



12 June 2026

FIFA World Cup 2026: The Beautiful Game Cannot Hide an Ugly Reality

Equidem calls on FIFA, host governments and corporate partners to protect workers, players, fans, referees and communities from abuse, discrimination and exploitation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

As the 2026 FIFA World Cup begins across the United States, Mexico and Canada, Equidem is calling on FIFA and its partners in government and business to urgently uphold the human rights of everyone connected to the tournament, from players, referees and fans to the workers and communities whose labour makes the World Cup possible.

The tournament opens amid mounting concern over the unfair treatment of migrants and racialised communities, aggressive border and immigration controls, labour exploitation, threats to freedom of expression, and failures of transparency across the World Cup ecosystem.

Recent incidents involving referees, players, officials and supporters facing immigration barriers and hostile treatment at borders are not isolated from the wider human-rights risks surrounding the tournament. They expose a deeper failure by FIFA to enforce its own binding human-rights commitments, from the bidding process to the delivery of the tournament.

“This tournament should be remembered for football. Instead, FIFA has allowed it to become a test case in how quickly a global sporting event can expose people to abuse when human rights are treated as public relations rather than binding obligations,” said Mustafa Qadri, Equidem’s CEO. “No one connected to the World Cup should be left vulnerable to discrimination, ill-treatment or exploitation.”

FIFA’s human rights commitments are failing in practice

FIFA’s own statutes commit the organisation to respecting internationally recognised human rights. The 2026 World Cup was also the first tournament awarded after human-rights requirements were formally built into FIFA’s bidding process. Yet the very risks those rules were meant to prevent are already visible across the host countries.



In the United States, aggressive immigration enforcement and travel restrictions have raised serious concerns for players, match officials, supporters, migrant workers and local communities. In Mexico, concerns over violence, impunity and restrictions on protest create risks for communities, workers and civil society groups seeking to speak out. In Canada, long-standing failures to protect Indigenous rights, address housing insecurity and safeguard marginalised communities remain part of the wider human-rights context of the tournament.

Across all three countries, the scale and commercial pressure of the World Cup heighten risks for low-wage, migrant, racialised, undocumented and temporary workers.

Equidem's work focuses on workers and migrant workers, but our evidence shows that FIFA cannot separate labour abuse from the wider human-rights context of the tournament. The same systems that hide workers behind contractors and subcontractors also allow accountability to disappear when fans, communities, players or officials face discrimination, exclusion or state abuse.

"FIFA is not a bystander. It architects the tournament, sets the requirements and profits from the spectacle. It cannot retreat from its human-rights commitments when they become difficult to enforce," said Qadri.

Workers remain hidden behind the spectacle

For more than five years, Equidem has investigated labour rights abuses linked to FIFA tournaments, bids and supply chains. Its [research](#) on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar documented wage theft, discrimination, excessive working hours, recruitment-related abuses, unsafe working conditions and barriers to remedy affecting tens of thousands of migrant workers in construction, hospitality and security. After the tournament, Equidem continued to support workers involved in the tournament seeking justice for unpaid wages and retaliation, including cases involving arrest, detention, deportation and blacklisting after workers attempted to recover wages they were owed.

More recently, as FIFA awarded the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia, Equidem warned that many of the structural conditions associated with [forced labour and worker exploitation remained present](#). Across successive tournaments, one pattern has remained clear: responsibility for workers is fragmented across contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, recruitment agencies, staffing companies and service providers, while accountability becomes harder to enforce.

That same pattern is now visible in the 2026 World Cup across the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Despite repeated calls from workers' rights organisations, FIFA has still not publicly disclosed the full network of contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, staffing agencies, labour brokers, logistics providers, security firms, hospitality providers, construction contractors and

merchandise suppliers connected to FIFA 2026. For a global body that claims to uphold human rights, FIFA's refusal to disclose the workforce behind its own tournament is deeply concerning. It prevents workers, unions, journalists and civil society from independently scrutinising labour conditions across the tournament economy.

"The World Cup does not happen only on the pitch," Qadri said. "It is built by construction workers, cleaners, security guards, drivers, cooks, hospitality workers, waste workers, merchandise workers and thousands of temporary and subcontracted workers. If FIFA cannot tell the world who is employing them, where they are working and how their rights are being protected, then it cannot credibly claim to be running a human-rights-compliant tournament."

Workers describe extreme heat, long hours and insecurity

Equidem's research has already identified serious labour and occupational safety risks linked to World Cup-related work. At a Team Base Camp for the tournament, interviews with workers documented concerns including extreme heat exposure, working weeks of up to 75 hours, accelerated production pressure, unpaid weather-related shutdowns, silica dust exposure, lack of health insurance and absence of written contracts.

One worker involved in World Cup-linked construction work described the pressure of working long hours in extreme heat to meet accelerated deadlines.

"Some weeks we worked up to 75 hours. The heat was intense, but the pressure was always to finish the job on time."

— Worker interviewed by Equidem

Another worker described the insecurity created by unpaid shutdowns and lack of basic protections.

"When the weather stopped the work, we were not paid. We lost wages, but the bills did not stop."

— Worker interviewed by Equidem

Equidem's wider heat-risk research across World Cup-linked worksites, developed in partnership with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and due to launch on 23 June, points to serious heat exposure risks facing workers connected to stadiums, training facilities, team base camps and surrounding tournament infrastructure. Even preliminary research has been able to identify significant risks in the years leading up to the tournament. Yet FIFA has not publicly shown what heat-risk assessment it has conducted, what protections it has required across worksites, or how it is ensuring that workers are protected from dangerous temperatures.

This raises urgent questions. If independent research can identify serious worker heat risks, why has FIFA not published its own risk assessment? What protections has it required from

host cities, stadium authorities, contractors and subcontractors? And how can workers, unions, journalists or civil society verify that those protections are actually being enforced?

The concerns documented by Equidem are not isolated. They are a warning sign of what may remain hidden across the wider tournament economy because FIFA has failed to provide meaningful transparency. Migrant and undocumented workers may face particular risks where labour abuse intersects with immigration enforcement, racial profiling or fear of deportation.

What FIFA must do now

FIFA has already failed to prevent serious human-rights risks from emerging around the 2026 World Cup. But it still has an opportunity and an obligation to correct course. With the tournament underway and risks already visible for workers, migrants, players, referees, fans and communities, FIFA and its partners must act immediately to address abuses that have occurred, prevent further harm, and make the tournament's human-rights protections transparent and enforceable.

The following steps should be treated as a starting point for urgent action by FIFA, host governments, host cities, stadium authorities, local organising committees, sponsors and corporate partners:

- Remedy abuses that have already occurred, including discrimination, harassment, unlawful detention, labour exploitation and other rights violations affecting anyone connected to the tournament, from workers and migrants to players, referees, fans and local communities.
- Protect every person connected to the World Cup from discrimination and persecution, regardless of nationality, race, migration status, gender, religion, belief, identity or occupation.
- Publish the full human-rights and labour footprint of FIFA 2026, including all contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, staffing agencies, labour brokers and service providers connected to the tournament.
- Accept responsibility for all workers whose labour makes the tournament possible, including those employed through contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, staffing agencies and temporary labour arrangements.
- Guarantee fair wages, overtime pay, paid sick leave, predictable schedules, healthcare access, written contracts, paid breaks and protection from wage theft for all tournament-linked workers.
- Adopt binding heat protections for workers, players, referees, fans and communities, including heat-risk mapping, paid rest breaks, cooling measures, stop-work thresholds and medical support.
- Protect migrant and undocumented people connected to the tournament so they can report abuse without fear of detention, deportation, racial profiling, blacklisting or retaliation.



- Guarantee freedom of association, union access, collective bargaining, freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest across tournament-linked spaces.
- Establish worker- and community-led monitoring and remedy systems, with affected people and their organisations at the centre of identifying risks, reporting abuse and enforcing solutions.

“The World Cup is meant to stand for dignity, unity and the shared joy of football. It should bring people together, not leave workers, migrants, players, referees, fans and communities exposed to abuse, fear or exploitation.”

FIFA still has an opportunity to make those values real by acting now: remedying abuses that have already occurred, preventing further harm, and ensuring that every person connected to the tournament is protected in practice, not just in principle,” said Mustafa Qadri, Equidem’s CEO.