

**For Immediate Release**

## **UK: Amend Modern Slavery Bill**

### ***Restore Right of Domestic Workers to Change Employers***

(London, February 23, 2015) – The House of Lords should amend the Modern Slavery Bill to restore the right for migrant domestic workers to change employers, Human Rights Watch and the [United Kingdom](#) charity Kalayaan said today. The bill is being considered in the House of Lords, the UK's upper chamber of parliament, during the week of February 23, 2015.

An amendment to the bill introduced on February 6 would end the current “tied visa” system, which forces migrant workers either to stay with an abusive employer or to become undocumented if they leave. On February 9, the government announced a review of the tied visa system.

“We don’t need another review to tell us the tied visa system facilitates abuse, both in the UK and abroad,” said [Izza Leghtas](#), Western Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The solution is to amend the bill so these vulnerable people can escape abuse.”

The UK government removed the right for migrant domestic workers to change employers in April 2012 as part of a broader effort to limit immigration to the UK. But research by Kalayaan and Human Rights Watch since the tied visa was introduced shows high levels of abuse among migrant domestic workers entering the UK under this system and that the safeguards in place are inadequate.

Since the government removed the right for migrant domestic workers to change employers, two parliamentary committees, including the one tasked with reviewing the Modern Slavery Bill, have called on the UK government to restore that right.

“All available evidence confirms our concerns about the impact of the current tied visa on migrant domestic workers, and shows that tying them to one employer has increased exploitation and abuse, including trafficking for domestic servitude,” said Kate Roberts, community advocate at Kalayaan. “Every day more workers enter on the tied visa and are at risk of abuse. The UK should not lose the opportunity to address this with the Modern Slavery Bill.”

In the March 2014 report “[Hidden Away: Abuses Against Migrant Domestic Workers in the UK](#),” Human Rights Watch found that many migrant domestic workers who accompany their employer to the UK face a range of abuses, including confiscation of passports, confinement to their employer’s home, verbal and psychological abuse, very little or no wages for extremely long hours of work without breaks, and inadequate food.

In the briefing “[Still enslaved: The migrant domestic workers who are trapped by the immigration rules](#),” published in April 2014, Kalayaan found that in the two years following the introduction of the tied visa, migrant domestic workers who were not allowed to change employers suffered significantly worse treatment than those who were in the UK under the original visa. Kalayaan has received testimony showing that this abuse has continued and that some domestic workers are facing exploitation by new employers in the informal sector.

Many migrant domestic workers who leave their employer seek work informally and in breach of the immigration rules as they are under significant pressure to support their families back home and to repay the debts they incurred when migrating. But that situation puts them at risk of further exploitation.

The announced government review is to include an assessment of whether the system in place effectively protects migrant domestic workers from abuse, whether there is evidence that the terms of the visa have led to trafficking or slavery, whether there are barriers for victims to access support, and whether abusers can effectively be held to account.

In a report published in April 2014, a cross-party parliamentary committee tasked with reviewing the first draft of the government's Modern Slavery Bill [found](#) that "tying migrant domestic workers to their employer institutionalises their abuse." Citing evidence from Human Rights Watch and others, the committee urged the government to [restore](#) the right for migrant domestic workers to change employer.

The Modern Slavery Evidence Review, commissioned by Home Secretary Theresa May and chaired by Member of Parliament Frank Field, also [called for](#) the restoration of the right to change employers, in a report published in December 2013.

Human Rights Watch has extensively documented how visa sponsorship systems, known as *kafala*, expose migrant domestic workers to abuse in other countries such as the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Jordan](#), [Kuwait](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#). The system in the UK before April 2012 was cited by the [UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants](#) as well as the UK parliament's [Home Affairs Select Committee](#) as key to protecting these workers from abuse.

Following a visit to the UK in April 2014, Rashida Manjoo, the UN special rapporteur on violence against women, [highlighted](#) the negative impact of the tied visa on migrant domestic workers and their increased vulnerability due to this system.

In the UK, the tied visa system means that workers who leave an abusive employer face significant challenges to accessing support and redress. The changes to the visa rules in April 2012 severely limited the support that Kalayaan and others have been able to provide.

When workers were still able to change employers, staff at Kalayaan were able to reassure domestic workers who arrived at the center, terrified, with no passport, belongings, or money, that they had done nothing wrong and to encourage them to report the abuse to the authorities.

Now staff have to inform workers that by running away from their employer, they have breached the immigration rules. As a result, even when offered support, few migrant domestic workers have the confidence to contact the authorities for support in recovering their passports, which are often held by the employer, or to report the abuse they have experienced.

"The tied visa system for migrant domestic workers has been in place for almost three years," Leghtas said. "If they are serious about fighting forced labor, members of parliament and the government should allow these vulnerable workers to get the protection they need without further delay."

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