

## Watching the World Cup in Qatar (words in bold are followed by explanations in italics)<sup>1</sup>

Holding the men's football World Cup in Qatar has been controversial for years. Concerns about migrant workers dying on the construction sites have been raised for a long time (see this [Amnesty International video](#)), as have worries about the carbon **footprint** (*production of CO<sub>2</sub>*) of building and running air-conditioned football stadiums. Qatar has also been criticised over the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, given that homosexuality is illegal and brutally repressed. It may further be noted that while women's rights are improving, women are still significantly dependent legally on men, and social segregation is important (see Wikipedia: [Women in Qatar](#)).

In early 2021, *The Guardian* confirmed reports that up to 6,500 workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had died since 2010, when Qatar won the right to **host** (*to welcome, to organise*) the championship. The total death **toll** (*number, count*) is believed to be higher, and includes other workers from Philippines and Kenya too. These **findings** (*results found*), based on data from migrants' home countries, illustrate Qatar's failure to protect its 2 million migrant workforce. The deaths stem from multiple causes including injuries from falling, and so-called "natural deaths" like **acute** (*sharp, severe*) heart or respiratory failure, due to working in extreme heat.<sup>2</sup>

In response, Fifa's, football's world governing body, has argued that it is committed to protecting workers' rights, and has encouraged improved conditions in Qatar. "With the very **stringent** (*demanding*) health and safety measures on site ... the frequency of accidents on Fifa World Cup construction sites has been low when compared to other major construction projects around the world," they said, without providing evidence' (*ibid*).

For its part, Qatar claims it has done much to improve workers' rights, notably in cooperation with the International Labor Office (ILO), which has been providing technical cooperation to the Emirati state since 2018 to undertake extensive reforms, in particular changes to the *Kafala* (or sponsorship system), that made migrant workers entirely dependent on a single employer: workers can now change employer or leave the country without permission. They have a minimum wage, and greater restrictions now exist on working in the heat of the day. An internet platform has also been created for workers to **log** (*file, declare*) complaints, etc. (see this [ILO video](#); and [ILO webpage](#)).

There is also a feeling in Arab countries that criticism of Qatar is unfair. "In some parts of the noisy Middle East social media, a mood of angry, patriotic Arab unity has grown, including in Gulf states that have been **at loggerheads** (*in conflict*) with Qatar for a decade. One popular hashtag says in Arabic: 'I am Arab and I support Qatar'.<sup>3</sup>

On the **eve** (*the night before*) of the tournament, Fifa president Gianni Infantino gave a heated and highly-unusual press conference, sharply reprimanding critics of the event proclaiming that, "[Today I feel Qatari](#). Today I feel Arabic. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled. Today I feel [like] a migrant worker... Of course I am not Qatari, I am not an Arab, I am not African, I am not gay, I am not disabled. But I feel like it, because I know what it means to be discriminated [against], **to be bullied** (*to be harassed, aggressed*), as a foreigner in a foreign country". Infantino also went on to note that "We have been told many, many lessons from some Europeans, from the western world. I think for what we Europeans have been doing the last 3,000 years we should be apologising for the next 3,000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people".<sup>4</sup>

Whatever happens during the Cup **play-offs** (*a series of games at the end of a competition*) in Qatar now, however, it seems unlikely that hosting the Cup will meet Qatar's wish to strengthen its international influence as a bridge between east and west. London and Paris have announced they will not host fan zones, even though the Qatar Sports Investment fund is the major **shareholder** (*someone who owns shares*) of the [Paris Saint-Germain Football Club](#). Controversy over the tournament is likely to continue.

### Questions for class discussion:

- 1/ Is there any justification for singling out Qatar for criticism compared, say, to Russia (where France won the World Cup in 2018), or [Argentina](#) (where the Cup was held in 1978 under a brutal military dictatorship), or China (which hosted the summer Olympics in 2008 and will welcome the winter Olympics of 2022)?
- 2/ To what extent can the view be justified that visitors to Qatar should rightfully respect local customs, say, for the strict controls over alcohol use. What about restrictions on non-heterosexual intimate relationships?
- 3/ Is the ecological impact of the Cup really any worse or that much different from other major sporting events?
- 4/ Is Gianni Infantino right that the western world has no lessons to give?
- 5/ The world has more pressing issues to address than continue organising such sporting events.

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Robert Ivermee for important suggestions about women's rights and the reference to the Amnesty video, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Pete Pattison et al., "[Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers died in Qatar since World Cup awarded](#)", *The Guardian*, 23 Feb 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Wintour, "[Before World Cup kicks off, has Qatar already lost at geopolitical football?](#)", *The Guardian*, 14 Nov 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Ingle, "['I feel gay, disabled... like a woman too!': Infantino makes bizarre attack on critics](#)", *The Guardian*, 19 Nov 2022.