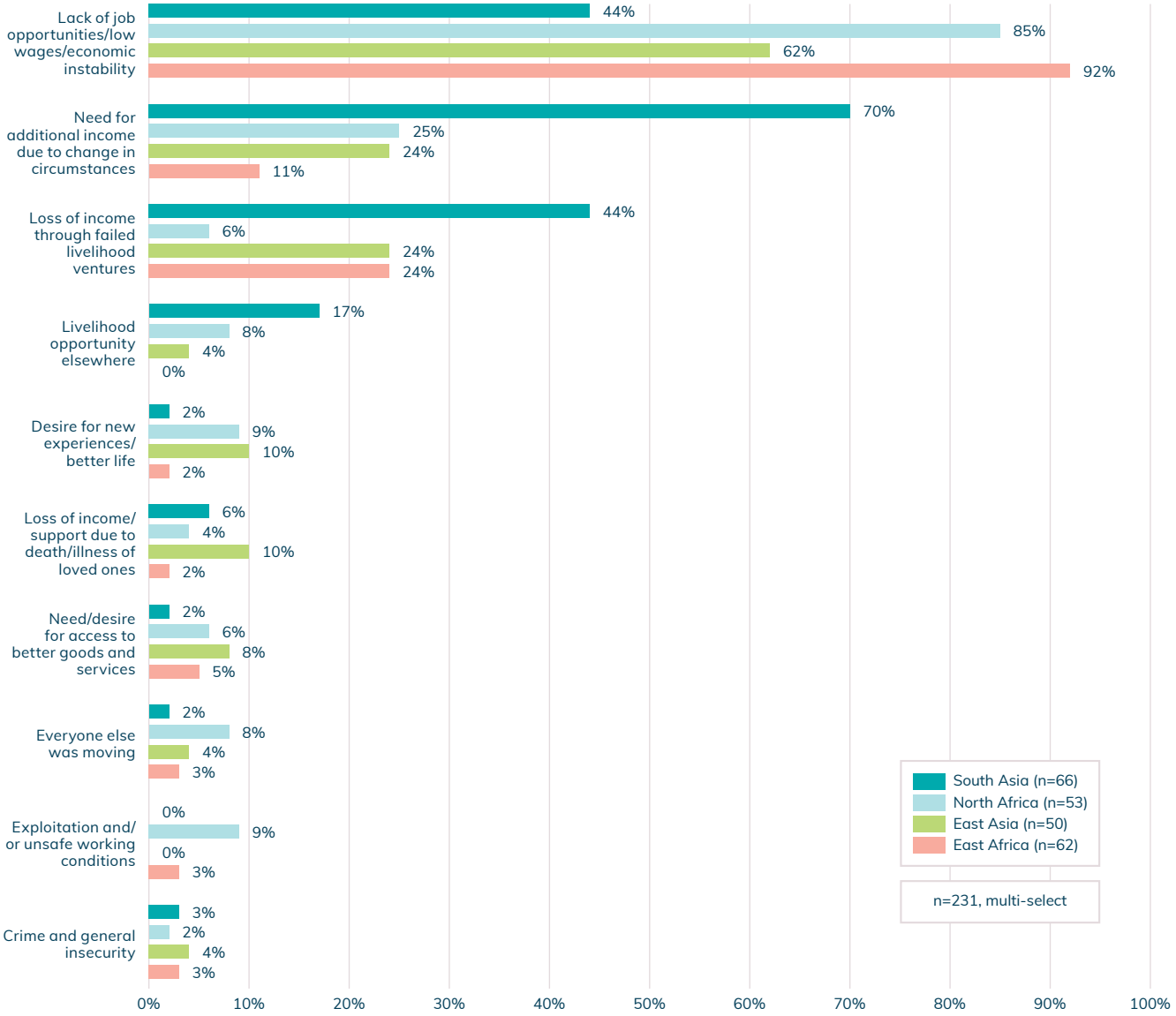
5.2 Migration to Saudi Arabia

Leaving because staying is not always viable

Findings underscore the role of structural economic hardship as the main driver of migration to Saudi Arabia, particularly for workers coming from rural or economically marginalised settings.

As shown in Figure 10, livelihood-related factors were by far the most commonly reported reasons for leaving the country of origin. More than 70% of respondents selected at least one response linked to economic hardship or income insecurity. The most frequently cited reason overall was lack of job opportunities, low wages, or economic instability, reported by 70% of respondents, with particularly high proportions among those from East Africa (92%) and North Africa (85%). Other notable livelihood-related drivers included the need for additional income due to a change in household circumstances (34%) and loss of income through failed livelihood ventures (26%), both most frequently reported by South Asian respondents (70% and 44%, respectively).

Figure 10. Most reported drivers for leaving countries of origin[43]



Focus group discussions and individual interviews further highlighted how migration decisions were often rooted in economic necessity and shaped by limited prospects at home. One interviewed Pakistani returnee who had worked as a tile fixer in Saudi Arabia explained: "I went there so I could afford better education for my children and a better standard of living for my family. I did not have a status. I achieved a status through it." Some South Asian focus group participants described migration as a response to broader financial instability or economic stagnation.

> *"As you know, due to the current situation in Pakistan, managing your household expenses by earning in Pakistan is not feasible anymore. That is why we have to be here to support our finances."*
> **Pakistani focus group participant**

43 Other reported reasons included family or social pressure to migrate (3%), overpopulation or demographic changes (2%), war/armed conflict/ terrorism (1%), political unrest/riots (1%), lack of freedom or political rights (1%), drought and its effects (1%), pollution (1%) and easing of (social/ cultural) pressures to stay (1%).

Why Saudi Arabia?

In line with the reported drivers, respondents mentioned primarily choosing Saudi Arabia as a destination for migration due to the availability of job opportunities and the potential for higher earnings, highlighting again the economic motivations for migration.

The most frequently cited reason was the availability of job opportunities in respondents' field, reported by 61% of respondents overall. This was most commonly mentioned by East Africans (62%) and South Asians (61%), followed closely by North Africans (50%). Higher wages or better income opportunities compared to other destinations were also cited by 36% of respondents, with relatively similar levels across all regions. A stronger economy and more financial stability in Saudi Arabia was mentioned by 28% of respondents overall, with particularly high proportions among East Asians (43%) and South Asians (26%).

> *"For financial benefit and nothing else… Salary offered there was greater and better."*
> **Pakistani interviewee**[44]

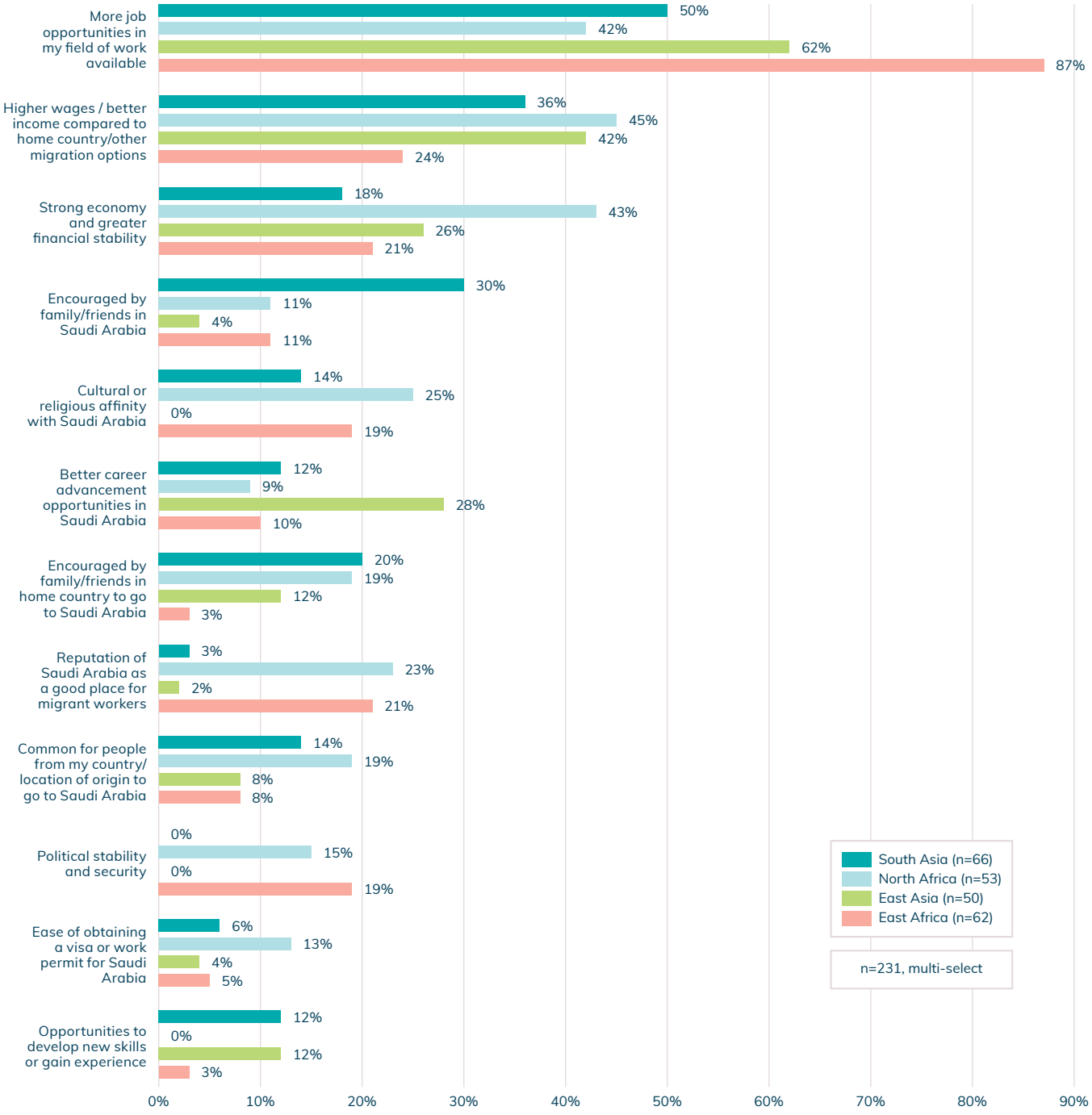
In addition to economic motivations, some respondents highlighted other practical and personal considerations that influenced their decision to move to Saudi Arabia, including social, procedural, and cultural factors.

Some cited expectations of career advancement (14%), the ease of obtaining a visa or work permit (7%), or opportunities to develop new skills (7%). Cultural or religious affinity with Saudi Arabia was mentioned by 15% of respondents overall, predominantly among North and East Africans. A smaller share (9%) referenced political stability and security in Saudi Arabia, particularly East African and North African respondents. Social networks and encouragement from family or friends — both in home countries and in Saudi Arabia — were also commonly reported across regions. (See Figure 11). Several of the aforementioned non-economic factors were also recurring themes in interviews and focus groups. For instance, an interviewed Pakistani returnee explained: *"I chose Saudi Arabia because we can also go to Hajj and Umrah… and earn a better living as well."* Another participant from East Africa noted: *"[Saudi Arabia] is an Arabic-speaking country… and we can get in contact with them easily, unlike the European countries."*

> *"Some countries have strict visa requirements, but it's easier to get one for Saudi Arabia"*
> **Somali focus group participant**

44 Involuntary mobility individual interview.

Figure 11. Most reported reasons for choosing Saudi Arabia as a destination[45]



45 Other reported reasons included better access to services in Saudi Arabia such as education and healthcare (5%), proximity to respondents' home country (4%), perceived respect for human rights (2%), opportunities to learn new languages or experience a new culture (2%), greater social acceptance and less discrimination (1%), not having chosen Saudi Arabia themselves (1%), and using Saudi Arabia as a transit stop before migrating elsewhere (1%).

Decision-making dynamics in the migration process

Although migration was largely described as an individual decision, South Asian respondents stood out for highlighting the involvement of family and friends — both at home and in Saudi Arabia — in shaping their choice.

The majority of respondents (60%) reported that they made the decision to migrate to Saudi Arabia on their own. This was especially pronounced among East African respondents (89%), as well as those from North Africa (68%) and East Asia (64%). In contrast, only 24% of South Asian respondents said they made the decision independently.

For the latter group, the decision appeared to be much more collective, with 62% saying friends or family members in the country of origin were involved, and 39% citing friends or family members in Saudi Arabia — much higher than in any other region.[46]

Spouses were also involved to varying degrees, reported by 24% of East Asians and 20% of South Asians, compared to just 2% of East Africans and 6% of North Africans. A smaller share of respondents across regions indicated that recruiters or agents were involved in the decision (5% overall), most notably among East Asians (10%) and North Africans (6%).

Accessing job opportunities

The vast majority of respondents (97%) reported having found employment in Saudi Arabia prior to arriving. Personal networks and recruitment intermediaries appear to play a central role in how respondents accessed job opportunities in Saudi Arabia, while direct outreach by employers or self-initiated searches seems uncommon.

When asked how they found the job opportunity they came to Saudi Arabia for, the most frequently reported method was through friends or other family members already in Saudi Arabia, selected by 49% of respondents. This route was especially common among South Asians (59%) and East Africans (56%). Another 33% of respondents reported using a job placement agency or broker in their country of origin, with particularly high rates among East Asian respondents (64%).

Connections in the country of origin were also significant: 11% of respondents — including 27% of South Asians — found their job through friends or family members back home. In contrast, less common methods included searching the internet (3%), social media (4%), or recruitment by an employer seeking specific skills (1%). Notably, only 3% indicated they migrated without a job already lined up — all of whom were East African.

Qualitative findings further emphasised the importance of these personal networks. While not connecting them to a job directly, several interviewees highlighted the role of social contacts in linking them to brokers or intermediaries who could facilitate access. A Filipino interviewee[47] explained: "*My brother has a friend who lives in Saudi Arabia. So, his friend gave us the contact details of the broker, and then we contacted the broker.*"

The role of brokers and agencies in facilitating employment and migration

Beyond how jobs were initially found, respondents were also asked whether any intermediaries — including formal or informal brokers or recruitment agencies — were involved in helping them secure employment or migrate to Saudi Arabia.

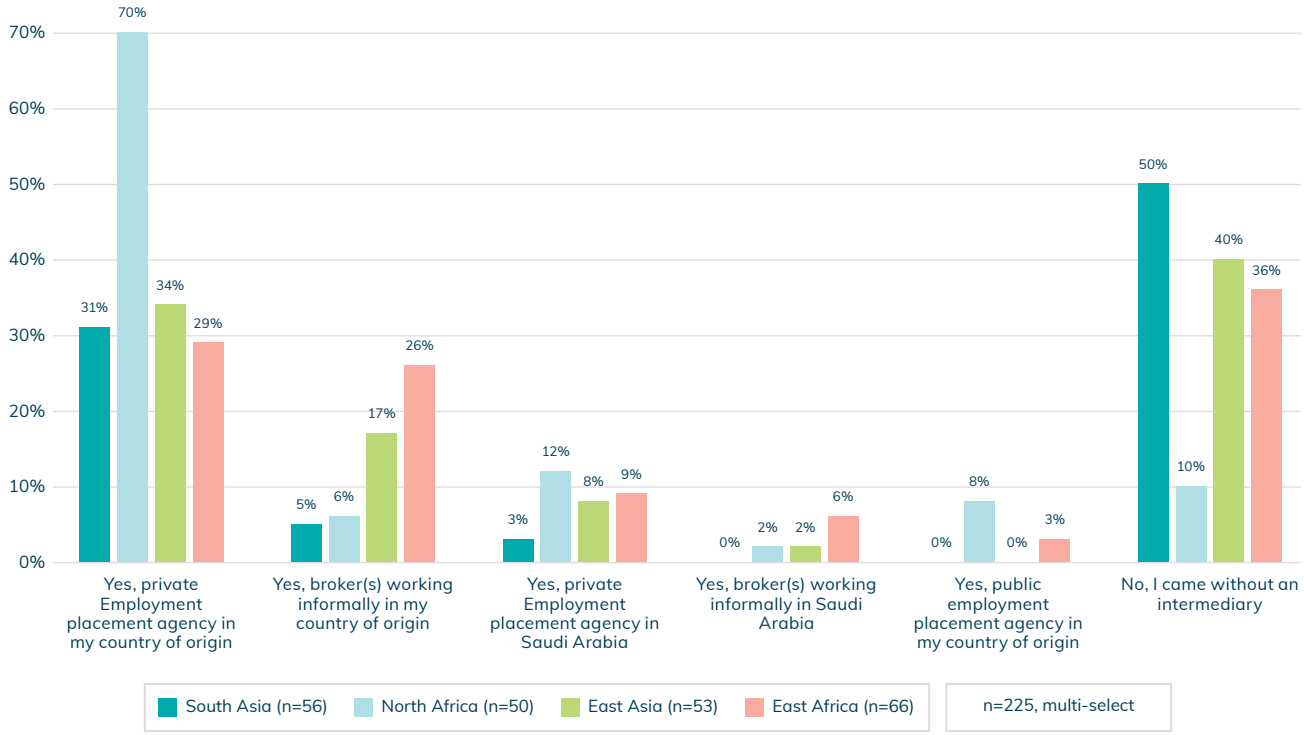
Findings suggest a high reliance on intermediated migration pathways, but the types of intermediaries to facilitate migration to Saudi Arabia varied considerably across regions of origin. The most commonly reported intermediary was a private employment placement agency in the country of origin, cited by 39% of respondents (n=225[48]). This route was especially common among East Asian respondents (70%), followed by those from North Africa (34%) and South Asia (29%), but less so among East Africans (31%). Informal brokers in countries of origin were also cited by 14% of respondents, with usage most common among South Asians (26%) and North Africans (17%). Smaller shares of respondents reported using private placement agencies in Saudi Arabia (8%), public employment

46 "Spouse" was included as a separate answer option, not categorised under family members.
47 Voluntary immobility individual interview.
48 Representing those who reported having found a job before coming to Saudi Arabia

agencies in their country of origin (3%), or brokers based in Saudi Arabia (3%). Some respondents reported using more than one type of intermediary.

Around one-third of respondents (35%) reported migrating without using any intermediary, a pathway most frequently reported by East Africans (50%) and North Africans (40%), suggesting higher levels of self-navigation among these groups. (see Figure 12)

Figure 12. Did you use intermediaries to help you come to and/or secure the job opportunity you found in Saudi Arabia? (among respondents who reported having found a job before coming to Saudi Arabia)



Several individual interview participants highlighted that securing employment and migrating to Saudi Arabia was often a multi-stage process that can involve both informal and formal actors. Some explained that while they found the job opportunities in Saudi Arabia through social networks, they still needed to engage an intermediary to arrange travel or handle visa procedures. One Egyptian interviewee explained: "I reached out to [a relative], and he arranged for my visa... [but] it had to go through a recruitment agency here in Egypt."[49] One respondent described the process working in reverse — first engaging a broker, and only later securing a job independently. As a Filipino interviewee explained: "I came through a broker and then I searched for the job."[50]

49 Voluntary mobility individual interview
50 Voluntary immobility individual interview

Deceptive Recruitment and Debt Bondage in the Saudi Migration Corridor

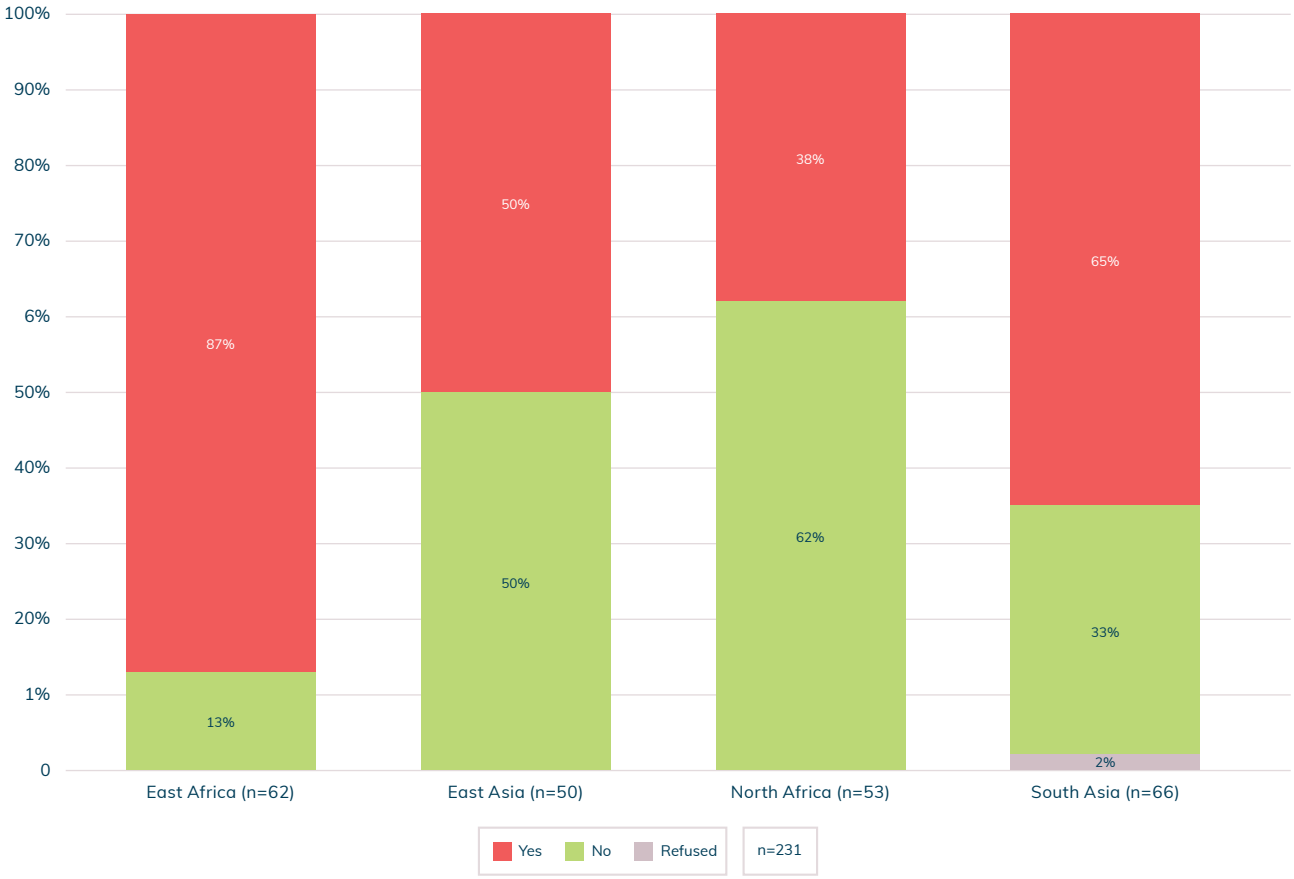
The recruitment process for migrant workers heading to Saudi Arabia is frequently marred by exploitation, beginning long before arrival. Labour migration, particularly for low-skilled roles predominantly filled by workers from South and Southeast Asia, is overwhelmingly managed by a complex web of private recruitment agencies (PRAs), brokers, and informal sub-agents.[51] The Kafala (sponsorship) system[52] inherently necessitates this reliance on intermediaries, as employers depend on them to navigate visa procedures and source labour.[53] Despite international guidelines and laws in many Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries prohibiting the practice, recruiters commonly charge prospective migrants exorbitant fees, sometimes amounting to thousands of dollars, to cover agency services, documentation, medical exams, and travel.[54] These fees, often varying by destination, job type, and promised wage, create immense financial pressure.[55] To meet these costs, workers frequently resort to high-interest loans, sell assets, or borrow heavily, plunging them into significant debt bondage even before earning their first salary.[56] This debt, which can take months or years to repay, is a key indicator of forced labour, trapping workers in exploitative situations.[57] Deception is also rampant, with recruiters misleading migrants about job terms, wages, or working conditions.[58] Upon arrival, workers may face contract substitution, forced to accept less favourable terms than initially agreed, or discover no job exists due to illicit 'visa trading' where sponsors profit from selling visas nominally attached to them.[59] The recruitment process often lacks transparency, and regulation of intermediaries, particularly informal sub-agents operating at the village level, remains weak, allowing abusive practices to persist with limited accountability.[60] The structure of Kafala, delegating state responsibility for migration management to private employers and the recruitment industry they rely upon, creates fertile ground for these abuses.[61] The resulting debt burden significantly compromises workers' ability to challenge subsequent exploitation, such as wage theft or unsafe conditions, for fear of losing the income needed for repayment.[62]

Financing migration to Saudi Arabia: debt, deductions, and household strain

A majority of surveyed migrant workers (62%) reported that they or their households incurred debt to finance their migration to Saudi Arabia. Debt-financed migration was especially common among East African and South Asian respondents, with 87% and 65% respectively reporting borrowing. In contrast, only 38% of North African respondents said they took on debt, while East Asian respondents were evenly split between those who did and did not incur debt (50% each). (see Figure 13)

51 International Labour Organization, Recruitment Practices of Employment Agencies Recruiting Migrant Workers.
52 United Nations Network on Migration, Summary Report of the Asia-GCC Dialogue on GCM Implementation.
53 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) Reforming the Kafala System.
54 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
55 Migrant Forum in Asia (2015) Recruitment Fees and Migrants' Rights Violations.
56 Anthesis Group (2025) How Businesses In The Gulf Can Practice Responsible Recruitment.
57 Ibid
58 Migrant Forum in Asia (2015) Recruitment Fees and Migrants' Rights Violations.
59 Anthesis Group (2025) How Businesses In The Gulf Can Practice Responsible Recruitment.
60 Hasin, M. (2025) The Quest for Decent Work: Issues and Challenges of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia.
61 Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (2019) Policy Brief 10. | Hasin, M. (2025) The Quest for Decent Work: Issues and Challenges of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia.
62 Anthesis Group (2025) How Businesses In The Gulf Can Practice Responsible Recruitment.

Figure 13. Did you/your family/household incur any debt for you to come to Saudi Arabia?



Of respondents who reported incurring debt (n=142), nearly 60% reported that the cost of migrating to Saudi Arabia was being, or had been, deducted from their wages, highlighting the widespread burden of repayment through earnings. This practice was most prevalent among East Asian respondents (n=25), 80% of whom indicated that migration costs were being deducted from their wages, followed by 70% of South Asian respondents and 52% of East Africans (n=54). In contrast, only 35% of North African respondents (n=20) reported the same, while the rest said their wages were not being used to repay migration costs.

Interview and focus group participants further emphasised the financial strain faced by many migrant workers in covering migration-related costs. Several respondents described taking out loans, selling personal belongings, or relying on family support to afford recruitment fees, travel, and paperwork. An interviewee from Egypt[63] explained: "*I paid 7,000 SAR [USD ~1,865] for the visa. I didn't have this money... I got a loan from the bank in order to pay it*". He added that additional expenses — including flights, quarantine accommodation, and health checks — brought his total cost to nearly 10,000 SAR *[USD ~2,665]*, stating: "*Each day you get deeper in debts*". **Beyond the individual, South Asian focus group participants and interviewees highlighted how the financial burden of migration can extend across entire households, often requiring significant sacrifice from family members**. A Pakistani interviewee[64] recalled: "*I incurred around 170,000 PKR [USD ~606] ... and the recruiter overcharged me. The government charges were not that high*".

> "*We gave our home on mortgage to come here... we even took things on EMIs*[65]*... we work hard to clear those loans*". *Another added that many migrants come from "financially weaker" families and must "take a loan or sell jewellery" to afford the journey.*"
> **Pakistani focus group participant**

63 Involuntary immobility individual interview
64 Involuntary mobility individual interview
65 EMI stands for Equated Monthly Instalment. It's a term commonly used in South Asia (especially in countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) to refer to monthly payments made to repay a loan, typically with interest, over a fixed period.

5.3 Conditions in Saudi Arabia

Work-related conditions and vulnerabilities

Work arrangements

Respondents were also asked about their employment modality in Saudi Arabia — that is, how their work was arranged. There was significant variation across regions. Most East Asian respondents (96%) reported regular, fixed monthly employment, in contrast to just 15% of East Africans, 40% of North Africans, and 74% of South Asians.

A large share of East African respondents (79%) reported working on a daily labour basis, meaning their employment was arranged day-to-day. This was also common among North Africans (60%), but less so for South Asians (24%) and East Asians (4%). A small proportion of East Africans (6%) also reported working in short-term or piece-based arrangements.

These patterns reflect varying degrees of employment precarity, with East African and North African workers appearing particularly exposed to unstable or informal arrangements, especially in climate-sensitive sectors.

Finally, only five respondents (2%) reported holding a second job or income-generating activity in Saudi Arabia. The vast majority (97%) said they did not, and a very small number (1%) preferred not to answer.

Incomplete or misleading job information during recruitment

While most migrant workers reported receiving some job-related information before arriving in Saudi Arabia, discrepancies between this information and their actual experiences raise concerns about the reliability of pre-departure recruitment practices.

Respondents who reported finding the job opportunity to Saudi Arabia through a broker or a placement agency (either in their country of origin or in Saudi Arabia), or directly through an employer recruiting for particular skills were asked whether their recruiters (n=90) had provided them with key information about the job they were coming for before starting work in Saudi Arabia.

Most respondents reported receiving pre-departure information, with 93% being informed about wages, 89% about working hours, 84% about contract duration, and 81% about job type. Fewer were informed about promised benefits (including insurance, housing, transportation, holidays, etc.) (42%) and security conditions (9%). However, when asked about the accuracy of the information provided, several respondents noted inconsistencies, particularly regarding working hours and promised benefits. Of those who reportedly received information about working hours (n=80), 30% said it had not matched their actual experience, and among the few who were informed about benefits provided (38), 37% reported that the information turned out to be inaccurate.

Two interviewees from Egypt echoed these concerns, highlighting cases of misinformation and contract discrepancies. One noted: "*The contract stated 5,000 SAR [USD ~1,332], but when I arrived, my actual salary was 3,000 SAR [USD ~799] … The initial contract is misleading.*"[66]. Another described agreeing to 2,500 SAR *[USD ~666]* before departure but being paid only 1,500 SAR *[USD ~399]* upon arrival.[67] Similarly, an expert interviewed for this study explained:

> *"There may be contract substitution… They are told the salary is one thing, but it's something else when they arrive. They are not empowered to ask for rights because they just want the job."*
> **Expert key informant**

66 Voluntary mobility individual interview.
67 Involuntary mobility individual interview.

Documentation and sponsorship

Respondents were asked whether they held valid legal documents that allowed them to reside and work in Saudi Arabia at the time of data collection. **Nearly all respondents (230 out of 231) reported holding valid legal documentation, such as an iqama (residence permit) or work visa.** Only one respondent from North Africa indicated not having such documents at the time of the interview.

While nearly all respondents in this study reported holding valid legal documentation, irregular migration remains a significant concern in Saudi Arabia. Although estimates of the size of the irregular migrant population are unavailable, reports indicate that a substantial number of migrants enter the country irregularly or become undocumented due to factors such as employers failing to renew residency permits or workers fleeing abusive conditions. For instance, among the approximately 750,000 Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia, about 60% are believed to have entered through irregular means. These individuals often face heightened risks, including exploitation, detention, and deportation, with limited access to legal protections and support systems. In 2022 alone, approximately 70,000 Bangladeshi nationals were deported from Saudi Arabia, many for lacking valid residence permits—a status often resulting from employer negligence rather than worker intent. Irregular status exacerbates migrant workers' vulnerability to labour exploitation. Without legal documentation, these individuals often face barriers to accessing healthcare, legal recourse, and stable employment.

All respondents indicated that they were working under the Kafala (sponsorship) system in Saudi Arabia. Although reforms introduced in 2021 aimed to ease some of the system's restrictive elements—such as enabling workers to transfer jobs/employers more freely and removing the requirement for employer consent to exit the country—findings suggest that in practice, these rights, or at least awareness of them, remain limited.

The Kafala System: Control, Exploitation, and Incomplete Reforms

Saudi Arabia's Kafala (sponsorship) system legally binds migrant workers to their employers (Kafeels), granting sponsors extensive control over workers' employment and residency status.[68] Historically, and often still in practice, sponsors control workers' entry, exit from the country, ability to change jobs, and the renewal of residency permits (iqamas).[69] This dependency creates a significant power imbalance, facilitating widespread exploitation and abuse.[70] In March 2021, Saudi Arabia implemented the Labour Reform Initiative (LRI), aiming to improve conditions for migrant workers covered under the main labour law.[71] Key LRI provisions, operationalised through online platforms like Qiwa and Absher, include allowing workers to transfer jobs without employer consent after one year or under specific circumstances (e.g., non-payment of wages), and enabling workers to request exit/re-entry or final exit visas independently.[72] Reforms also relaxed 'absconding' regulations, providing a grace period for workers reported "absent from work" to rectify their status.[73] However, these reforms fall short of dismantling Kafala.[74] Employers can still object to exit requests and interfere with job transfers, often with impunity due to weak enforcement.[75] Workers still depend on sponsors for initial entry and permit renewals.[76] Crucially, the LRI explicitly excludes large categories of vulnerable workers, most notably domestic workers, but also farmers and others, who remain subject to the full controls of the unreformed Kafala system.[77] The LRI represents a partial liberalisation for certain labour market segments, potentially driven by Vision 2030 economic diversification goals requiring different skill sets, rather than a fundamental overhaul of the sponsorship structure.[78] While digitisation offers a modern interface, it does not guarantee rights protection if underlying employer control mechanisms and enforcement gaps persist.[79]

68 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
69 Migrant-Rights.org Reform the Kafala System. Accessed April 2025.
70 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) Reforming the Kafala System.
71 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
72 Ibid
73 Migrant-Rights.org (2025) Saudi's Labour Reform Initiative: An Overview.
74 Human Rights Watch (2021) Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient.
75 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
76 Human Rights Watch (2021) Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient.
77 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) Reforming the Kafala System.
78 Md. Mufassir Rashid (2022) The Political Economy of the Kafala Abolishment in Saudi Arabia. The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA).
79 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.

The majority of respondents (61%) said they were not able to change jobs or employers if they wished to. An additional 26% reported that they could only change jobs with difficulty. Restrictions on exiting and re-entering Saudi Arabia were even more pronounced: **nearly nine in ten respondents (89%) indicated they could not leave the country without their employer's consent.** (see figures 14 and 15)

Figure 14. Are you able to change your job/employer if you wish to?

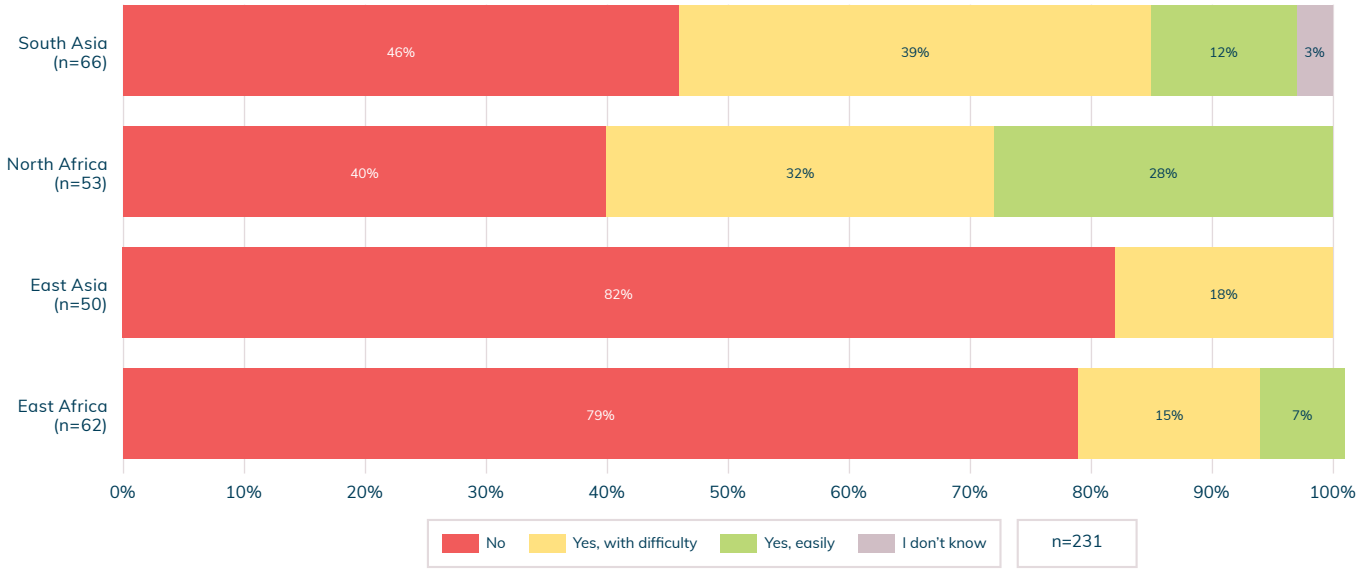
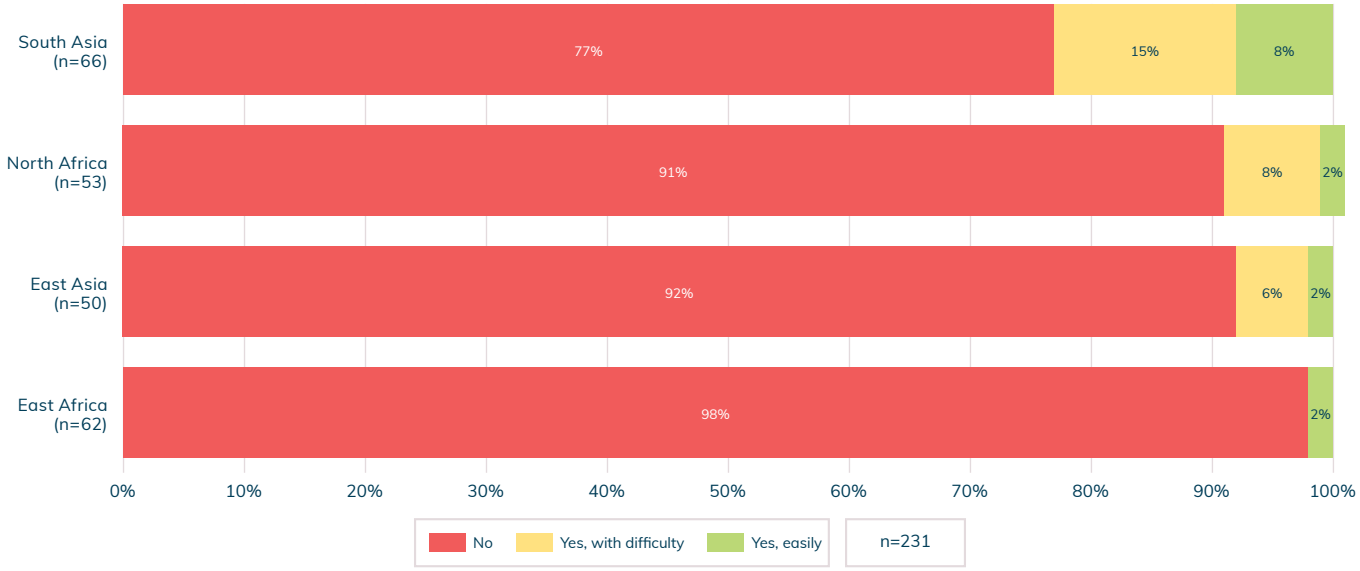


Figure 15. Are you able to exit/return to the country during your allowed visa/residency stay without your employer's consent?



Protection risks at the workplace

Alongside the abovementioned restrictions on movement and employment, a small share of respondents reported experiencing direct abuse or exploitation by their employers. Just over one in ten respondents (13%) said they had faced abusive or exploitative practices since arriving in Saudi Arabia. These experiences were not evenly distributed: South Asian workers stood out, with more than a quarter (27%) reporting such incidents, compared to 11% of North Africans, 10% of East Asians, and just 2% of East Africans.

Among South Asian respondents who reported abuse (n=18), the most commonly cited experiences were verbal violence (12) and threats or intimidation, including psychological abuse (14). While less frequently reported, such practices reflect important vulnerabilities in the working environment and may intersect with exploitative recruitment or employment arrangements.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it is important to note that experiences of abuse and exploitation may be underreported, particularly among individuals who may feel they have limited recourse or protection.

Pervasive Abuse Beyond Recruitment: Daily Realities for Migrant Workers

Beyond the exploitative recruitment process, migrant workers in Saudi Arabia endure a wide array of protection risks and abuses throughout their employment cycle. Wage theft—including non-payment, underpayment, delayed wages, and arbitrary deductions—is rampant across sectors.[80] The state's Wage Protection System (WPS) is often ineffective due to resource constraints and lack of timely enforcement against employers.[81] A new wage insurance scheme introduced in 2024 offers limited relief due to extremely restrictive eligibility criteria (e.g., wage delays affecting over 80% of a company's workforce for six months or more) and the exclusion of many worker categories.[82] Poor working conditions are common, characterised by excessively long hours often exceeding legal limits, denial of mandatory rest days and leave, and intense pressure to meet unrealistic production targets, particularly on large-scale development projects.[83] Workers frequently live in overcrowded, unsanitary accommodation, sometimes in remote locations with inadequate access to basic necessities.[84] Freedom of movement is severely curtailed through common practices like illegal passport confiscation and confinement to the workplace or housing.[85] Migrant workers are prohibited from forming or joining trade unions and cannot legally strike.[86] Many of these practices—debt bondage, wage withholding, restricted movement, document confiscation, threats, and abusive conditions—are recognised indicators of forced labour.[87] A formal forced labour complaint citing these issues was filed with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2024.[88] Accessing justice is fraught with obstacles; workers fear employer retaliation, such as dismissal, deportation, or false accusations, if they complain.[89] The legal system can be slow and difficult to navigate, particularly for workers facing deportation or lacking resources for legal aid or interpretation.[90] The confluence of Kafala controls, recruitment debt, and weak state enforcement creates an environment where abuse is systemic and predictable, and state protection mechanisms often fail to provide meaningful remedy.[91]

Key informants reinforced these accounts by drawing attention to systemic risks under the Kafala system, especially for low-wage workers. One expert stated: *"All workers who are beholden to their employers… face serious risks. This behaviour… extends to sectors such as construction, retail, and services"*. She described cases of *contract substitution, withheld wages, and situations approaching bonded labour or human trafficking*, particularly when workers' contracts are sold or changed without consent

80 Hasin, M. (2025) The Quest for Decent Work: Issues and Challenges of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia.
81 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
82 Amnesty International (2024) Saudi Arabia.
83 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
84 Md. Mufassir Rashid (2022) The Political Economy of the Kafala Abolishment in Saudi Arabia. The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA).
85 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
86 Ibid.
87 Anthesis Group (2025) How Businesses In The Gulf Can Practice Responsible Recruitment
88 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.
89 Ibid.
90 Walk Free (2023) The Global Slavery Index 2023, Minderoo Foundation.
91 Human Rights Watch (2024) "Die First, and I'll Pay You Later": Saudi Arabia's 'Giga-Projects' Built on Widespread Labor Abuses.

Isolation and Abuse: The Acute Vulnerability of Female Domestic Workers

There are an estimated 3.7 million domestic workers in Saudi Arabia.[92] These workers, especially females, constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in the country, facing heightened risks due to their unique working environment and exclusion from legal protections.[93] They are explicitly excluded from the country's main labour law and the recent Labour Reform Initiative (LRI), leaving them governed solely by the restrictive Kafala system with minimal safeguards.[94] Their workplace within private households isolates them, limiting oversight and making it extremely difficult to report abuse or seek assistance.[95] Employers often confiscate passports and restrict communication, denying access to phones or outside contact.[96] Common abuses reported include excessive working hours without rest days, forced confinement within the employer's home, non-payment or underpayment of wages, and food deprivation.[97] Alarmingly, physical and sexual abuse are significant concerns for this group.[98] The Kafala system binds them tightly to their employers, making it perilous to leave abusive situations; fleeing often results in charges of 'absconding,' leading to detention and deportation.[99] Some resort to social media as a desperate measure to seek help.[100] The consistent exclusion of domestic workers from labour reforms suggests a deliberate policy choice, reflecting entrenched societal norms and economic interests in maintaining a low-cost, highly controlled domestic labour force, rather than an oversight.[101] This combination of legal exclusion and profound physical isolation creates an environment where severe human rights violations can occur with near-total impunity.[102]

Health insurance

In Saudi Arabia, it is legally mandated that all employers, including corporate entities, provide health insurance coverage to their employees and their dependents in the country. This requirement, outlined in the Cooperative Health Insurance Law, applies to both Saudi nationals and expatriates working in the private sector. For individual employers hiring domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, the obligation to provide health insurance depends on the number of workers employed: since July 1, 2024, it has been mandatory for those employing more than four domestic workers, while no such requirement currently applies to those with four or fewer.

Health Access Gaps: Occupational Risks and Insurance Shortfalls

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia encounter significant obstacles in accessing adequate healthcare and health insurance, particularly for conditions arising from their work.[103] Common barriers include limited insurance coverage, restricted access to statutory healthcare, language difficulties, and fear of repercussions for reporting work-related injuries or illnesses.[104] This is critical given the hazardous nature of jobs many migrants perform, leading to high rates of occupational morbidity and mortality.[105] A major concern is exposure to extreme heat, resulting in acute illnesses like heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and chronic conditions such as kidney disease and cardiovascular problems.[106] The Cooperative Health Insurance Law, introduced in 1991, mandates that private sector employers provide health insurance coverage to their expatriate employees and their dependents.[107] The law does not cover migrants working irregularly, and initially, domestic workers were not included.[108] Mandatory coverage was then extended to domestic workers in December 2024, but only

92 Richard Browne (2024) Saudi Arabia introduces mandatory health insurance for 3.7 million domestic workers. Healthcare & Protection.
93 Walk Free (2025) Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia Face Systemic Abuse and Exploitation.
94 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) Reforming the Kafala System.
95 Steven Escobar-Mendez, Hiwot Demelash, Sam Denison, Emma Hartmann and Michael Stevanovich, Empowering Domestic Workers in the Gulf States.
96 Walk Free (2023) The Global Slavery Index 2023, Minderoo Foundation.
97 Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (2019) Policy Brief.
98 Walk Free (2025) Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia Face Systemic Abuse and Exploitation.
99 Walk Free (2023) The Global Slavery Index 2023, Minderoo Foundation.
100 Walk Free (2025) Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia Face Systemic Abuse and Exploitation.
101 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) Reforming the Kafala System.
102 Center for Global Development (2020) Saudi Arabia Could Rewrite Its Record on Labor Mobility by Ending Kafala.
103 medRxiv, Opportunities and challenges in access to healthcare for international migrants with work-related diseases and injuries in Gulf Cooperation Council countries: A systematic literature review protocol.
104 Hasin, M. (2025) The Quest for Decent Work: Issues and Challenges of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia.
105 medRxiv, Opportunities and challenges in access to healthcare for international migrants with work-related diseases and injuries in Gulf Cooperation Council countries: A systematic literature review protocol.
106 Human Rights Watch (2023) Gulf States: Migrant Workers at Serious Risk from Dangerous Heat.
107 ILO (2023) Review of National Social Protection Legislation and Legal Frameworks for Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries.
108 Migrant-rights.org (2023) Comparison of Health Care Coverage for Migrant Workers in the GCC.

applicable when employed by households with more than four staff.[109] Crucially, occupational illnesses and deaths, especially those linked to heat stress, are frequently misclassified as non-work-related (e.g., "natural causes"), denying workers and their families rightful compensation and insurance benefits.[110] Access to justice for compensation claims is also severely limited.[111] Notably, many employers have failed to comply with the regulations and provide their employees with the required health insurance coverage. As a response, the Saudi Council of Health Insurance announced the imposition of penalties for those in violation of the insurance law in February 2025,[112] but implementation of these measures is still to be assessed.

Current health and insurance frameworks appear insufficient to address the severe occupational health risks migrant workers face, particularly chronic conditions linked to heat. The exclusion of the most vulnerable groups from even limited schemes underscores a tiered system of rights, leaving those in greatest need with the least support.

While the vast majority of respondents (90%) reported access to employer-provided health insurance, North African workers constituted a notable exception. In fact, around one in four North African respondents (23%) stated they were not covered, accounting for nearly all of those who reported lacking health insurance (12 out of 14).[113] Given the critical role of health insurance in safeguarding workers' wellbeing, particularly for those engaged in physically demanding or high-risk jobs, this gap in coverage may heighten the vulnerability of this group to health-related and financial risks.

Despite widespread reports of insurance coverage, qualitative findings highlighted that **coverage on paper does not always translate into meaningful access to care. Gaps in implementation — whether through subcontracting, geographic isolation, or policy loopholes — can leave workers particularly vulnerable to health and financial risks**. Some focus group participants described receiving health insurance coverage but noted that the quality or scope was extremely limited, requiring them to pay out of pocket despite holding valid insurance cards. A South Asian participant explained: "*The medical insurance cards that they provide here are of a very low amount… When you go to the hospital, that doesn't work for you or does not fulfil your needs. You have to pay the cash amount from your pocket to get treatment*".

Key informants also spoke of **sectoral or contractual loopholes** that allowed employers or subcontractors to evade providing coverage. One elucidated that construction workers are often classified as "independent contractors" to circumvent employer responsibilities: "*They're moved from one site to another… so they're never considered permanent enough to receive health care… if they get sick, they send them home or they die*". Another highlighted the **spatial and systemic exclusion** of migrant workers: "*Health insurance may be written in the contract, but due to the isolated places that they live, they may have very limited access to medical services… and definitely no coverage when their work permit ends*".

General conditions and vulnerabilities

Satisfaction with Living conditions and access to basic services

This section explores migrant workers' satisfaction with their living conditions in Saudi Arabia, alongside their perceptions of access to core services such as housing, water and sanitation, healthcare, transportation, social support systems, and legal assistance. Using both a general satisfaction question and a series of Likert scale statements, the aim was to unpack the different dimensions shaping workers' everyday experiences in the country.

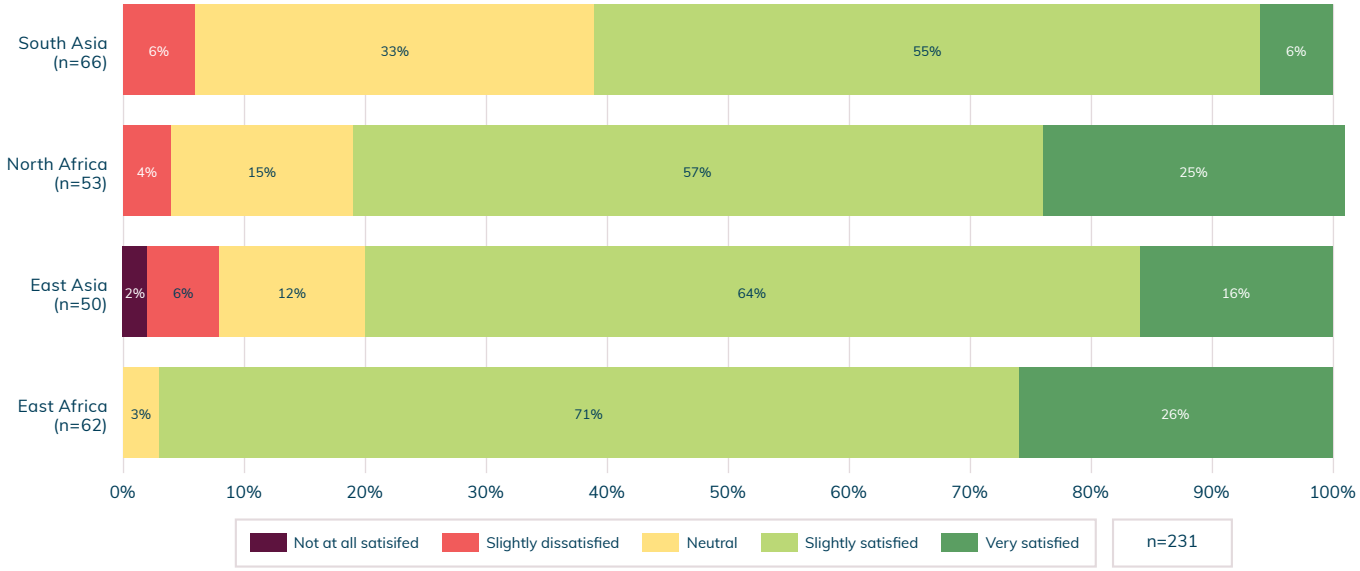
Overall, the majority of migrant workers surveyed expressed general satisfaction with their living conditions in Saudi Arabia. **However, South Asian respondents, in particular, consistently reported lower satisfaction and more limited access to key aspects of daily life, including safe housing, healthcare, legal services, and social support. These patterns suggest that not all migrant workers are benefitting equally from the**

109 Richard Browne (2024) Saudi Arabia introduces mandatory health insurance for 3.7 million domestic workers. Healthcare & Protection.
110 Human Rights Watch (2023) Gulf States: Migrant Workers at Serious Risk from Dangerous Heat.
111 Ibid
112 Roxanne Libatique (2024) Saudi Arabia cracks down on employers over health insurance violations. Insurance Business Asia.
113 All North Africans who indicated a lack of health insurance coverage originated from Egypt and reported working under the Kafala system in the following sectors: construction (10 out of 12), transportation and storage (1), and electricity or water supply, sewerage and waste management (1). Further investigation is needed to understand why this issue appears to disproportionately affect this group.

protections and services that should, in principle, be universally accessible. The findings raise important questions about how nationality may be a factor in shaping migrant workers' quality of life in Saudi Arabia, and where gaps in support and basic services provision may be reinforcing existing vulnerabilities.[114]

The data show that overall satisfaction is relatively high, with 79% of respondents indicating they were at least slightly satisfied with their living conditions in Saudi Arabia. However, disaggregation by region of origin reveals meaningful differences in lived experiences. While 97% of East Africans and 80% of East Asians reported being at least slightly satisfied, the figure dropped to 61% among South Asians — the lowest of any group. South Asians were also the most likely to express dissatisfaction or ambivalence, with one in three selecting "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" and an additional 6% reporting some level of dissatisfaction. North African respondents are closer to the middle, with 81% reporting at least slight satisfaction and 15% selecting "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied." (see Figure 16)

Figure 16. How would you rate your satisfaction with your living conditions in Saudi Arabia?

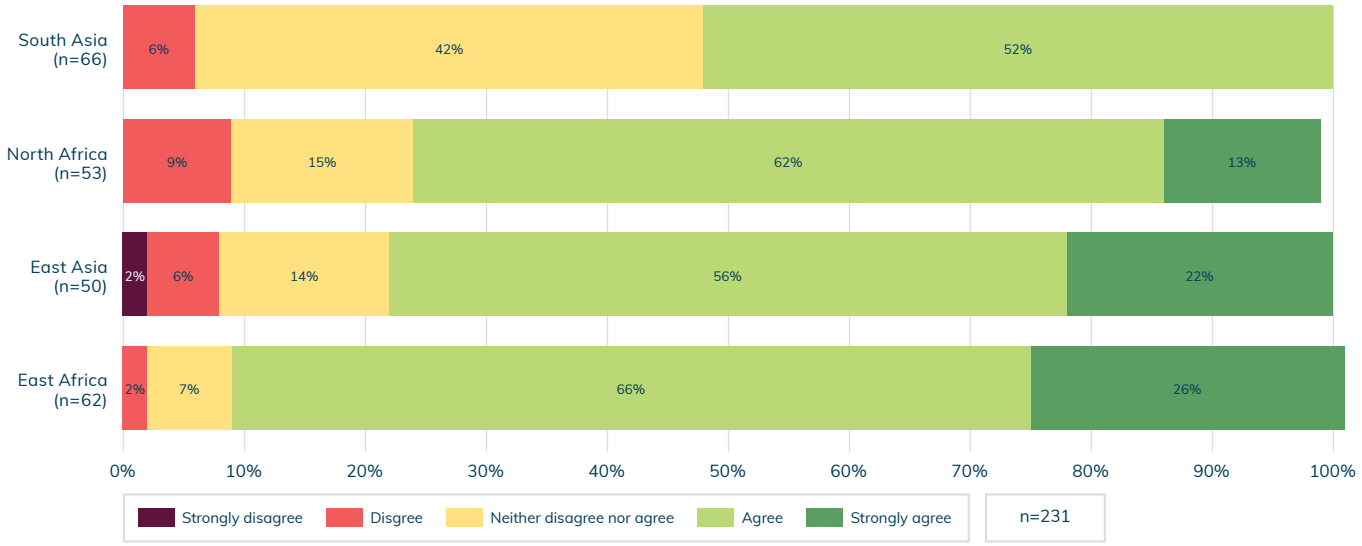


These regional differences extended across a range of specific living condition indicators (see Figure 17). South Asian respondents reported notably lower access to safe and affordable housing, with none strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to 26% of East Africans and 22% of East Asians. Similar gaps appeared around access to healthcare, legal services, and social support systems. For example, while over 90% of East Africans agreed or strongly agreed that they had access to affordable healthcare, only 38% of South Asians felt the same. On legal access, just 3% of South Asian respondents strongly agreed they had access to legal services, compared to 24% of East Africans and 24% of East Asians.

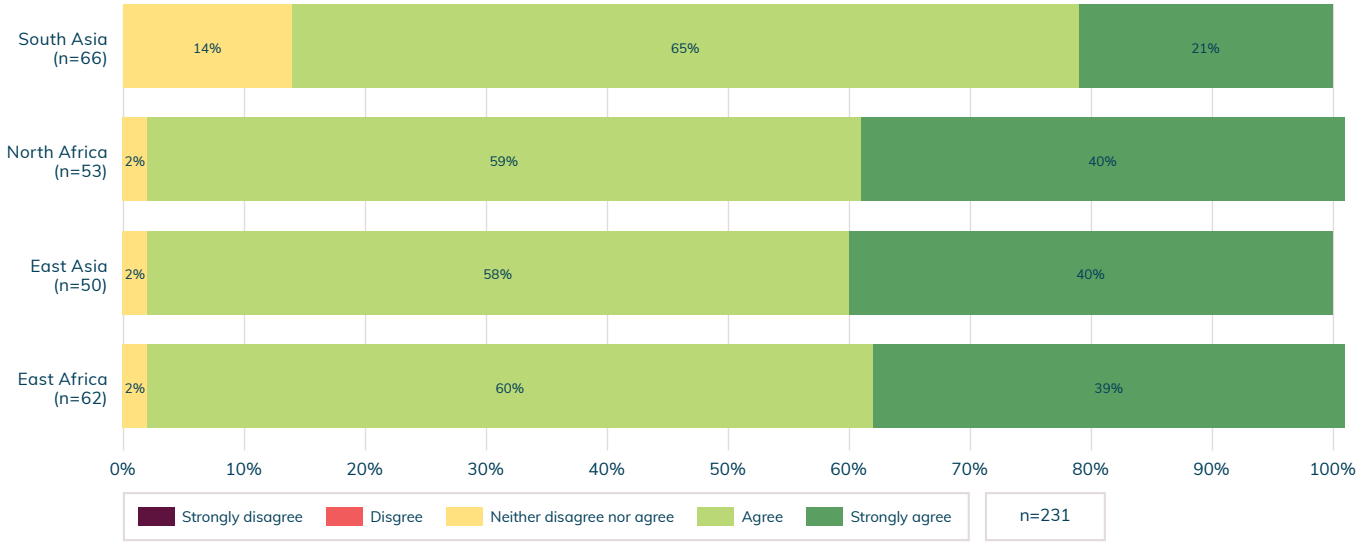
114 This summary is based on an aggregation of the most favourable response categories across all questions in this section. For general satisfaction with living conditions, both "slightly satisfied" and "very satisfied" responses were considered indicative of positive sentiment. For the other Likert-scale questions, "agree" and "strongly agree" were grouped together to reflect overall agreement, while other responses were interpreted as neutral or negative depending on the question's framing and context.

Figure 17: On a scale of 1 to 5, where one 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree", to what extent do you agree with the following statement

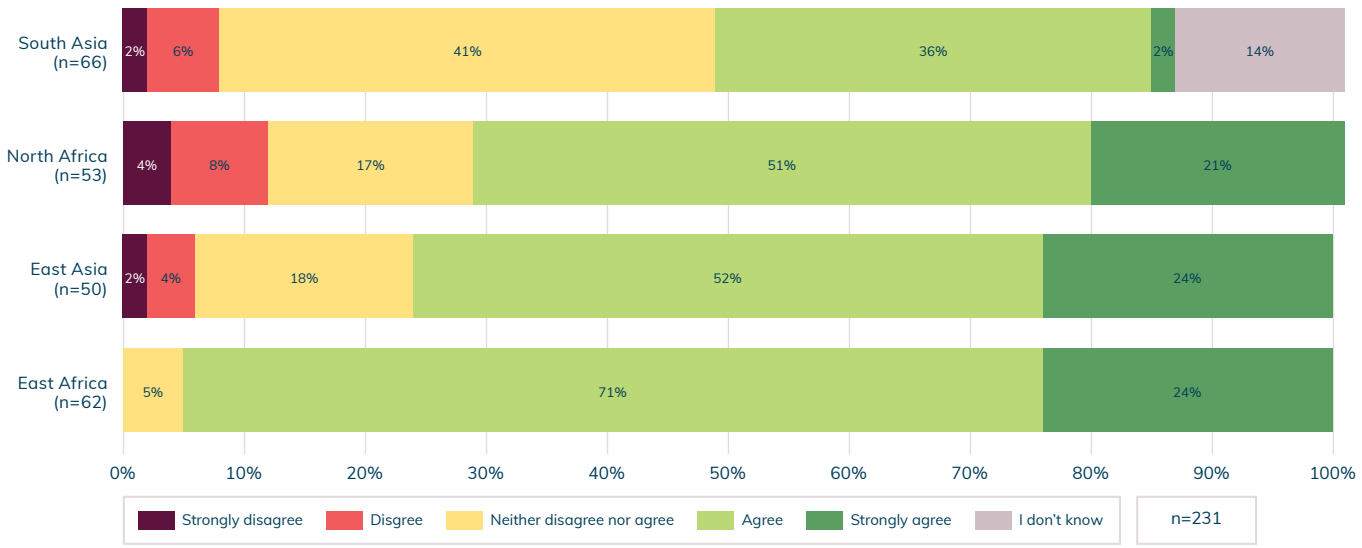
I have access to safe and and affordable housing in Saudi Arabia



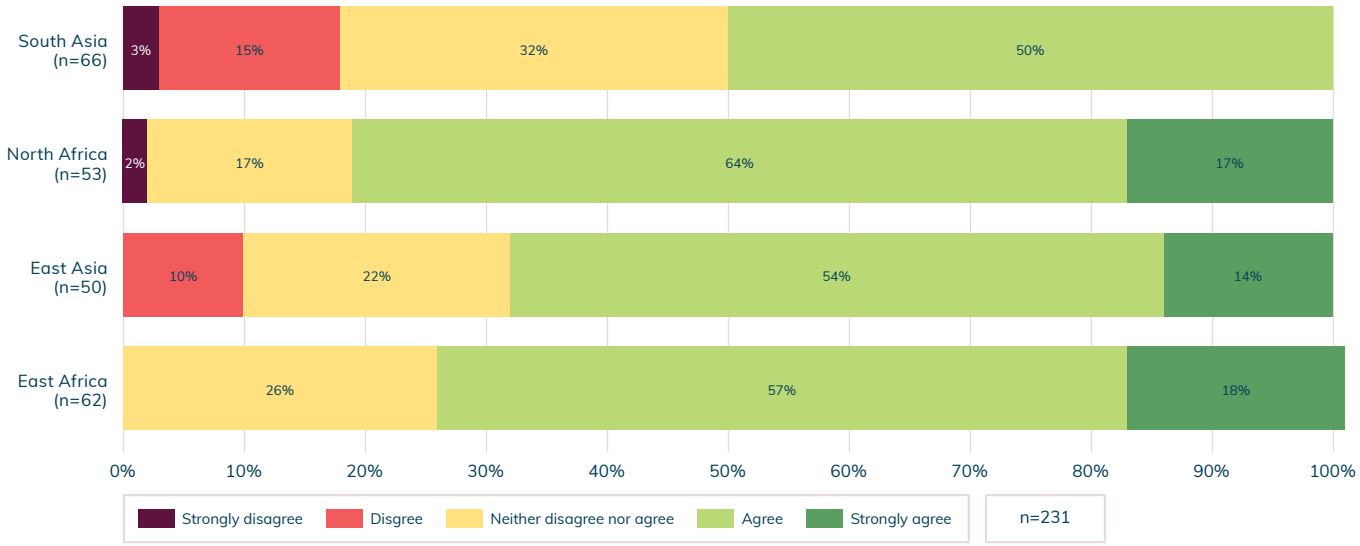
I have access to clean water and sanitation facilities in Saudi Arabia



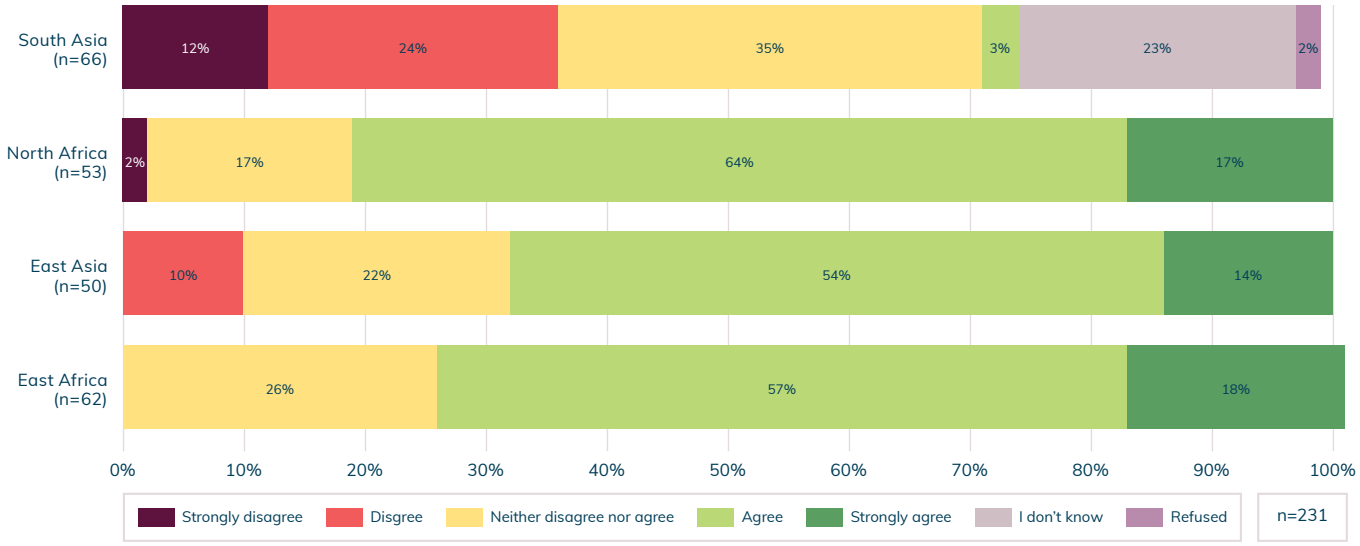
I have access to affordable healthcare services in Saudi Arabia



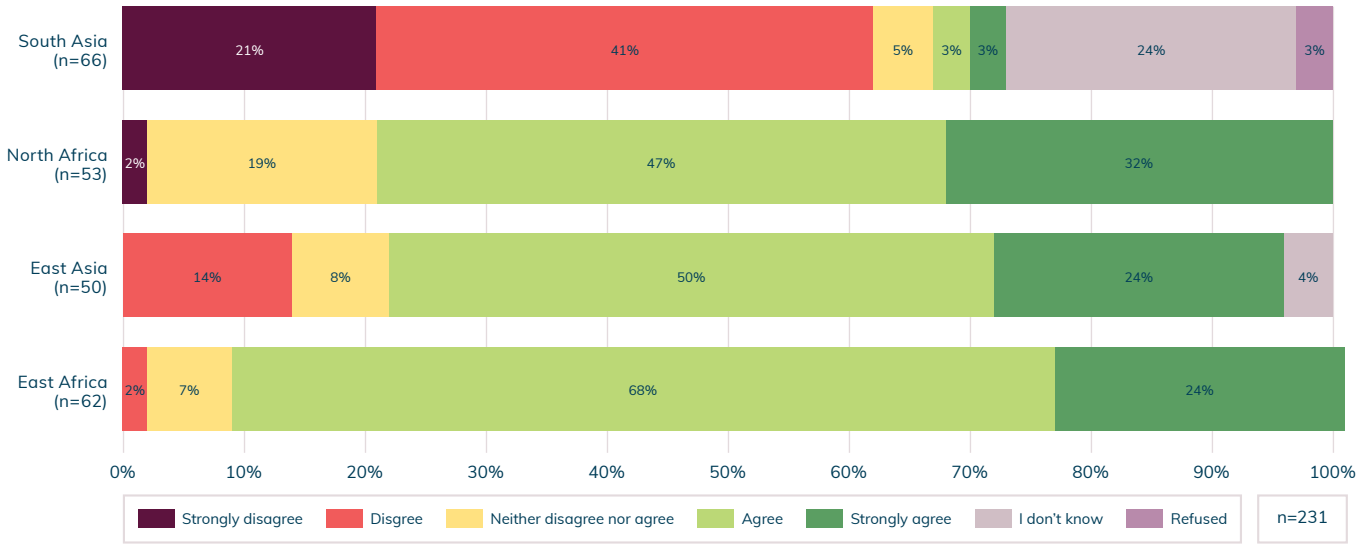
I have access to reliable and affordable transportation in Saudi Arabia



I have access to social support systems in Saudi Arabia



I have access to legal services in Saudi Arabia



Individual interview participants offered a more nuanced picture of everyday living conditions, underscoring how reported access to services and infrastructure could vary significantly depending on employment type, location, or housing arrangements. Some described generally positive experiences, particularly where accommodation and services were arranged by "reputable employers". A Pakistani interviewee explained, "*Housing and insurance both were given… They used to take us to the site and bring us back*".[115] Others echoed this, noting that accommodation was air-conditioned and utilities were consistently available: "*Yes, all services are provided — water, electricity, accommodation with AC*".[116]

However, not all accounts reflected this level of support. In several cases, participants noted **issues with overcrowding, poor maintenance, or limited autonomy over basic amenities**. One Egyptian interviewee[117] recalled, "*We were literally in the middle of nowhere, staying in caravans… around 20 people in one caravan*". Although he was later moved to improved housing, the initial experience reflects the **fragility of conditions for many lower-tier or site-based workers**, particularly in remote areas.

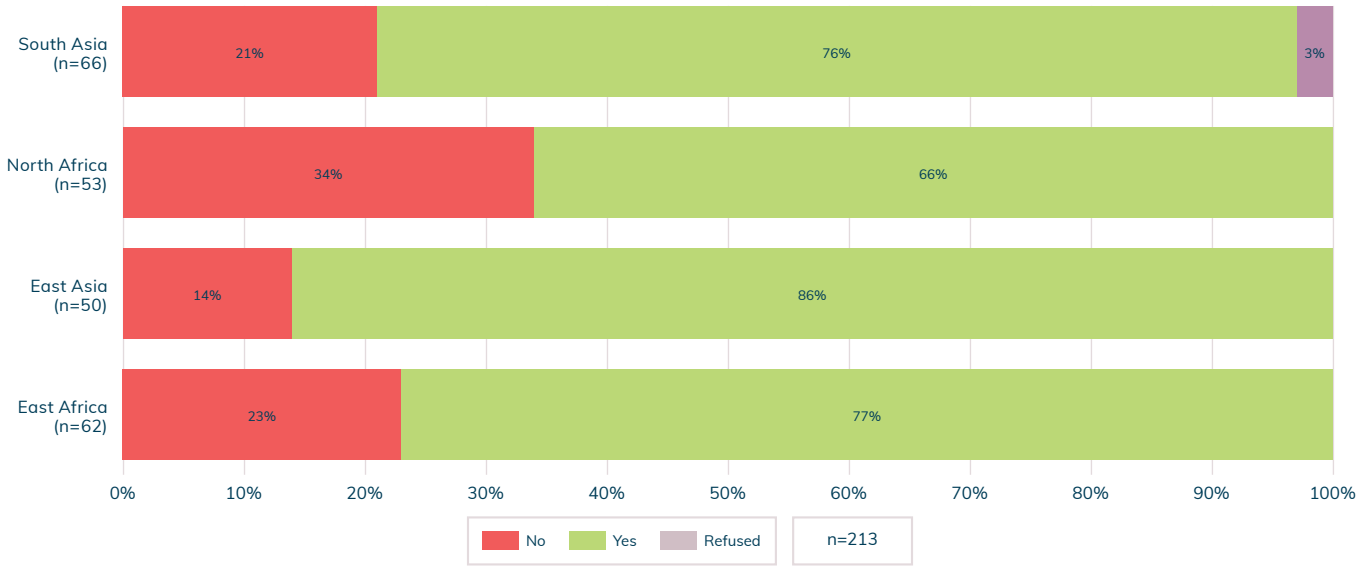
Perceptions around access to legal or social support also varied among interviewees. While a few participants expressed confidence in their ability to claim rights or receive employer support when needed, others highlighted a **lack of formal or informal support structures**. One interviewee noted, "*There is no organisation that supports us financially or emotionally. Nothing like that*".[118] Yet others mentioned that supervisors were responsive when approached directly, suggesting that **access to redress may depend on individual relationships** as much as institutional safeguards.

Ability to Meet Basic Needs

While overall, the majority of respondents said they could meet their needs, the data highlight persistent gaps in economic security across all regions, particularly among North Africans.

Most (76%) indicated that they had sufficient resources to meet their basic needs. However, financial and material hardship was still reported by nearly one in four (23%), with North African respondents appearing especially affected—more than a third (34%) reported they did not have enough resources. (See Figure 18)

Figure 18. Do you currently have sufficient resources to meet your basic needs?



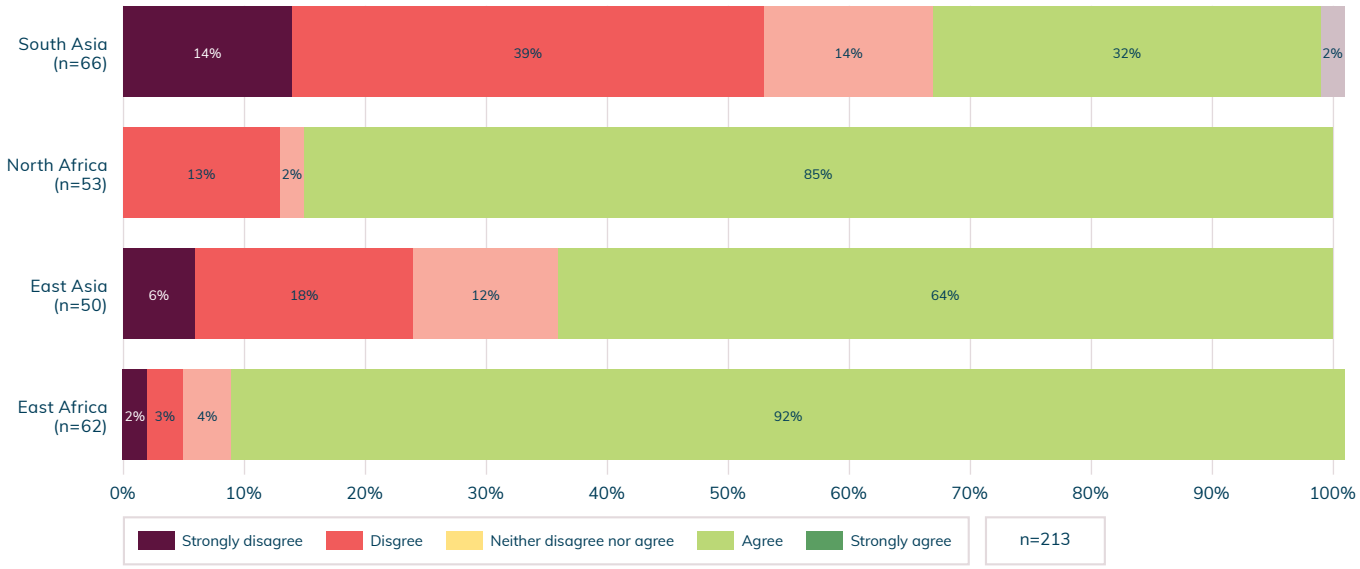
115 Voluntary mobility individual interview
116 Voluntary immobility individual interview
117 Voluntary mobility individual interview
118 Voluntary immobility individual interview

Exposure to discrimination

Discrimination appears to be a major barrier to inclusion for South Asian respondents, whose experiences point to both the prevalence and severity of the issue.

Nearly a third of respondents (32%) stated that they have experienced discrimination, suggesting that discrimination remains a significant concern for many. However, stark disparities by region of origin emerged: nearly 70% of South Asian respondents reported experiencing discrimination, compared to just 8% of East Africans and 15% of North Africans. (See Figure 19)

Figure 19. Have you experienced any discrimination since your arrival in Saudi Arabia?

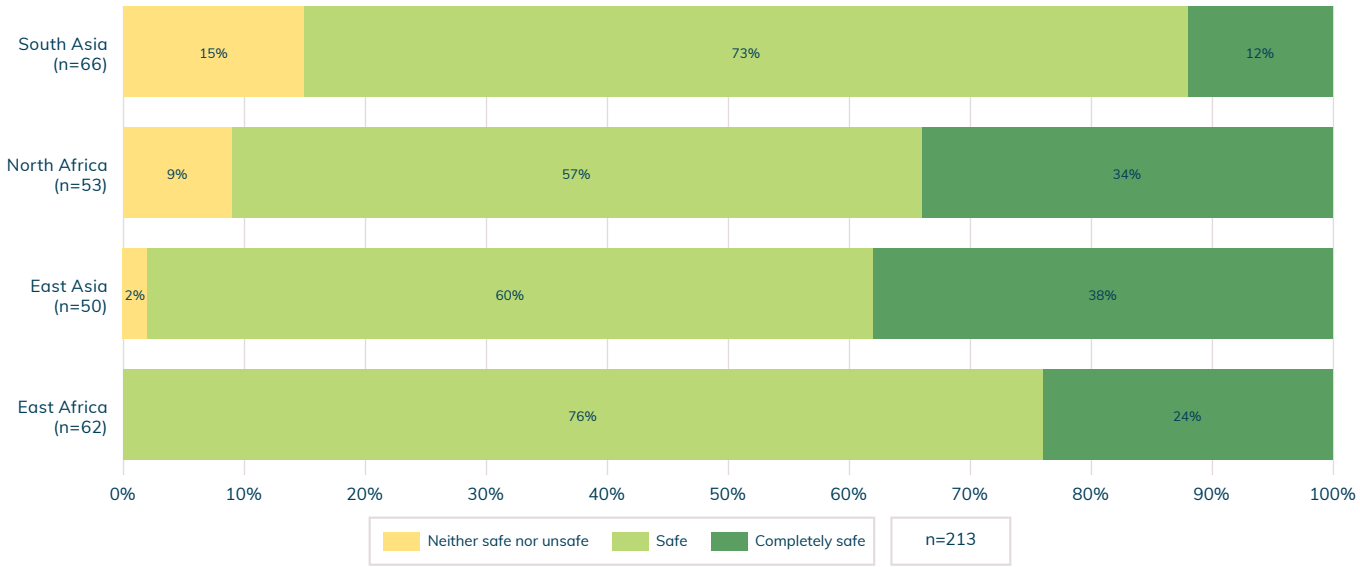


Sense of Safety

Although most respondents reported a sense of safety, the data suggest that certain national groups, especially South Asians, may feel relatively less secure in their living environments.

Two-thirds of respondents (67%) said they felt "safe" in the areas where they lived, and another quarter (26%) described feeling "completely safe." Yet these positive perceptions were not shared equally across all groups. South Asian and North African respondents were the least likely to report feeling completely safe, and the most likely to describe their environments as "neither safe nor unsafe." (See Figure 20)

Figure 20. To what extent do you feel safe and secure in the area where you reside currently?



Climate and environmental stressors in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's climate is characterised by extreme heat, aridity, and frequent dust storms, conditions that are expected to intensify due to climate change. While these environmental challenges affect broad segments of the population, migrant workers are often disproportionately exposed due to their overrepresentation in outdoor, physically demanding, and low-skill labour. Their vulnerability is further compounded by limited access to climate adaptation measures, inadequate workplace protections, and systemic barriers to support.

Extreme Heat and Occupational Hazards: A Deadly Combination for Migrant Workers

Saudi Arabia's climate presents extreme heat challenges, significantly amplified by climate change, posing severe occupational health and safety risks, particularly for migrant workers in outdoor sectors like construction and agriculture. The country is warming at a rate 50% higher than the Northern Hemisphere landmass average, with summer temperatures rising fastest, and projections indicating continued warming and more frequent extreme weather. Workers describe the heat, which can feel like 62°C with humidity, as "torment" and "like a wall". Exposure leads to heat stress, cramps, exhaustion, and potentially fatal heat stroke, alongside symptoms like fainting, vomiting, dizziness, and dehydration. Long-term consequences include chronic kidney disease, cardiovascular problems, and organ damage. Migrant workers are disproportionately affected due to heavy physical labour, often without adequate acclimatisation, rest, or water. Pressures from employers to meet tight deadlines on projects, including Vision 2030 giga-projects, further compel workers to continue labouring under dangerous conditions. Existing protective measures, primarily midday work bans during summer months (e.g., 12 PM-3 PM, June 15-Sept 15), are widely criticised as insufficient, non-scientific, and inconsistently applied. Dangerous heat levels often occur outside these prescribed hours and months, and studies indicate increased injury risks persist despite the bans. Workers report inadequate access to shaded rest areas and cool drinking water. There are calls to adopt risk-based standards like the Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) index instead of calendar-based bans. Tragically, numerous migrant worker deaths are linked to heat stress, often officially attributed to "natural causes" or "acute heart failure," which prevents families from receiving work-related compensation. The lack of autopsies and thorough investigations obscures the true scale of these occupational fatalities. Climate change, therefore, acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying the dangers faced by workers already made vulnerable by exploitative labour systems like Kafala, which limit their ability to prioritise safety over work demands.

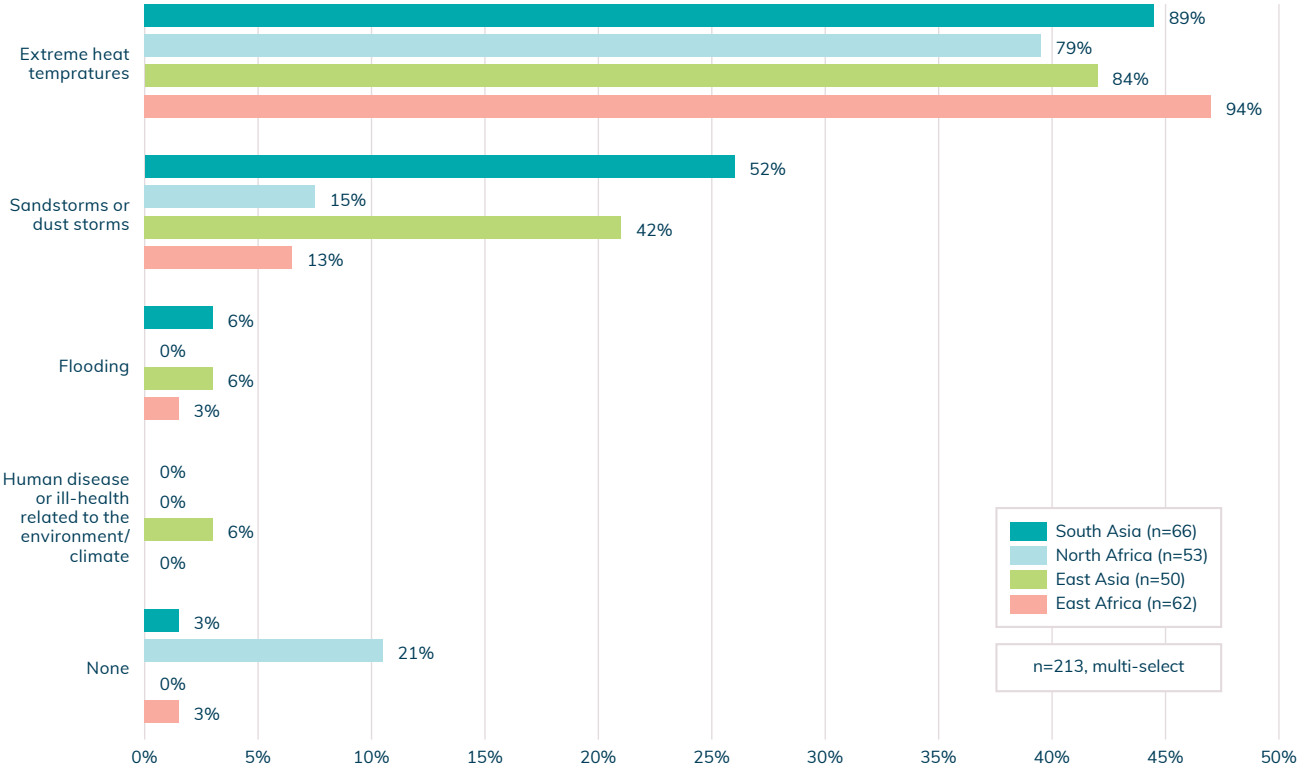
Exposure

Saudi Arabia's climate is characterised by extreme heat, aridity, and frequent dust storms, conditions that are expected to intensify due to climate change. While these environmental challenges affect broad segments of the population, migrant workers are often disproportionately exposed due to their overrepresentation in outdoor, physically demanding, and low-skill labour. Their vulnerability is further compounded by limited access to climate adaptation measures, inadequate workplace protections, and systemic barriers to support.

The vast majority of respondents reported experiencing extreme climate-related events since arriving in Saudi Arabia, with sand and/or dust storms and extreme heat standing out as the most commonly cited hazards. Among those affected, many described these conditions as frequent during work, pointing to sustained and repeated exposure that may jeopardise both health and safety.

When asked whether they had experienced any climate-related hazards since arriving in Saudi Arabia, nearly all respondents (93%) reported having encountered at least one such event. Extreme heat (87%) and sand and/or dust storms (31%) were by far the most commonly reported, followed by flooding (4%), and human disease or ill-health related to the environment/climate (1%). (see Figure 21).

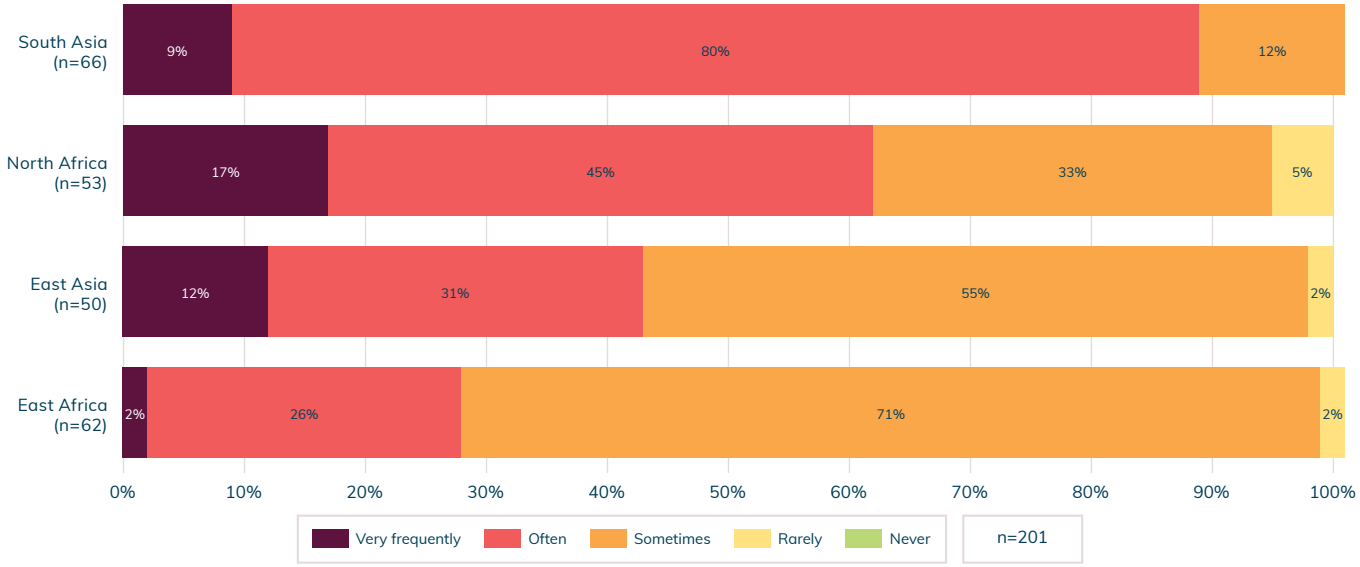
Figure 21. Reported environment and climate-related stressors experienced since arriving in Saudi Arabia



As the most consistently reported environmental factor, the analysis for this section focuses on extreme heat and sand or dust storms. The other climate-related hazards were mentioned only sporadically and are therefore not covered in detail.

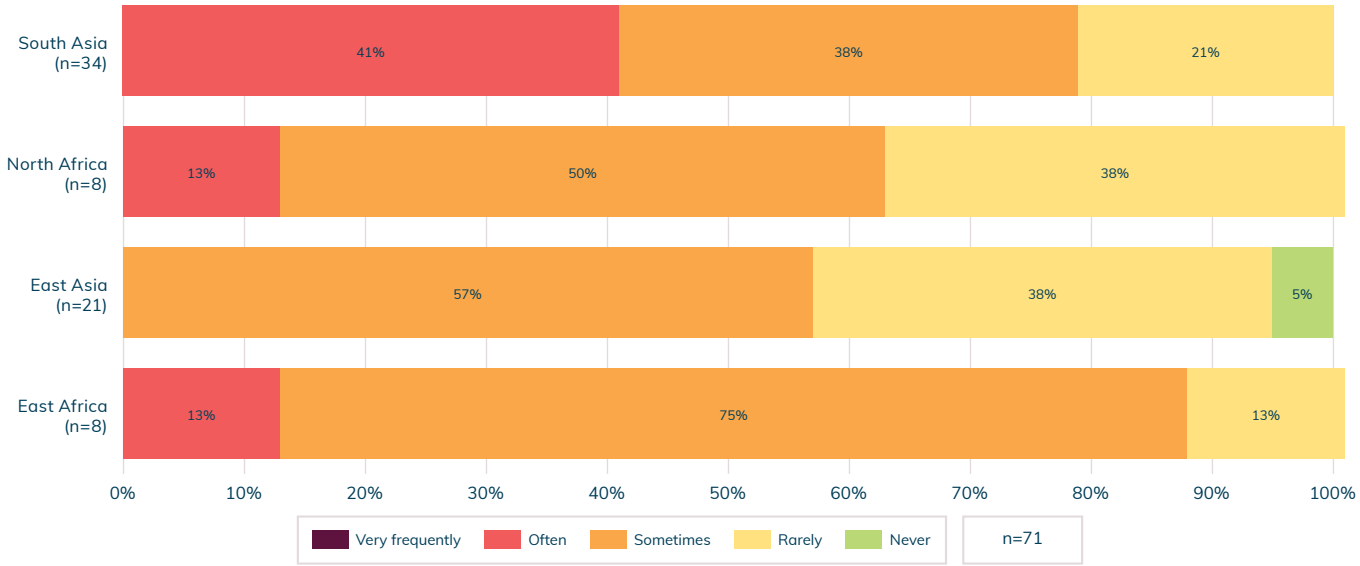
Among those who reported experiencing extreme heat while working in Saudi Arabia (n=201), just over half (56%) said it occurred often or very frequently, while 42% described it as happening only occasionally. Exposure was not evenly distributed across respondents. **Notably, no respondents said they had never experienced extreme heat while working.** South Asian respondents were by far the most likely to report frequent or near-constant exposure (89%), followed by North Africans (62%) and East Asians (43%). In contrast, only 28% of East African respondents reported frequent or very frequent exposure to extreme heat while working. (see Figure 22)

Figure 22. How often have “Extreme heat temperatures” occurred while you are working? (among respondents who reported experiencing extreme heat temperatures)



Experiences of sandstorms or dust storms (n=71) were more varied. Just under half (35) said the phenomenon occurred occasionally, 19 said rarely, and 16 reported that it happened often. A single respondent indicated the event never occurred while they were working. Unlike with extreme heat, differences in reported exposure were less pronounced across respondents from different regions of origin. (See Figure 23)

Figure 23. How often have Sandstorms or dust storms occurred while you were working? (among respondents who reported experiencing sand and dust storms)



Impact

Findings highlight the tangible vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in Saudi Arabia as a result of climate-related stressors, with many respondents reporting health problems, movement restrictions, and interruptions to their ability to work, impacts that extend beyond inconvenience and point to broader risks to well-being and livelihood security.

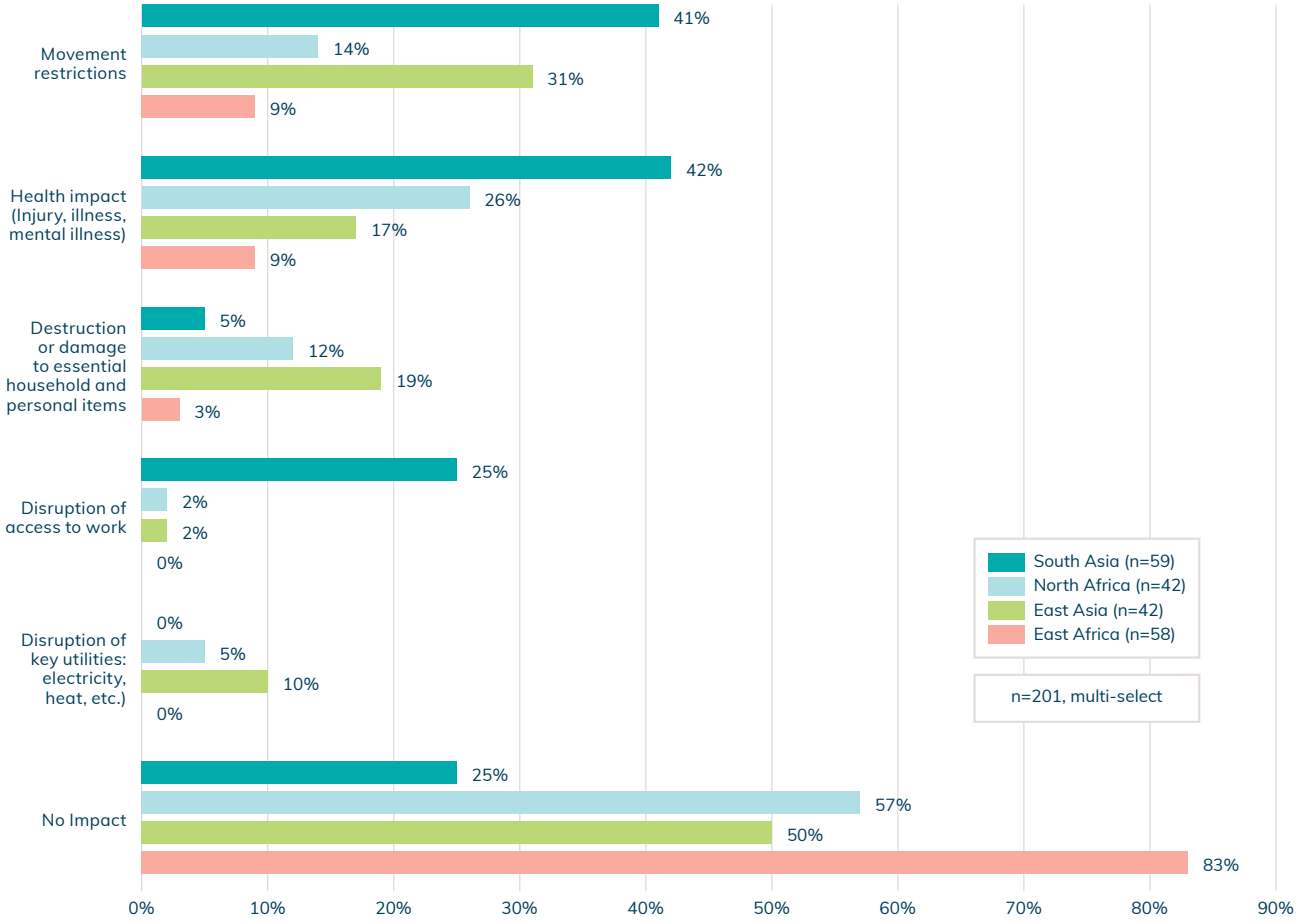
Among respondents who had experienced extreme heat (n=201), nearly half (46%) reported at least one type of impact. Health-related effects and movement restrictions were the most commonly cited (24% each), while 8% reported disruptions to their ability to work. The remaining 54% indicated that extreme heat had no impact on them. South Asian respondents (n= 59) appeared the most affected, with only 25% stating the heat had no effect. In contrast, those from East Africa (n=58) were the least affected, with 83% reporting no impact—the highest share of any group. (see Figure 24)

> *"The first thing is the heat. Here, the heat is more than in Pakistan or India... those who work in the sun or in the heat, it is very difficult for them and their health is also very bad."*
> **Pakistani focus group participant**

Interviewees and participants across all regions raised concerns about extreme temperatures. From heatstroke to chronic illness, many described the toll of sustained exposure. "At some point, I fell sick while I was there, and because I had to continue working while on medication, I developed a condition called photosensitivity... I couldn't be exposed to sunlight." (Egyptian interviewee)[119]. An East African respondent linked daily heat exposure to serious health risks, stating: "It is too hot here. You can't go out for a day because you may get heatstroke... heat brings diseases."[120] Recent studies and reports have documented a significant number of Nepali migrant workers returning from Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, with chronic kidney failure, often after years of labour in extreme heat with limited access to hydration and rest.[121] For instance, a 2023 report by The Guardian noted that men under 40 are increasingly returning to Nepal in need of dialysis after working in intense heat conditions abroad.[122] Similarly, a 2025 article from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre highlighted that one third of dialysis patients at the Nepal Kidney Centre were young men who had worked abroad in extreme heat, particularly in the Gulf region.[123] Studies underscored the severe health risks associated with prolonged heat exposure and inadequate labour protections.[124] They also highlight that the health impacts of extreme temperatures extend beyond immediate conditions like heatstroke, contributing to long-term, life-altering illnesses.[125]

119 Voluntary mobility individual interview
120 Voluntary immobility individual interview
121 Middle East Monitor (2023) Rise in foreign labourers returning from Gulf with chronic kidney disease.
122 Poudel, R. (2023) 'Going abroad cost me my health': Nepal's migrant workers coming home with chronic kidney disease. The Guardian.
123 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2025) Nepal: One-third of dialysis patients are Gulf returnees having endured harsh working conditions under endless hours of labour incl. in extreme heat.
124 Hilary Beaumont (2024) Extreme heat due to climate crisis puts people at greater risk of kidney disease. The Guardian
125 Ibid.

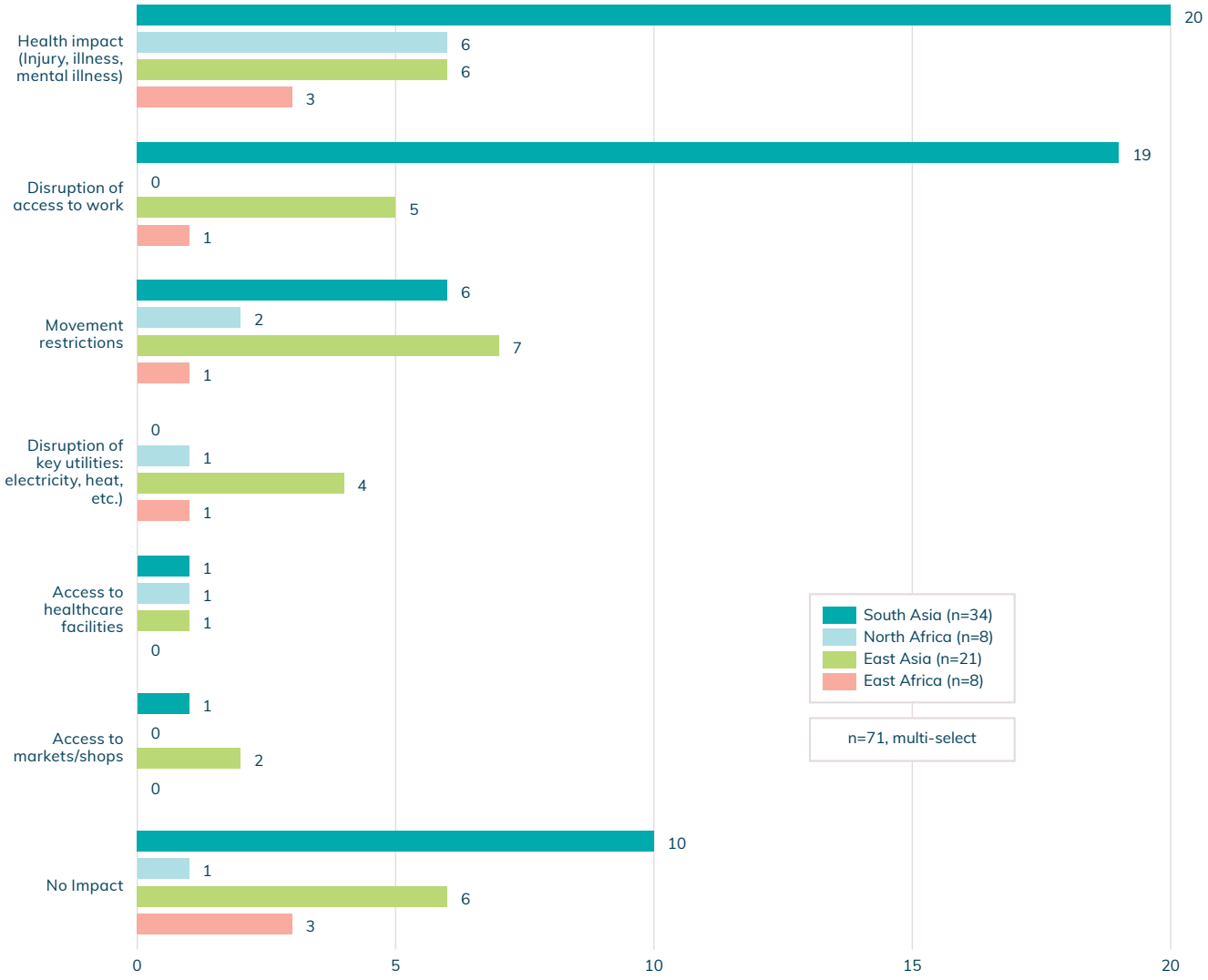
Figure 24. Most commonly reported impacts of extreme heat temperatures since arrival in Saudi Arabia (among respondents who reported experiencing extreme heat temperatures)[126]



126 Other reported impacts included hampered access to healthcare facilities (1%) and hampered access to markets/shops (1%).

For those who were exposed to sandstorms or dust storms (n=71), just under three-quarters (51) of respondents reported experiencing at least one impact. Health-related consequences were most frequently mentioned (35), followed by work disruptions (25) and movement restrictions (16). Regional variations were notable: South Asians (n=34) were the most likely to report work disruptions (19), while North African respondents (n=8) stood out for health impacts, with three-quarters of those reporting exposure citing these issues. (see Figure 25)

Figure 25. Most commonly reported impacts of sandstorms or dust storms since arrival in Saudi Arabia? (among respondents who reported experiencing sand or dust storms)[127]



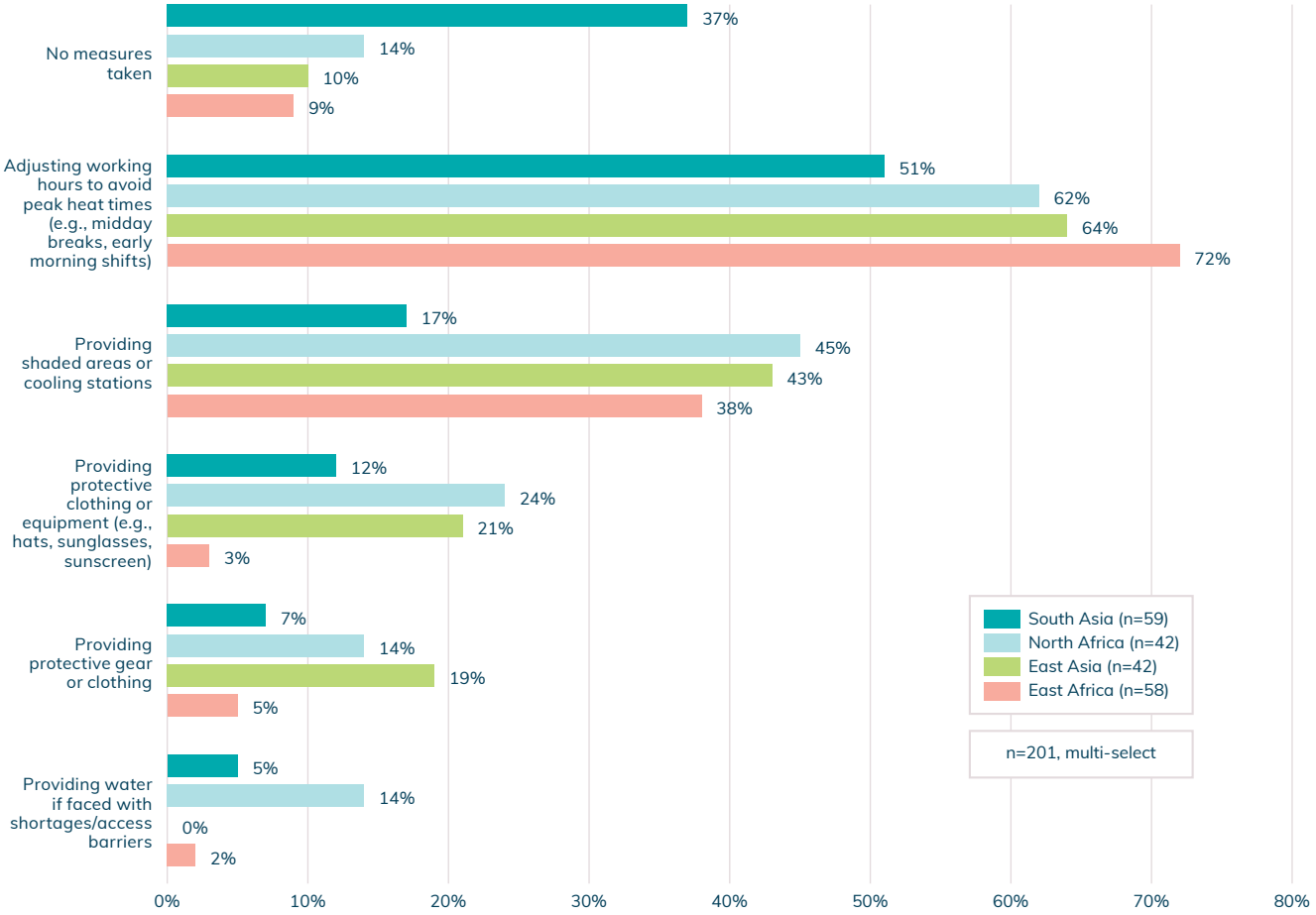
127 Other reported impacts included displacement/evacuation/relocation (2), destruction or damage to essential household and personal items (2), destruction or damage of housing/shelter (1), and disrupted access to drinking water (1)

Coping Measures and Gaps

Many migrant workers are bearing the brunt of climate-related hazards with limited on-the-job safeguards. Findings indicate that while some employers have taken steps to protect migrant workers, protection measures are not always applied, leaving some to fend for themselves in the face of rising environmental stressors. Additionally, qualitative findings show that the provision of standard gear by employers did not always translate into meaningful protection.

Most respondents who experienced extreme heat (n=201) indicated that their employers had taken at least one step to mitigate its effects in the workplace (82%). Adjusting working hours was by far the most common measure (62%), followed by providing shaded areas or cooling stations (34%). Still, gaps were visible: over one-third of South Asian respondents (n=59) said no measures were taken (37%) — the highest across respondent groups (see figure 26).

Figure 26. Most reported measures taken by respondents' employers to mitigate the impact of extreme heat temperatures in the workplace (among respondents who reported experiencing extreme heat temperatures while working in Saudi Arabia)[128]

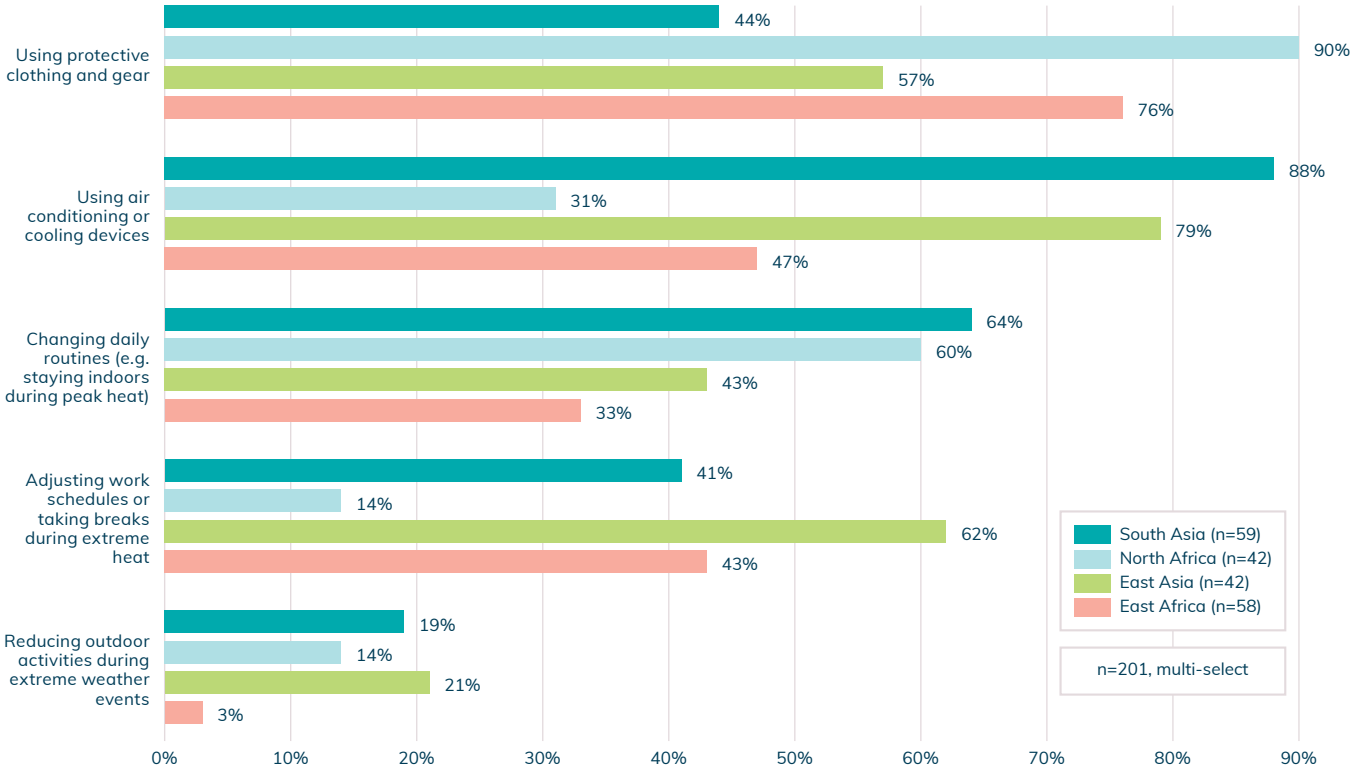


128 Other reported measures included training employees on recognizing and preventing climate-related health risks (4%), implementing early warning systems for extreme weather events (2%), providing health check-ups or monitoring for climate-related illnesses (1%), and engaging with employees on climate change concerns and adaptation strategies (1%).

Beyond employer action, many respondents reported personal efforts to manage the extreme heat. Two-thirds (66%) said they used protective clothing or gear, 62% relied on air conditioning or other cooling devices, and half adjusted their routines to avoid peak heat hours. (See Figure 27).

East African and North African focus group participants more often cited government-mandated heat restrictions as the main source of workplace protection, although implementation varied. "Work is not allowed after 12:00 PM… but some private companies don't apply this," explained a participant in the discussion with East African respondents.

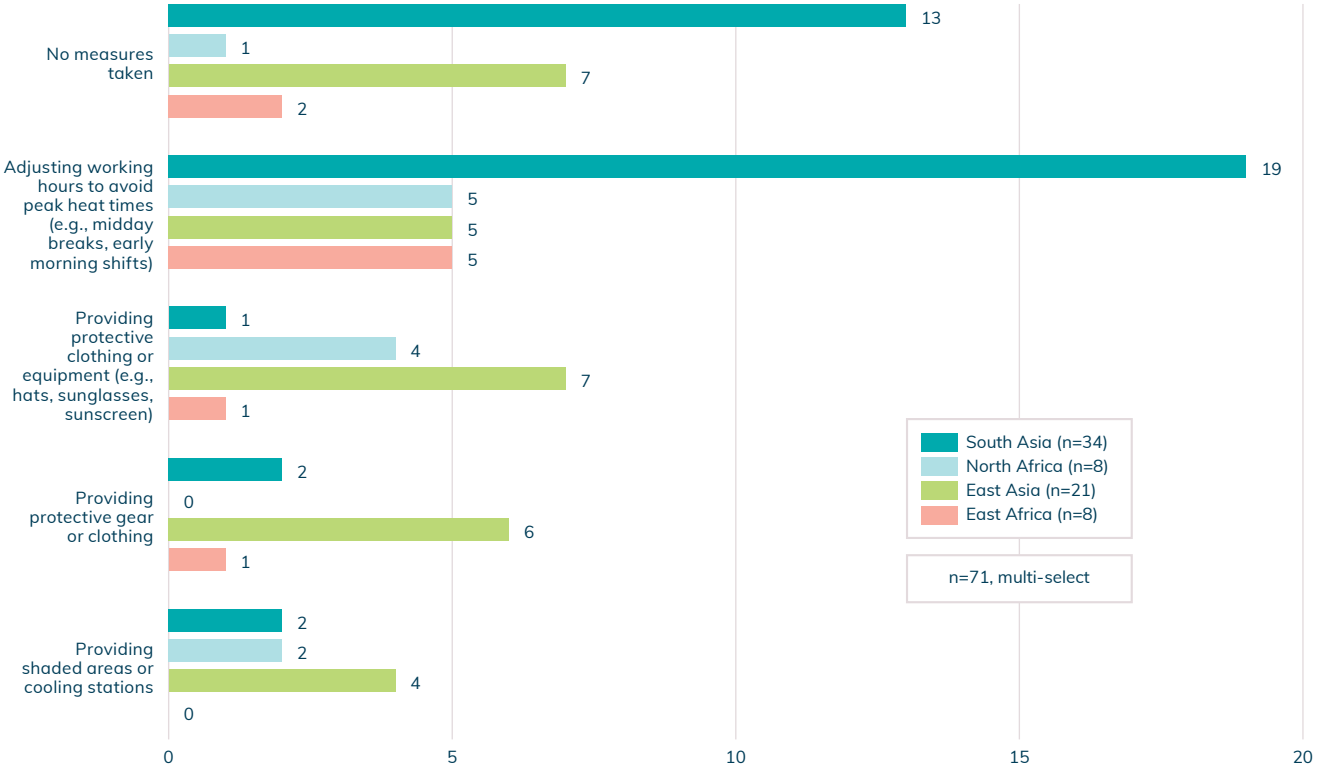
Figure 27. Most reported measures taken by respondents to deal with or avoid problems caused by changes in extreme heat temperatures (among respondents who reported experiencing extreme heat temperatures while working in Saudi Arabia)[129]



129 Other reported measures included relocating to a cooler or less affected area (6%), conserving water at home and work (e.g., shorter showers, fixing leaks) (5%), staying informed about weather forecasts and warnings (5%), using traditional knowledge or practices for coping with climate change (5%), participating in climate change awareness initiatives (5%), saving money for emergencies or unexpected expenses (2%), learning new skills or adapting existing skills to changing conditions (2%), changing jobs or seeking employment in less exposed sectors (1%), relying on social support networks (family, friends, community) (1%), and diversifying income sources (1%)

When it came to sandstorms or dust storms (n=71), employer interventions were less consistently reported. Only 68% of those affected said any workplace measures had been implemented, most often through adjusted working hours (48%) (see Figure 28). South Asians (n=34) again stood out, with 38% saying no action had been taken by their employers.

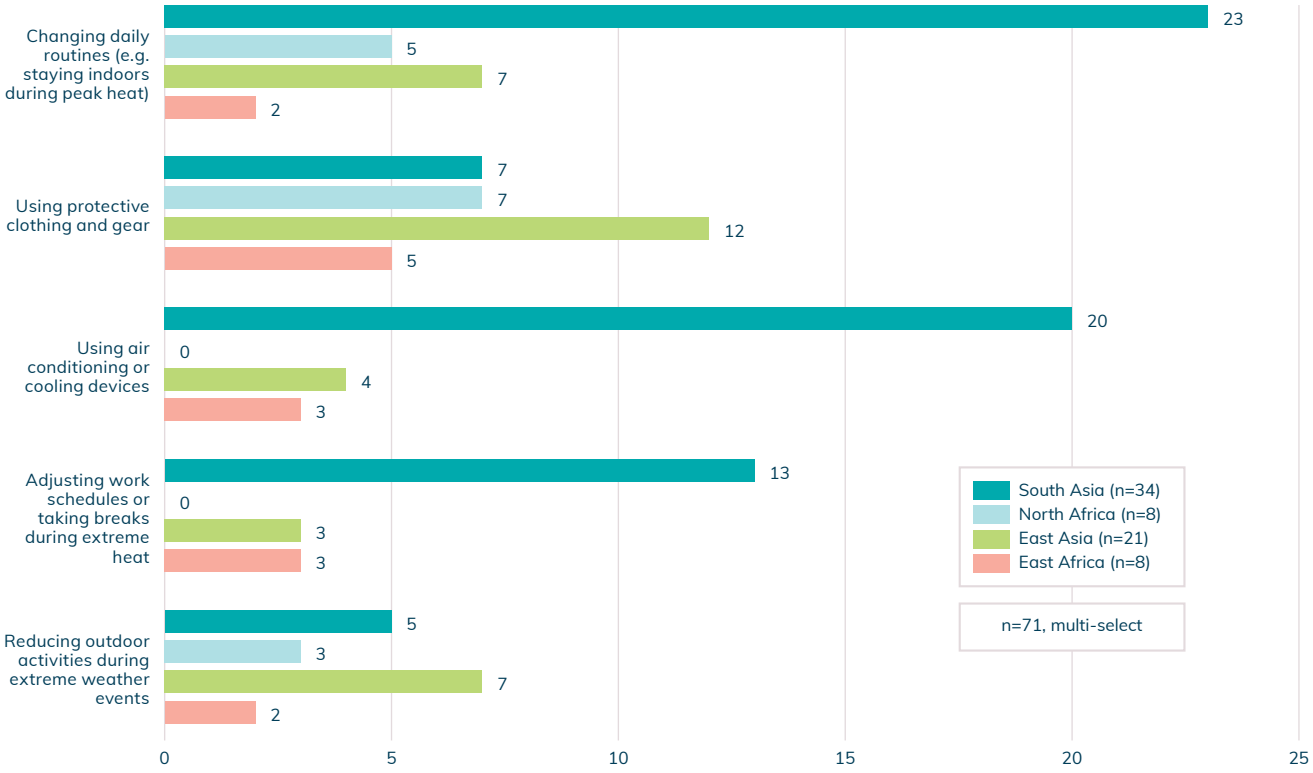
Figure 28. Most reported measures taken by respondents' employers to mitigate the impact of sandstorms or dust storms in the workplace (among respondents who reported experiencing sandstorms or dust storms while working in Saudi Arabia)[130]



130 Other reported measures included training employees on recognising and preventing climate-related health risks (3) implementing early warning systems for extreme weather events (1), providing health check-ups or monitoring for climate-related illnesses (1), and engaging with employees on climate change concerns and adaptation strategies (1).

Individual coping strategies were also common in this context. Over half (52%) of respondents said they changed their daily routines to reduce exposure, while 44% reported using protective gear. The latter was especially common among East and North African respondents. (see Figure 29)

Figure 29. Most reported measures taken by respondents to deal with or avoid problems caused by changes in sandstorms or dust storms (among respondents who reported experiencing sandstorms or dust storms while working in Saudi Arabia)[131]



131 Other reported measures included using traditional knowledge or practices for coping with climate change (8), staying informed about weather forecasts and warnings (7), conserving water at home and work (e.g., shorter showers, fixing leaks) (4), relying on social support networks (family, friends, community) (2), seeking mental health support if needed (2), saving money for emergencies or unexpected expenses (2), learning new skills or adapting existing skills to changing conditions (2), participating in climate change awareness initiatives (2), relocating to a cooler or less affected area (1), and seeking assistance from government or aid organizations (1). Four respondents did not report adopting any coping strategies.

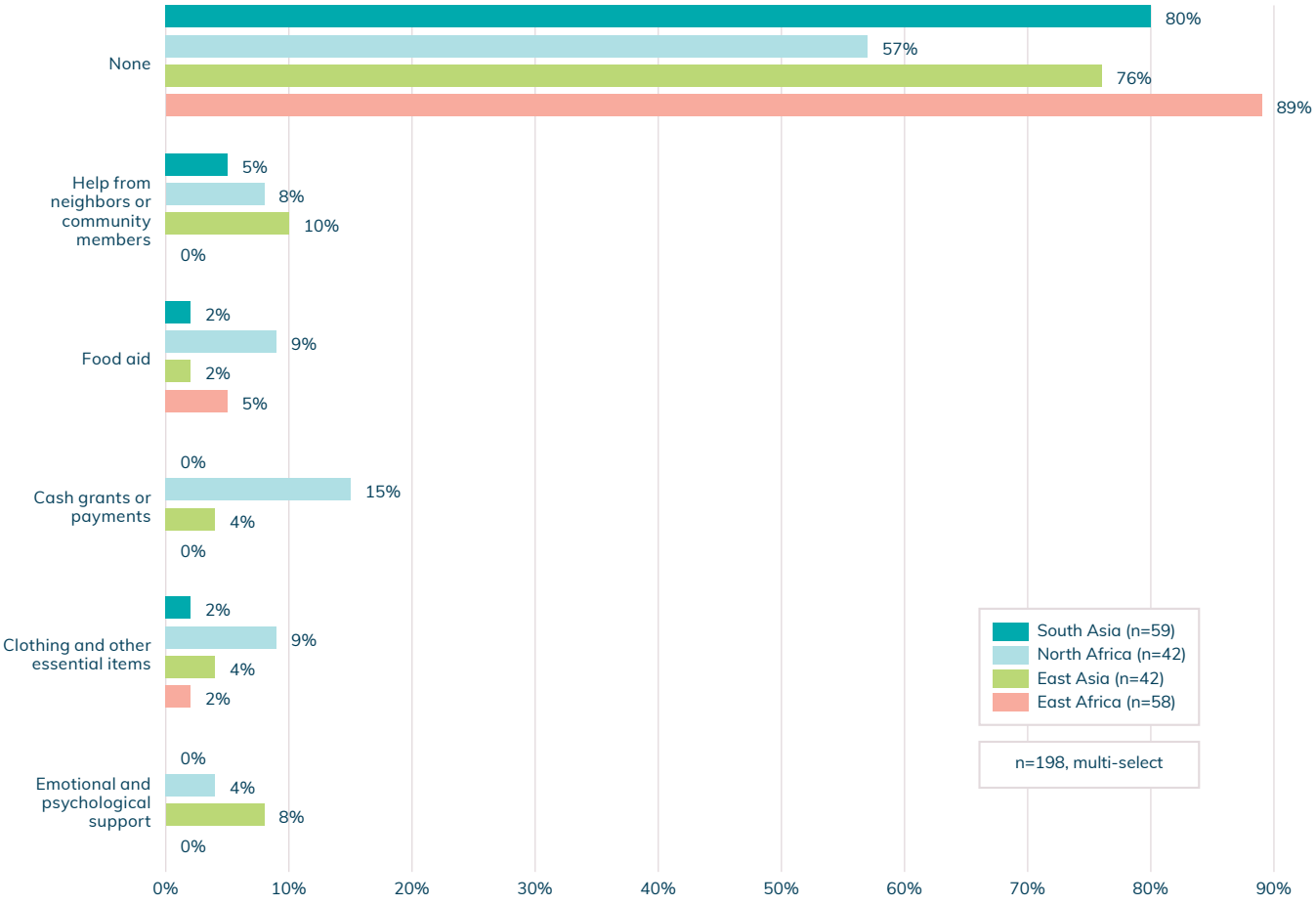
Access to external assistance

The vulnerabilities created by patchy employer protections are deepened by the near-total absence of external assistance when faced with or in preparation for climate-related hazards, underscoring how thin the safety net truly is for many migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.

A large majority (76%) of respondents who reported exposure to climate and environmental stressors (n=198) said they had not received any form of external support. This was particularly pronounced among East Africans (89%; n=58) and South Asians (80%, n=60). Even among North Africans (n=42), who were the most likely to report receiving some kind of help, over half (57%) still said they had received none.

The most commonly reported forms of support, though limited, included help from community members (5%), food aid (4%), and the distribution of clothing or other essential items (4%). More structured or institutional forms of assistance—such as cash grants, subsidies, or insurance payouts—were exceedingly rare. (see Figure 30)

Figure 30. Most reported kinds of assistance/support received by respondents when faced with or in preparation for climate and environmental stressors in Saudi Arabia (among respondents who reported exposure to such stressors)?[132]



132 Other reported kinds of assistance received included information on available resources and services (2%), advice on coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies (2%), water and sanitation supplies (2%), subsidies for essential goods or services (1%), training on disaster preparedness and response (1%), and community-organized relief efforts (1%).

Qualitative data underscored how rare external assistance truly is for migrant workers navigating climate-related challenges. Across all regions, participants consistently reported that aside from informal peer or community-based support, they had received **no structured external aid**. A North African interviewee who fell ill from heat exposure and sought treatment explained, "I take my residency and my insurance with me and go to a clinic… No one helped me"[133]

In focus groups, South Asian participants similarly pointed to the **lack of any organisational or institutional safety net**, with one noting, "There is no government-level community or organisation that will support [us] for a single day". Informal country-of-origin networks were occasionally cited as a source of emotional or limited material support, but often lacked the resources to respond to environmental hazards. An East African participant explained, "If someone gets into an accident, everyone contributes money to support them," adding that such help was restricted to tight-knit national groups and only available in emergencies.

Expert voices confirmed these patterns. A key informant observed that while "some NGOs and community groups offer practical support," their presence was "rare," and they were "not allowed to go to the workers and ask who needs help" — instead, aid is offered only to those who proactively seek it out. Another also pointed out that groups like Migrant Forum Asia offer guidance and support to returnees, but such organizations are "not allowed to operate in [Saudi Arabia]" and are therefore **not accessible to migrants in-country**.

Anticipating the 2034 FIFA World Cup: Hopes and Cautions for Migrant Workers

Labour risks and climate concerns ahead of Saudi Arabia's 2034 FIFA World Cup

As Saudi Arabia prepares to host the FIFA World Cup in 2034, the country is embarking on an unprecedented wave of infrastructure development tied to its Vision 2030 strategy. Projects related to transportation, hospitality, stadium construction, and urban development are expected to accelerate over the coming years, driving demand for migrant labour across sectors. The tournament is seen as a major opportunity to showcase Saudi Arabia on the world stage, but it also places the Kingdom under heightened international scrutiny, particularly around its labour practices. Critics point to Saudi Arabia's reliance on the Kafala system and its patchy enforcement of labour reforms as factors that could leave low-wage migrant workers vulnerable to abuse, particularly under pressure to meet rapid construction and event deadlines. Amnesty International has warned that without robust safeguards, "there is a real risk that the exploitation of migrant workers seen in Qatar will be repeated" in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Human Rights Watch and Migrant-Rights.org have noted that past mega-projects in the Kingdom, such as NEOM and The Line,[134] have already been associated with reports of wage violations and limited legal protections. In addition to long-standing concerns about wage violations and limited legal protections, the tournament has drawn particular attention to Saudi Arabia's extreme climate. International reporting has already flagged the risks of heat stress, unsafe outdoor working conditions, and poor housing infrastructure as critical issues that must be addressed if the country is to prepare for and safely host such a massive, labour-intensive event. While Saudi Arabia has taken initial steps toward reform, such as easing exit permit requirements for some private sector workers, many experts remain concerned that these changes remain limited in scope, poorly enforced, or inaccessible to the most vulnerable workers. The FIFA tournament may thus serve as a test case for whether the Kingdom can balance its global ambitions with meaningful labour rights compliance.

133 Involuntary immobility

134 NEOM is a planned cross-border smart city and economic zone in north-western Saudi Arabia, envisioned as part of the country's Vision 2030 plan. One of its flagship developments is The Line, a linear city designed to run for 170 kilometres without roads or cars, intended to house nine million residents and operate entirely on renewable energy. For more details, see: Sri Lanka Guardian (2024) NEOM: Saudi Arabia's Futuristic Megacity Built on the Graves of 21,000 Workers.

Across focus group discussions and expert interviews, the 2034 FIFA World Cup was widely seen as a major source of opportunity for migrant workers, but also as a moment of heightened risk if past patterns of labour exploitation are not addressed.

Participants expected the event to trigger large-scale demand for labour, particularly in construction, maintenance, healthcare, hospitality, and event logistics. In North and East African groups, participants emphasized **the potential for wage increases and job creation**, with one Egyptian worker saying, "It will raise the level of migrant workers… You may see a wage increase". Others saw the event as likely to "reduce unemployment" and "provide more demand for migrant workers," not only for their own nationalities but across the board.

Southeast Asian participants echoed this sentiment, identifying a wide range of potential roles — from technicians and mechanics to nurses, cleaners, and even event organizers. "Filipinos would help in organizing this event," one participant noted, while another added, "It would help more Filipinos to come here and work, with extra skills".

Among East African participants, **hopes for improved conditions and long-term benefits** were also tied to lessons learned from previous mega-events in the Gulf. One participant reflected, "During the World Cup in Qatar, there were issues… The Kingdom will certainly plan to avoid facing these same problems again," citing hopes for improved housing, healthcare, and working hours. Others anticipated **a boost in income opportunities,** with mechanics and workshop workers noting they could go from servicing two vehicles a day to ten due to increased demand during the tournament.

However, concerns about worker protection and oversight were raised as well, particularly by expert interviewees. A Key informant warned that unless reforms to systems like the Kafala are meaningfully enacted, "there will be more exploitation and abuse of these workers." He also highlighted the risk of "exponential pressure" on workers as deadlines approach, referencing the high rate of documented deaths and abuses during preparations for the Qatar 2022 World Cup. According to a 2021 investigation by The Guardian, more than 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka died in Qatar between 2010 and 2020 following its successful bid to host the World cup, a figure likely to be an underestimate, as it excludes deaths from other countries and lacks occupation-specific data.[135]

Another expert noted that Saudi Arabia, under growing international scrutiny, may face pressure to improve migrant working conditions in the lead-up to 2034, presenting both a **challenge and an opportunity**. "They will be in the spotlight… like Qatar was," one key informant noted, adding that this global attention could serve as a catalyst to "promote a positive narrative around migration and labour reform" if managed proactively.

Qatar's experience offers a cautionary tale. In the years leading up to the 2022 World Cup, Qatar implemented several labour reforms, including introducing a minimum wage and easing restrictions on workers changing jobs.[136] However, reports indicate that many of these reforms were not fully enforced, and abuses persisted. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented ongoing exploitation, and FIFA has been criticized for failing to provide adequate remedies to affected workers.[137] For instance, despite recommendations from its own sub-committee to compensate workers, FIFA launched a $50 million legacy fund for social programs without addressing worker compensation.[138]

While most participants viewed the upcoming tournament as a gateway to opportunity, these reflections suggest that **meaningful outcomes for migrant workers will depend not only on job creation but on the strength of legal protections, labour rights enforcement, and climate-responsive working conditions**.

135 Pete Pattinson (2021) Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded. The Guardian
136 Graham Dunbar (2024) After hosting World Cup, Qatar praised by UN rights body for labor law reforms but urged to do more.
137 Amnesty International (2022) Qatar: Labour reform unfinished and compensation still owed as World Cup looms.
138 Rohith Nair (2024) FIFA overlooks own report advice on Qatar World Cup workers' compensation. Reuters.

5.4 Perception of Migration Experience and (im)mobility intentions

Perceived levels of success of the migration experience

The research explored how migrant workers in Saudi Arabia perceive their migration experience overall, with a particular focus on whether they feel their move has been successful and to what extent they have achieved their financial objectives.

Despite many migrant workers viewing their migration to Saudi Arabia as generally successful, few felt they had achieved their financial goals. This mismatch between perceived success and actual financial outcomes highlights how migration may offer relative improvements or stability without necessarily fulfilling core aspirations.

Across the sample, perceptions of the migration experience were mostly positive: 42% of respondents described their move to Saudi Arabia as "successful," and 7% considered it "very successful." However, when asked specifically about financial goals, only 19% said they had achieved them. Three-quarters (74%) reported they had not met their financial objectives.

This disconnect was particularly stark among East African, East Asian, and North African respondents. While majorities from each of these regions (ranging from 45% to 65%) described their move as successful, only small proportions—3% of East Africans, 7.5% of North Africans, and 26% of East Asians—said they had achieved their financial goals. South Asians, by contrast, were more optimistic, with nearly 38% reporting success in meeting their financial aims.

This gap between perceived migration success and the reality of unmet financial goals was echoed by several focus group participants. Many described how, despite stable employment and the ability to send remittances, the broader financial pressures left little room for savings or upward mobility. A South Asian participant shared, "I am not saving anything. I am just going on with my life. I have 6 kids". Similarly, an East African participant described his migration outcome as an improvement over life back home — but still far from financially fulfilling, adding: "We can live day to day, but it's just enough to get by"

Others expressed quiet resignation to the lack of economic progress. "We all have the same dream of growth," said one Indian participant, "but we have yet to see that growth".

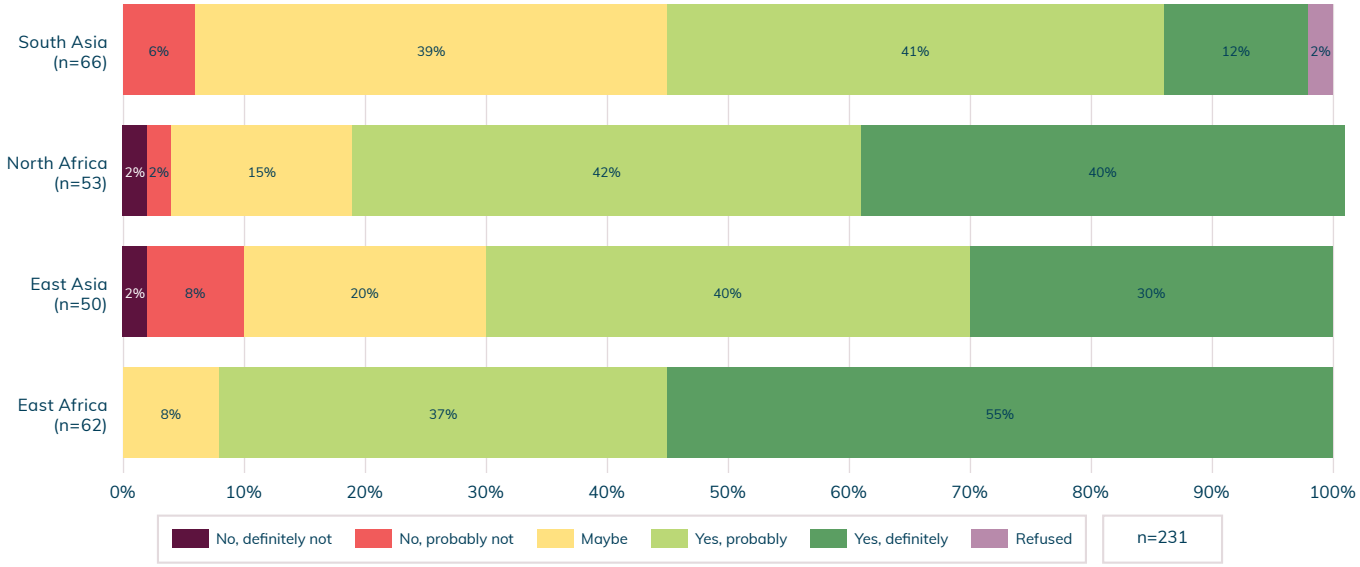
Perceived value despite unmet goals

Although many respondents reported that they had not fully achieved their financial goals, most still said they would choose to migrate to Saudi Arabia again. This suggests that their migration experience, while not always meeting expectations, was still seen as worthwhile, likely shaped by relative gains or limited alternatives or opportunities elsewhere.

Overall, three in four respondents (74%) indicated that they would make the same decision to migrate to Saudi Arabia if they could decide again, with 34% saying "yes, definitely" and 40% selecting "yes, probably."

East Africans were the most resolute, with 92% expressing they would migrate again. South Asians, by contrast, were the most uncertain: while 41% said they would "probably" choose to come again, only 12% said they would "definitely" do so, and 39% selected "maybe." (see Figure 31)

Figure 31. If you could decide again, would you still choose to come and work in Saudi Arabia?

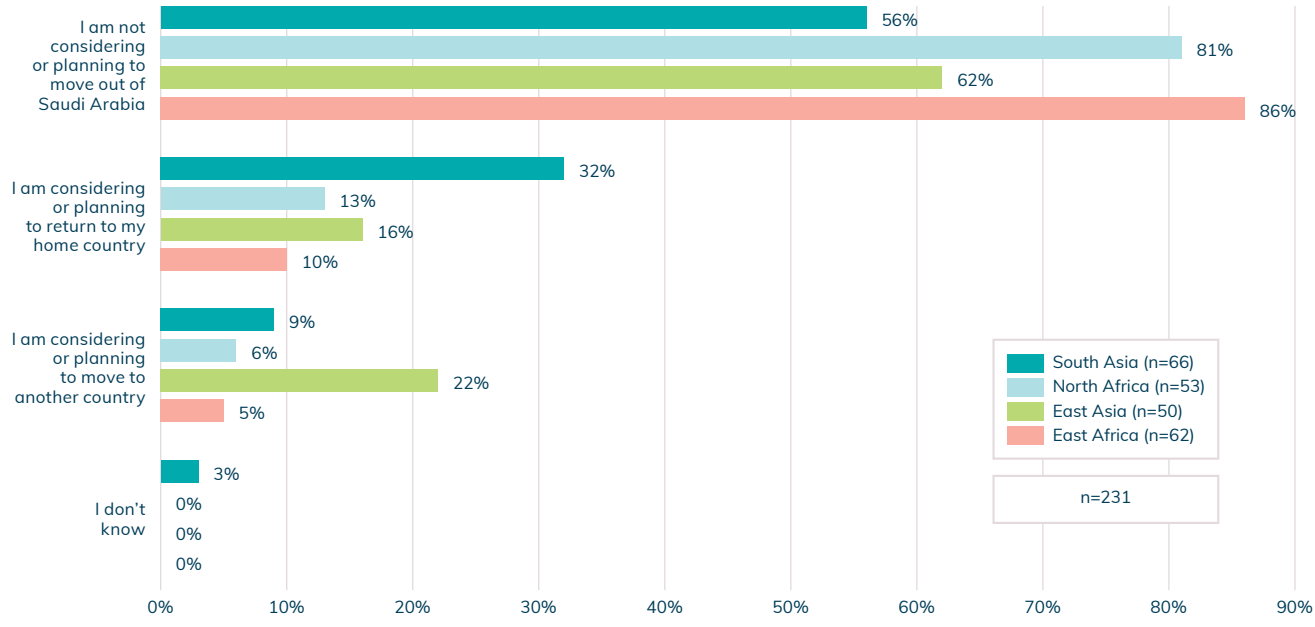


Mobility intentions

While most surveyed migrant workers reported no plans or consideration to leave Saudi Arabia, a significant share expressed intentions to return home or move elsewhere. However, many of those considering to move lacked the resources or capacity to act on these intentions, revealing a gap between aspiration and ability which many migrant workers face.

When asked about their mobility intentions, 71% of respondents said they were not considering or planning to leave Saudi Arabia. However, 28% indicated they were considering returning to their home country or moving to another country (see Figure 32). These responses indicate a general sense of settlement or planned continued stay in Saudi Arabia, though this does not necessarily reflect permanence.

Figure 32. Reported mobility intentions

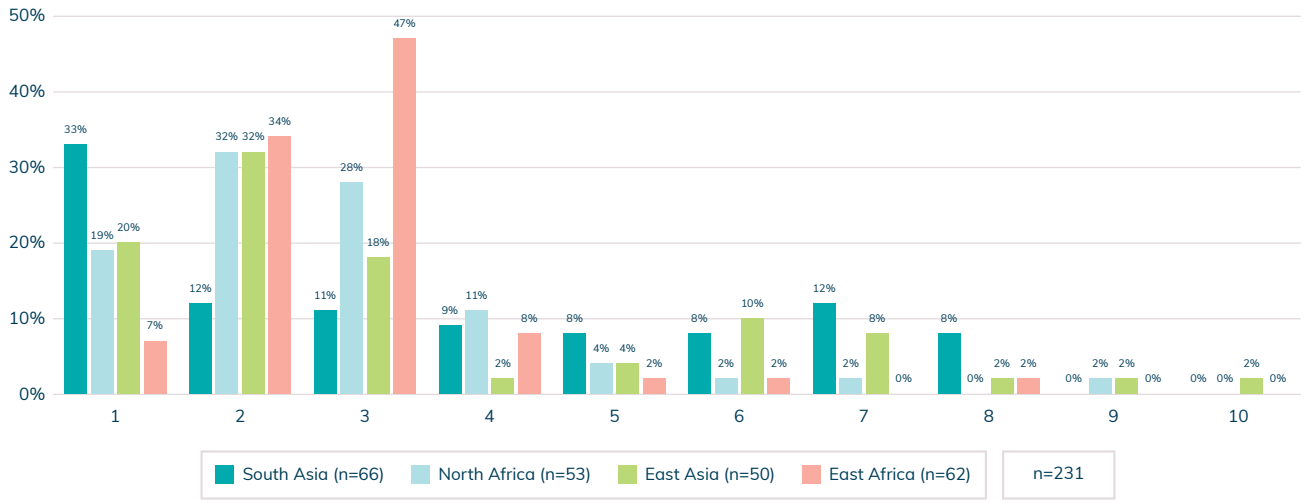


Among those planning to return home (n=42), only 6 respondents said they had the full capacity and resources to do so, despite not having specific plans yet. The majority, however, reported limitations: 21 had no resources or capacity, and 15 had only partial means to return. South Asians made up the largest share of this group and were also the most likely to report lacking the means to act on their plans. A similar trend emerged among those considering onward migration to another country (n=23). Just 2 individuals across the entire sample said they had all the necessary resources to move, while 13 reported having none, and 8 said they had only partial capacity. Again, East Asian and South Asian respondents featured most prominently in this group. For those considering or planning migration to a different country, when asked about preferred destinations, no single country or region dominated, and responses were rather scattered across a wide geographic range, including Europe, North America, and other Gulf countries.

Overall, respondents did not feel a strong pressure to leave Saudi Arabia, suggesting that those who do want to leave – whether it is return or onward migration – do so because of their own preference rather than out of necessity due to a strongly felt pressure.

Most respondents reported relatively low levels of pressure to leave Saudi Arabia, suggesting that many perceive their continued stay as at least partially voluntary. Over 70% selected a score between 1 and 3 on the pressure scale, with 1 indicating complete freedom of choice, including 20% who selected 1, the lowest level of pressure. Only a small minority reported high levels of pressure: just 5% selected 8 or above, and only two respondents selected 10. Notably, South Asians were the most likely to report higher levels of pressure to move. (see Figure 33)

Figure 33. Perceived Pressure to Leave Saudi Arabia (1-10 Scale[139]), as felt by respondents



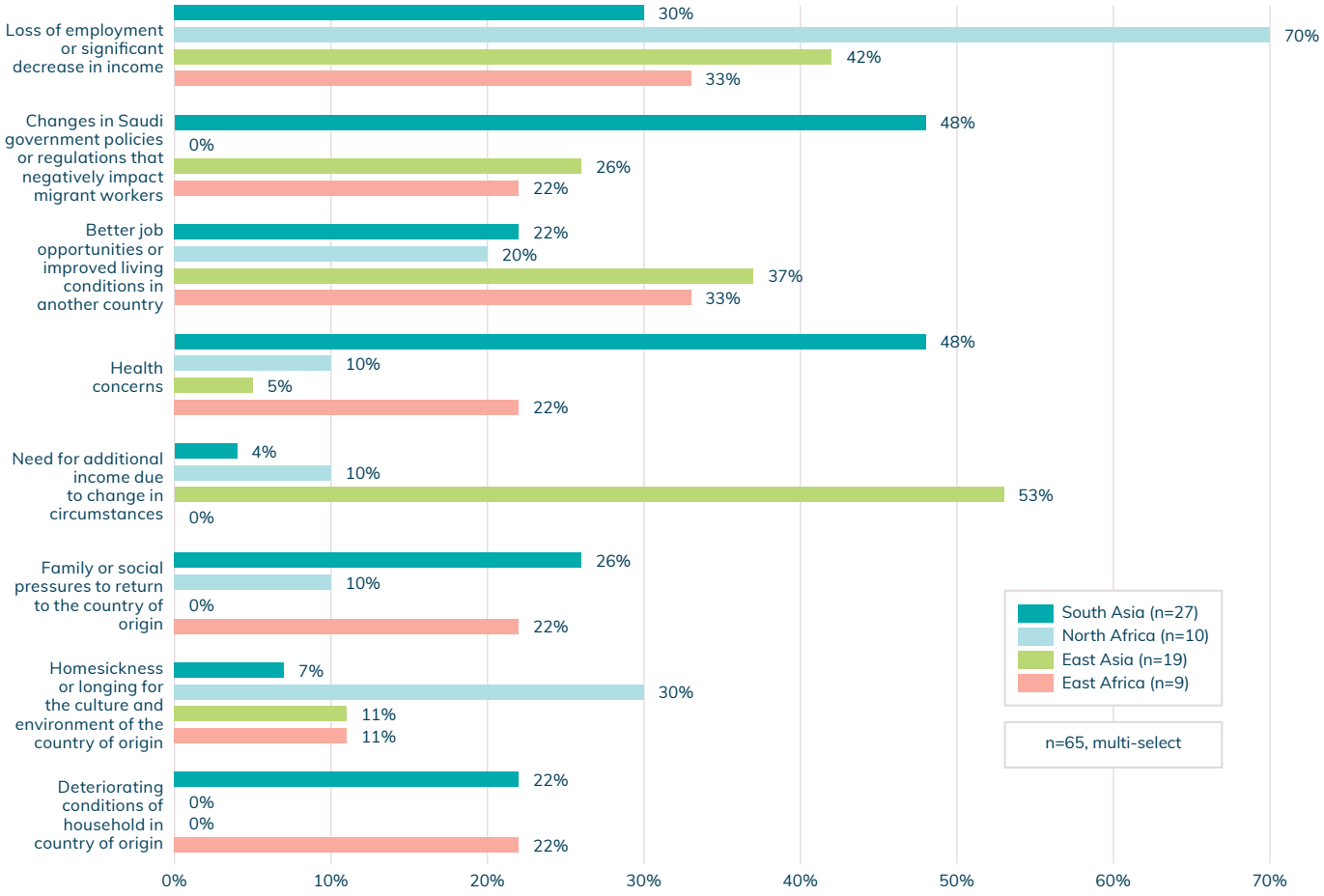
Despite generally low levels of perceived pressure to leave, those who do express an intention to move — either to another country or back home — are likely to report feeling higher levels of pressure. In contrast, those who said they were not considering a move overwhelmingly selected scores at the lower end of the scale. This underscores the notion that their decision to stay is more likely to be voluntary.

While earlier findings showed that economic motivations were central to migrants' decisions to leave their countries of origin and move to Saudi Arabia, the data suggest that when these expectations go unmet, particularly around income stability and job prospects, economic factors can often become the main drivers of onward or return mobility. Yet these rarely act in isolation; instead, they frequently intersect with other drivers such as health concerns, policy changes, or social pressures, shaping how and whether mobility unfolds.

139 Respondents were asked to rate their feeling about leaving Saudi Arabia on a scale from 1 to 10. A score of 1 indicates that there is no pressure to leave and the decision would be made entirely by choice, while a score of 10 indicates that the respondent feels they have no choice at all and there is an urgent need to leave.

Among respondents who reported considering or planning to move (n=65), the most frequently cited reason was loss of employment or a significant decrease in income (40%), followed by better job opportunities or improved living conditions in another country (28%) and changes in government policies affecting migrants (31%). Health concerns were also notably high (26%), particularly among South Asian workers (48%; n=27). Some respondents also cited social or family pressures, deteriorating conditions back home, and even homesickness, illustrating a mix of economic, structural, and psychosocial drivers. **Notably, very few respondents (3%) explicitly cited increased risk or experience of climate change impacts, such as extreme heat or sandstorms, as a reason for intending to leave, despite widespread reported exposure to these hazards. This suggests that, for most, these conditions may be experienced as part of the broader hardships of low-skill climate-sensitive labour, but not as a distinct or primary trigger for onward movement. This could mean that climate-related stressors may operate more subtly in the background, shaping broader living and working conditions that feed into other, more immediate drivers of mobility.**

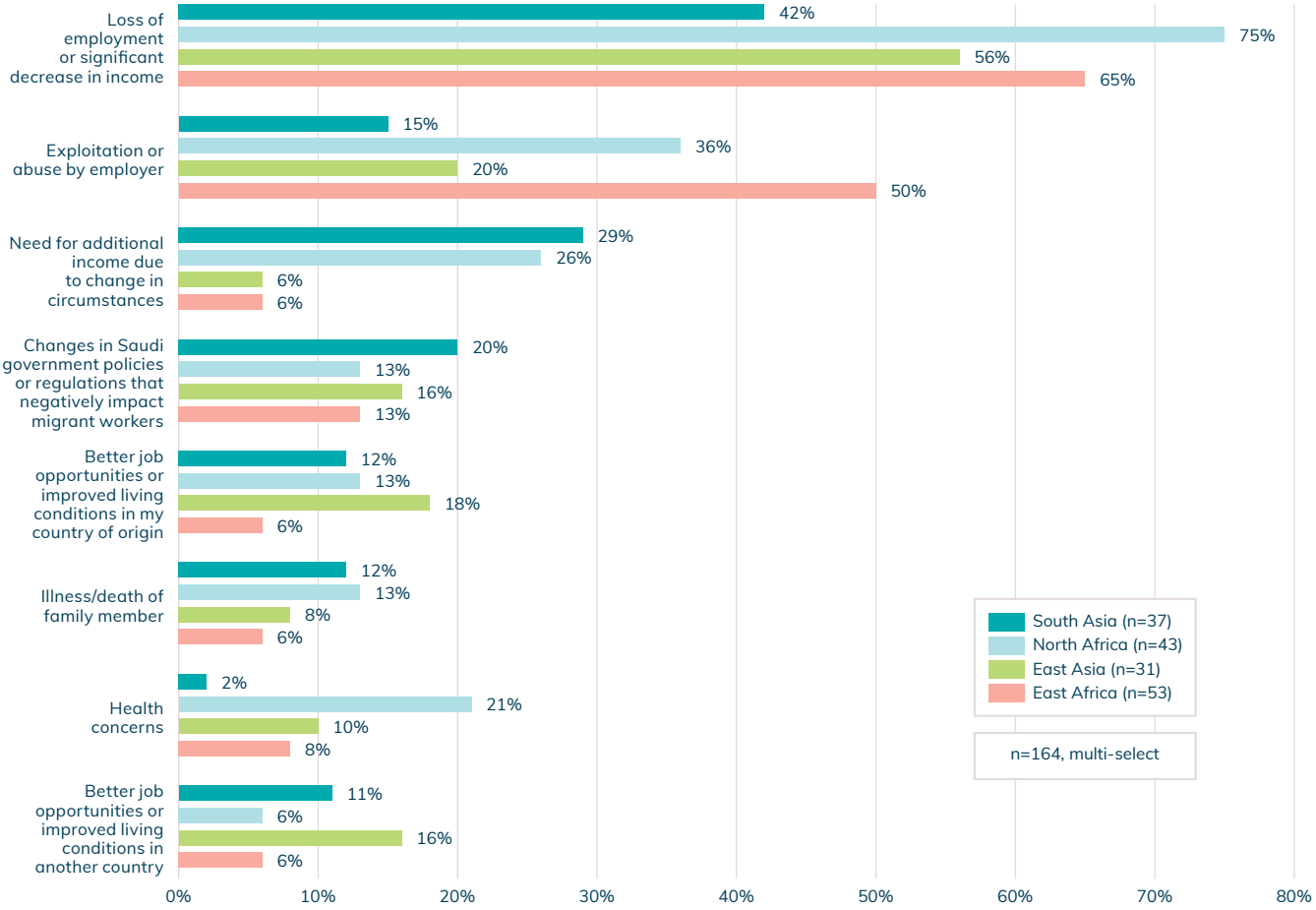
Figure 34. Most reported reasons for considering/planning to move, among respondents who reported it[140]



140 Other reported reasons included better job opportunities or improved living conditions in my country of origin (9%); deterioration of living conditions in Saudi Arabia (e.g., lack of access to safe housing, healthcare, or essential services) (8%); eviction or threat of eviction (6%); exploitation or abuse by employer (5%); better job opportunities or improved living conditions in another country (5%); increased risk or experience of climate change impacts (e.g., extreme heat, water shortages, sandstorms) (3%); windfall or increase in income enabling migration (2%); and permission to return from parent/guardian (2%).

Those who did not report intentions to move (n=164) were asked to identify potential circumstances that could push them to reconsider, if any. Loss of employment or income again topped the list (59%), followed by exploitation or abuse by an employer (30%). Other potential triggers included policy changes, increased financial need, and health-related risks. (see figure 35). **Notably, no respondents identified environmental or climate-related conditions as a potential trigger, further highlighting that, despite high levels of exposure, climate stressors are not necessarily perceived as decisive factors in shaping mobility decisions within the Saudi context**.

Figure 35. Most reported potential reasons that could trigger leaving Saudi Arabia, among respondents who reported not having such intention[141]



Findings from the in-depth interviews reveal how mobility outcomes are shaped not only by intent, but by a complex interplay of capacity, perceived pressure, and broader life conditions. Voluntary movers tended to describe their decision as a proactive step toward better opportunities or improved conditions, though not always with clear outcomes. In contrast, involuntary movers often linked their departure to job loss, employer disputes, or policy barriers — and in some cases, made the decision under urgent or constrained circumstances. Among those who remained in Saudi Arabia, voluntary immobility was often framed in terms of stability, familiarity, or unmet financial goals, while those who felt unable to move despite a desire to do so described being held back by lack of resources, fear of uncertainty, or legal limitations. These narratives reinforce the idea that (im)mobility is rarely a simple matter of choice, but shaped by shifting material, institutional, and social pressures.

141 Other reported reasons included eviction or threat of eviction (9%); deterioration of living conditions in Saudi Arabia (e.g., lack of access to safe housing, healthcare, or essential services) (8%); family or social pressures to return to the country of origin (6%); deteriorating conditions of household in country of origin (5%); desire to reunite with family or loved ones in another country (4%); discrimination (3%); homesickness or longing for the culture and environment of the country of origin (3%); better job opportunities or improved living conditions in another country (3%); increased risk or experience of climate change impacts (e.g., extreme heat, water shortages, sandstorms) (2%); windfall or increase in income enabling migration (1%); and permission to return from parent/guardian (1%).

6. Conclusions

This report has shed light on the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on the intersection of labour, climate, and mobility. While the country's migrant workforce is integral to its economic model and development ambitions, especially in climate-vulnerable sectors like construction, transport, and waste management, the findings reveal a mismatch between their foundational role and the structural constraints they face.

Across all regions of origin, **migrant workers reported navigating complex and often exploitative recruitment pathways, frequently incurring significant debt to secure jobs in Saudi Arabia.** While personal networks and intermediaries – both formal and informal – were central in facilitating migration, they also contributed to opaque and sometimes misleading information about job terms and conditions. Many respondents described inconsistencies between what they were promised and what they experienced upon arrival, compounding feelings of disempowerment.

Once in the country, **migrants encountered varied but often precarious employment arrangements, with East African and North African workers disproportionately engaged in unstable daily labour.** These employment conditions were mirrored in broader indicators of vulnerability: South Asian migrants, in particular, reported lower levels of satisfaction, reduced access to basic services, and significantly higher exposure to discrimination and debt-linked wage deductions.

The study also underscores the increasing role of climate-related stressors in shaping migrant workers' experiences. While a majority of respondents from North and East Africa did not report environmental challenges in their areas of origin, most South and East Asian workers did, including flooding, storms, and extreme temperatures. **In Saudi Arabia, nearly all respondents reported exposure to extreme heat and/or dust storms, with many citing tangible health and livelihood impacts.** However, these environmental risks were not consistently viewed as urgent or problematic. Some individual interview respondents downplayed their severity, while others saw them as routine parts of daily life, suggesting a degree of normalisation or prioritisation of more immediate socioeconomic concerns. **Coping strategies were largely self-initiated, and while employer protections were present in some cases, they were inconsistently applied. External support was virtually absent,** leaving many migrants to face climate-related risks with minimal institutional assistance.

Despite these challenges, **many migrant workers expressed satisfaction in their ability to support families through remittances — a near-universal practice among respondents — and some described their migration as a source of status or improved opportunity.** Yet this resilience coexisted with deep systemic vulnerabilities, even as they continued to shoulder disproportionate burdens stemming from debt, exploitative recruitment practices, and structural constraints such as the Kafala system.

Looking ahead, Saudi Arabia's upcoming mega-projects, including the 2034 FIFA World Cup, will further increase the demand for migrant labour. Without significant reforms and stronger enforcement of protections, there is a real risk that existing patterns of exploitation, inequality, and exposure will be exacerbated. **Ensuring that migrant workers are included not just in the country's development ambitions but also in its social protections and climate preparedness is essential for building a more equitable and resilient future**.

Finally, the research revealed important insights into how migrant workers in Saudi Arabia perceive their futures. While many expressed a desire to remain in the country in the short term, often to continue supporting families financially, long-term mobility intentions were more varied. Some envisioned eventual return to their country of origin, while others described a desire to move onward, often citing legal uncertainty, limited rights, or harsh working conditions. These aspirations were shaped not only by economic circumstances but also by access to information, perceived opportunities, and levels of debt. Notably, those in more precarious situations, including migrant workers with limited resources or restrictive legal conditions, were often the least mobile, despite a desire to leave. Many reported lacking the financial or legal capacity to act on their intentions, revealing that (im)mobility was shaped less by choice and more by constraint. While climate exposure was rarely cited as a direct reason to leave, it may contribute to these constraints by compounding existing vulnerabilities. These findings highlight the need to consider structural constraints and unequal access to mobility in policy and programmatic discussions about migrant futures in the region.

Areas for further investigation

This research highlights several key areas that merit deeper exploration in future studies:

- **Long-term impacts of climate-related exposure on migrant health and productivity**: While respondents reported frequent exposure to extreme heat and dust storms, there is limited data on the cumulative physical and mental health consequences of prolonged environmental stressors in migrant communities.

- **Gendered experiences of climate-related and labour vulnerabilities:** This study focused primarily on male workers in climate-sensitive sectors. Further research is needed to explore how women migrant workers experience climate-related risks, recruitment dynamics, and employment precarity differently.

- **Migrant agency, (im)mobility, and decision-making over time**: Many respondents faced structural barriers to return or onward migration. Longitudinal research could shed light on how mobility intentions evolve and the role of legal status, debt, and environmental stressors in shaping future trajectories.

- **Employer practices and compliance with labour protections:** Inconsistencies in wages, benefits, and working hours were commonly reported. A more focused study is needed into recruitment chains, employer accountability, and enforcement of reforms under Saudi labour law.

- **Migrant access to grievance mechanisms and legal recourse**: Despite reported challenges, little is known about how migrants navigate systems of redress in cases of contract violation, abuse, or wage theft. Research could inform policy and legal reform to improve access to justice.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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