

# PLATFORMING HUMAN TRAFFICKING: TWEETING HUMAN AUCTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



## INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation, particularly in the telecommunication sector, has been a driving force for change in society – and its criminal underworld. Social media has been routinely used to recruit victims of human trafficking. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, human traffickers have adapted their business model to online trends and are [“taking advantage of online technologies for every step of their criminal activities.”](#) Especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasingly aggressive tactics have been used by human traffickers to the point where a UN rights committee had to [call upon](#) technology companies to help eliminate trafficking on their platforms. Just [in the United States in 2020](#), over 40% of victims in federal sex trafficking cases were recruited online, with 59% of those victims being recruited on Facebook. No reliable statistics are available about the use of social media for labor trafficking recruitment or for human trafficking outside of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The Center for International Policy’s Global Social Media Harms Tracker has aggregated harms propagated or facilitated by social media platforms in the Global South. The tracker uncovered a disturbing trend of slave markets and human trafficking on social media within the MENA region. One such example is the 2019 BBC [report](#) on Instagram slave markets and other social media platforms in Kuwait and the Gulf Region. In these markets migrant workers, often women, are actively sold and purchased as domestic workers under the

<sup>1</sup> Though the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) did discuss the use of social media in a [2020 report](#), it does not attempt to estimate what portion of trafficking victims were recruited online, only what proportion of victims recruited online were recruited by social media. Similarly, many other sources of information ultimately cite a small number of methodologically questionable datasets which we have decided not to include here.

Kafala system. Additionally, some academics have begun to investigate the role of social media platforms in [facilitating](#) the abuse of domestic workers and one study illustrated social media's role in [brokering](#) the sale and purchase of domestic workers both regionally and domestically.

This phenomenon of selling and trading migrant workers within the MENA is not new. Rather, it has existed as long as the Kafala system has with most sales conducted by so-called "recruitment agencies." However, social media has allowed sellers to bypass agencies, and created an ["unregulated black market which leaves women more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation."](#)

This brief sets out to investigate the current state of human auctions on social media. While these markets are prolific on almost all platforms including [Instagram](#), [WhatsApp](#), and [closed Facebook groups](#), this brief focuses on public auctions held on Twitter.

## UNDERSTANDING THE KAFALA SYSTEM

As far back as the 1950s, Arab states introduced the kafala system as a method to regulate incoming migrant workers. At its core, the kafala system provides citizens or companies the ability to [sponsor a migrant](#) to come and work within the country. The system ties a migrant worker's immigration status to their sponsor. Under the kafala system, migrant workers are not allowed to [change employers, leave the country, resign, or even travel locally](#) without the permission of their sponsor. Accordingly, a sponsor can abdicate his sponsorship to another national who is willing to purchase it. The term for such a transaction is تنازل in Arabic, a term that signifies a person relinquishing their ownership of the sponsorship in return for financial gains. In this brief, we transliterate the word تنازل as "Tanazol."

From the perspective of the kafala system, what is being bartered or sold is the sponsorship or documentation of the migrant workers, rather than the migrant workers themselves. This rather superficial distinction is often leveraged to avoid scrutiny under international customary law. States that apply the kafala system are quick to point out that they have laws against human trafficking which are enforced. For example, Lebanese internal security forces arrested a man for putting his migrant domestic worker, rather than the worker's sponsorship, up for ["sale."](#) States claim that the distinction is legally valid. Yet in practice there is little to no difference in the commodification of migrant workers under the kafala system and human trafficking.

This distinction, coupled with restrictive sets of laws, regulations, and customary practices, elevates the [level of vulnerability](#) of migrant workers. However, the kafala system is only one aspect of the systematic and institutionally orchestrated forceful

acquiescence and submission of domestic workers. The institutional void provides little to no governance mechanisms that prevent corruption, protect human rights, ensure the rule of law, or establish support/escape mechanisms for migrant workers. This purposeful [disenfranchisement](#) has increased the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers and given rise to [modern slavery](#).

This parallel between slavery and the kafala system is not an exaggeration. The kafala system essentially allows a sponsor to have “[complete control over their employees](#)”. The overwhelming majority of those governed by the kafala system are female domestic workers, who are forced to [live](#) with their employer availing them no privacy. These workers are often [beaten](#), [raped](#), and starved by their sponsors or recruitment agencies. The migrant workers have no recourse or ways to report their circumstances as police often dismiss their concerns or arrest them. In the face of such an impossible choice, migrant workers often resort to ending their own lives. Human Rights Watch stated that at one point “[domestic workers \[were\] dying in Lebanon at a rate of more than one per week.](#)”

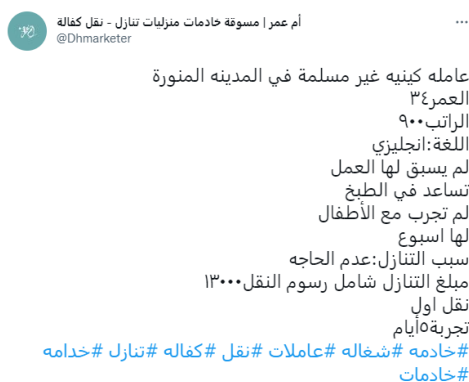
## TWITTER'S HUMAN AUCTIONS

Locating accounts auctioning domestic workers was not difficult. Many of these accounts employ marketing tactics similar to those of large companies. The most popular tactic is hashtags, with the three most common being: تنازل (Abdication), شغاله (Female Worker), خادمه (Female Maid). This was expected as the majority of domestic workers within the Gulf region are women.

One prolific account calls itself “Um Omar” (CIP translation from Arabic) and advertises its services as an intermediary broker between sponsors and clients for a fee of about 1000 Saudi Riyal (\$266<sup>2</sup>). According to Twitter’s metrics the account has been active in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) since August 2020, has tweeted 5,707 tweets, and amassed a following of 4,911 followers. However, upon further inspection, the account began to actively tweet on July 7th of 2022, with all 5,707 tweets occurring within that timeline. This translates into over 230 days of account activity. In other words, “Um Omar” has posted **on average more than one auction per hour per day for the past seven months.**



<sup>2</sup> As of January 2023.



The posts advertising these auctions are standardized and systematic. The advertisement begins with the nationality of the domestic worker, religion, and current location. Then they discuss her age, salary, language, work experience, as well as experience with kids. Finally, they discuss the reason she is being “Tanazol” by the sponsor as well as her salary and fees. Once read in this way, the post structure mirrors the typical responsibilities of a domestic worker.

Additionally, it appears that auctioneers have identified certain price ceilings for certain nationalities. In the post shown to the side, auctioneers appear to identify a maximum limit for transfer fees per nationality. According to the pinned tweet, published on 6 May 2022, the maximum fee for a domestic worker originating from **Southeast Asia** (e.g., Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka) is **29,000 SR (7,723.83 USD<sup>3</sup>)**, those from **Southern Asia** (e.g., India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) are capped at **20,000 SR (5,326.78 USD<sup>3</sup>)**, and migrants from **African countries (including Morocco)** have a maximum of **18,000 SR (4,794.10 USD<sup>3</sup>)**.



As of 11 January 2023, “Um Omar” announced new price adjustments as shown in the post to the side. In the new post, migrants from **Southeast Asia** are now capped at **27,000 SR (7194.94<sup>3</sup>)**, those from **Southern Asia and Morocco** are **18,000 SR (4,794.10 USD<sup>3</sup>)**, and migrants from all remaining **African countries** are maxed at **16,000 SR (4263.67 USD<sup>3</sup>)**. The reason behind the price change is not mentioned anywhere on “Um Omar’s” feed.

The account known as “Um Omar” is one of many auctioneers on Twitter. All posts from this account appear to follow the same rough format in how they describe the domestic workers. However, some accounts employ a fundamentally different approach that is more

<sup>3</sup> As of January 2023.

degrading. One such account is “Marketer of maids and workers for Tanazol” (CIP translation from Arabic). The account is also active in KSA although only since September 2022, has 329 tweets, and 778 followers. However, while the tweet count is much less than that of others, these accounts operate differently than those like “Um Omar”. While “Um Omar” posts descriptions of the individual, this account posts identifiable photos of those auctioned with texts embedded into the images.<sup>4</sup>



These accounts would typically post up to four photos at a time, essentially conducting four auctions simultaneously. The accounts do not take any steps towards concealing the identities of auctioned individuals or hiding their features. In fact, some of these posts contain the full resident identity card as issued by the KSA Ministry of Interior. The card has been redacted by CIP and is shown in the top right image.

## DISCUSSION

These auctions undermine decades of human development and are signs of moral bankruptcy, but they are not illegal. The distinction between the words “for sale” and “for abdication” provides a thin disguise that allows the Kafala system to pass human trafficking off as change of sponsorship. From a legal standpoint, these auctions are not selling humans, they are transferring sponsorship. However, almost none of the posts seen above refer to the domestic worker’s documentation or respective expiry dates. These posts exclusively discuss the domestic worker’s demographic details and relevant skillsets. In essence, what is being advertised is humans and not documentation. Governments within the region have shown no interest in repealing the Kafala system despite numerous calls to do so.

<sup>4</sup> CIP randomly sampled images of individuals being auctioned isolating their facial features and conducting a reverse image search. Results confirmed that these images were not stock images. CIP was unable to further verify the authenticity of these images.



Perhaps more of the burden of regulation should fall onto the social media platforms themselves. The culpability of Twitter in the matter of slave markets and human trafficking on their own platform is significant. Twitter has routinely failed to moderate foreign languages, [particularly Arabic](#). Accounts engaging in these slave markets are using the same distinguishable hashtags to market themselves, making identifying them much easier. Yet Twitter has continued to aid and abet these slave markets through their inaction. Social media companies like Twitter have a vast amount of resources at their disposal and are well-positioned to fight human trafficking on their platforms. However, social media companies have repeatedly failed in the past. When BBC reached out to Facebook to alert them of the slave markets, with the latter assuring the BBC that they had banned the relevant hashtags, [BBC was still able to find active listings](#). Additionally, in 2021 an SEC whistleblower testified that Facebook was aware that it was being used to “[promote human trafficking and domestic servitude](#).” The continued trend of willful negligence by social media companies in pursuit of profit and growth has come at the expense of those without protections. The victims of these slave markets fall into a cycle of exploitation and trafficking with Twitter and Facebook continuing to turn a blind eye to moderating their own platforms.

As both regional governments and social media companies are unwilling to regulate human auctions, this creates a protection gap that has and will likely continue to allow the proliferation of human auctions shown above on Twitter and other social media platforms. However, a common denominator of these social media platforms is their country of origin: they are all U.S.-based companies and would be held liable if national regulation was to assign them some level of accountability. Regulations could be put in place to stop companies from knowingly assisting, facilitating, or supporting human trafficking in the form of auctions both nationally and internationally. The House of Representatives and Senate have both indicated political will to begin regulating social media companies, particularly in the aftermath of rampant misinformation during COVID-19 and recent elections. Therefore, legislation ought to be designed to regulate social media companies by assigning culpability for human rights transgressions committed on their platforms both nationally and internationally.

## REGULATORY STATUTES AND GAPS

Perhaps the most foundational law behind the modern internet is [Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996](#). The act exempts online services from legal liability for third-party content on their platforms. Though some specific carve-outs have been written to Section 230 (including most recently the controversial FOSTA-SESTA bills) for certain types of content, in general platforms remain immune from liability for content that is posted by users.

The U.S. has also enacted and reauthorized a number of laws focused on combating forced labor and human trafficking. In 2019, Congress amended the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) by passing four separate bills. These made a variety of changes to existing law. For example, [Section 135 of H.R. 2200](#) instructs the Department of Labor to list goods produced through child or forced labor in its public reports.

The US Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons established a [Program to End Modern Slavery](#) in 2017. The program has funded \$150 million in programming to date and their most recent fund is another example of U.S.'s efforts against modern slavery. The so-called "Freedom Fund" aims to ["...reduce the prevalence of domestic servitude among women and girls in Ethiopia and in the migration corridor to the Middle East."](#)

U.S. private companies have undermined the U.S government's attempt to combat human trafficking and modern slavery. Lack of moderation and inaction have caused Twitter and other social media companies to become platforms for the selling of humans. Moving forward, legislators ought to target U.S. companies' actions on an international level. Similar to how Section 135 of H.R. 2200 acts to prevent the US from turning into a market for goods made through forced labor, another bill could be passed to prevent U.S. social media platforms from continuing to provide a marketplace for forced labor.

## QUESTIONS TO POLICY MAKERS

1. What are current barriers against amending Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) to expand Section 13 of H.R. 2200 to not only list goods made through forced labor, but also list companies that provide platforms for the advertisement of forced labor?
2. Should the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons take on an additional monitoring and oversight role to hold Twitter and other social media companies accountable for human trafficking conducted on their platforms?
3. Has the Attorney General considered the role of Twitter and other social media platforms in the development of their National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking as directed by the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015?
4. Have the Senate and House Judiciary committees attempted to account for the role of social media companies when amending the TVPA in the past? Can future reauthorizations include amendments that aim to hold companies accountable?