

Forum: United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Issue #1: Measures to address the exploitation of migrant labor in global economies.

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Introduction

Exploitation of migrant labor has been a recurring issue throughout history, but it still grows wider as migration gets more extensive and international labor grows. The most in jeopardy are undocumented migrants or migrants belonging to vulnerable groups. They are commonly underpaid, overworked, and exposed to dangerous conditions. In most cases, they are deprived of access to legal protection (International Labour Organization). Even though they are crucial to sectors like construction, agriculture, and household work, they remain the most unprotected and exploited group in the world

economy (Human Rights Watch).

Foreign or migrant labor has also been a key factor in promoting international economic development by filling the necessary positions in most industries. Historically, foreign labor exchange stimulated economic development in most regions with enormous needs for low-cost labor (International Labour Organization). Applying foreign or migrant labor today is still crucial in sustaining manufacturing, agricultural production, and caregiving industries. Remittances — the money migrant workers send back to support their families — are often essential to national income. These financial flows help sustain both the economies of the workers' home countries and the host countries where they are employed (World Bank). Without these financial contributions, many families and local economies in migrant-sending countries would face greater hardships, highlighting the global interconnectedness of migration and development.

Despite such economic contributions, concerns have also been raised for the rights and treatment of the migrant workers. More protection and regulation are essential to guarantee safe labor practices, equitable wages, and access to legal support (United Nations Human Rights Office, Migration Policy Institute). In many cases, migrant workers undergo discrimination and struggle to access health care and legal assistance. Initiatives aimed at protecting migrant workers have focused on promoting safer migration pathways, enhancing labor standards, and encouraging fair recruitment practices (Human Rights Watch).

Economically, migrant labor has continued to be vital in filling labor shortages and supporting key industries. However, the exploitation of many migrant workers has raised broader concerns about inequality and social justice. The balancing of economic needs with the protection of labor rights remains a difficult goal for policymakers. They demand stronger labor rights, greater access to legal remedies, and international cooperation, while others emphasize migration control and border management (United Nations Rights Office).

Definition of Key Terms

Migrant Worker: A person who moves countries to find employment. They are frequently employed in low-wage sectors like agriculture, construction, and domestic work and may be exposed to poor working conditions and legal disadvantages (Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

Remittances: Money that migrant workers send back to their families in their home countries. It is not only crucial for household survival, but national income in most less-developed nations (World Bank).

Worker Exploitation: The unfair treatment of workers typically includes poor pay, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions. Migrant workers are the most prone to exploitation, particularly the undocumented ones (International Labour Organization, 2021).

Undocumented Migrant: An individual living in a nation without legal authorization. Because of their lack of status, they are generally unable to report abuses or claim their basic rights (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2022).

Labor Rights: Rights to equal treatment in the workplace. Such as safe conditions, reasonable working hours, and the right to obtain equal pay for equal work. (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Human Trafficking: The illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation, through deception and coercion (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023).

Seasonal Labor: Temporary work that is connected with agricultural or tourism seasons. Seasonal migrant workers typically experience unstable income, substandard housing conditions, and inferior labor protections (The Conversation, 2024).

Informal Economy: Economic activity not under the government's regulation. Migrant laborers are often recruited informally, without benefits, contracts, and with inferior legal

protection (Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

Recruitment Fees: The money migrants commonly pay to an employment broker or an agency before they can start working in another country. These fees can lead to debt bondage and are a form of labor exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2021).

Debt Bondage: A modern form of slavery in which individuals are forced to work to pay off a debt that was contracted through recruitment fees and travel expenses. It is illegal in most countries, but is common in migrant labor systems (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023).

General Overview

Patterns of Migrant Labor Exploitation

Migrant labor exploitation is a common issue for both developing and developed economies. As many as 27 million workers are estimated to be in forced labor worldwide today, with migrants disproportionately being exploited (ILO, 2023). Migrant workers are the backbone of sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic services, but are themselves subject to wage theft, unsafe working environments, and deprivation of basic rights. In countries including the US and Spain, farm laborers are exposed to harmful chemicals and substandard conditions, while in Gulf states and Southeast Asia, domestic and construction workers are at risk of being victims of passport confiscation, excessive recruitment fees, and physical abuse. The women and children are most at risk, representing the majority of the victims around the globe (UNODC, 2024). Even in affluent nations, workers' rights are poorly enforced, and the illegal migrants are typically too afraid to complain as they are frightened of deportation. Such widespread exploitation highlights the need for strong international standards and effective mechanisms of enforcement for protecting migrant workers all over the globe.

Root Causes

The mistreatment of migrant workers is at the center of deep structural imbalances, bad governance, and economic strain. Migrants from various nations, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, are pushed out by poverty, conflict, and climate change, leaving them vulnerable to exploitative recruitment and trafficking (UNODC, 2024). Recruitment agencies also charge excessive fees, sometimes a few thousand dollars, forcing migrants into debt bondage and enhancing the likelihood of receiving exploitative work conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The destination countries' quota systems of limited visas, such as the UK's Points-Based System or the Gulf's kafala sponsorship, tie workers' official status in employment, practically handicapping them from fleeing abusive situations. Corruption, xenophobia, and a lack of political will facilitate the power of employers to ignore labor laws with impunity, particularly in Russia and Turkey. Colonial heritage, such as caste-based discrimination in India, also continues to shape labor markets and guarantee cycles of exploitation. These structural drivers guarantee that the exploitation response is a sensitive and continuous process.

Economic Impact

Migrant work is the lifeline of the global economy, transferring an estimated \$689 billion in annual remittances that are critical to the economies of countries like India, the Philippines, and Mexico (World Bank, 2024). Migrant workers fill labor shortages in critical sectors and enable economic expansion in host countries while keeping families and communities in their home countries going. Yet, this economic dependence frequently leads to exploitation since destination countries value cheap labor above worker protections. For instance, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations depend on migrants for as much as 90% of their workforce, yet the workers often earn low wages and provide little social protection (ILO, 2023). In sectors such as U.S. agriculture or Qatari construction, profit motives often override safety and fair treatment, at a cost of billions in unnecessary injuries and fatalities, and long-term underpayment. Although migrant workers contribute an estimated \$3 trillion to global GDP, they are among the most economically vulnerable, perpetuating global disparities and the demand for more fair labor practices and increased international responsibility.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States of America (USA)

The United States is a major destination for migrant workers, particularly in domestic work, agriculture, and the construction industry. Migrant workers, particularly illegal ones, are most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. There has been a large volume of research involving cases of Mexican and Central American migrants' labor trafficking, with them being put through harsh conditions of labor at farms in the United States. These workers were treated inhumanely, earning as little as 20 cents for a bucket of produce, living in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions, and threatened with violence and deportation if they protested. Employers typically confiscated travel documents and imposed illegal fees for the basic necessities, trapping employees in debt and dependency cycles. The U.S. government has shifted to a victim-oriented approach to combating labor exploitation, but systemic challenges such as weak protection, racial discrimination, and restricted immigration policies continue to put migrant workers at risk (ICE, 2025).

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia relies on foreign labor across various industries, but particularly large-scale construction work and domestic housework. South and Southeast Asian migrant workers are subjected to systematic mistreatment, ranging from charging high rates of recruitment fees to wage theft, dangerous working conditions, and a lack of job mobility. Workers tend to face violations by the employers in breach of contracts, denial of promised wages, unsafe overexposure to heat, seizure of documents like their passports, making it hard, if not impossible, for laborers to leave abusive workplaces. Despite some reforms, the sponsorship (kafala) system still limits workers' ability to change jobs or report abuses without risking deportation. High-profile projects such as the 2034 FIFA World Cup and the NEOM development have been under international scrutiny for the misuse of labor rights. Human Rights Watch has documented such abuses, noting that Saudi Arabia's rapid development is constantly built upon the backs of exploited migrant workers (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

United Kingdom (UK)

The United Kingdom is a significant destination for foreign laborers, particularly in areas

like agriculture, care, and hospitality. The majority of the migrant workers are abused by illegal recruitment fees, dangerous working environments, and deportation threats. The government has recently conducted incursions against rogue employers who recruit and exploit illegal workers through degrading wages. Migrant workers are also misled by criminal gangs about the description of labor, to find themselves in exploitative jobs with little recourse. The UK government has strengthened penalties for illegal employers and collaborated with enforcement authorities in safeguarding vulnerable workers. However, the combination of strict immigration restrictions and limited employment mobility still renders migrant workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (UK Home Office, 2024).

India

India is both a source and destination for migrant labor, as millions of workers move within and beyond India for employment. India itself, in-country employees, most of whom are members of marginalized tribes and lower-caste groups of women, are the most vulnerable to abuse. A caste is a rigid social class people are born into, which often determines their societal role and can lead to discrimination, especially against lower castes. These workers are likely to receive wages that are a fraction of what other employees receive, have little or no social protection, and experience poor working conditions, exploitation, and even slavery. The caste system continues to be a dominant cause of the persistence of economic exploitation and social exclusion, especially against Dalits and other vulnerable groups. While NGOs and trade unions have succeeded in organizing workers and pushing for better conditions, the informality of domestic work and failure to enforce labor law leave many migrant workers exposed. Initiatives to enhance labor rights and social protections are emerging but face rooted structural and cultural barriers (Anti-Slavery International, 2024; Mencher, 2016).

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1882	The U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, blocking Chinese workers and marking the first major restriction on migrant labor in the country (ILOSTAT).
1914–1918	Manpower shortages during World War I prompted the United States and other countries to create guest worker programs, as they grew more reliant on international labor for agricultural and factory work (ILO).
1949	The International Labour Organization took its first employment migration convention, requiring minimum standards to govern the treatment of migrant workers worldwide (ILO).
1964	The U.S. ended the Bracero Program, which had brought millions of Mexican workers as replacements for labor shortages but opened them up to wage theft and poor conditions (ILOSTAT).
1975	Bahrain regulates labor that includes both citizens and migrants, but doesn't include domestic workers in these protections (Human Rights Watch).
1976	The ILO addresses Convention No. 143, which deals with abusive forms of labor migration and advocates for equal rights of migrant workers (ILO).
1980s–1990s	The Gulf states criminalize the kafala sponsorship regime, tying the legal status of migrant workers to their employers and leaving them more susceptible to abuse (Human Rights Watch).
1986	The U.S. imposes employer sanctions on the hiring of illegal workers, but

exploitation persists with weak enforcement (ILOSTAT).

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| 1990 | The United Nations adopts the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, setting international standards for the rights of migrants (OHCHR). |
| 2009 | Bahrain authorizes migrant workers to change jobs without employers' approval after giving notice, a first in the Gulf states (Human Rights Watch). |
| 2011 | Bahrain modifies its reform, having employees wait one year before quitting work without the consent of their employer (Human Rights Watch). |
| 2014 | The ILO adopts a new protocol for the strengthening of forced labor prevention and the safeguarding of migrant workers (ILO). |
| 2020 | Qatar implements reform of the kafala system, strengthening the mobility of migrant workers' jobs, despite patchy enforcement (Fisher Phillips; Human Rights Watch). |
| 2021 | Italy enacts a decree granting residence permits and legal support to victims of labor exploitation, intending to regularize irregular migrant workers (ILOSTAT). |
| 2024 | Remittances to low- and middle-income countries are expected to reach \$685 billion in 2024, reflecting the economic importance and vulnerability of migrant workers (World Bank). |

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)

The convention was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1990 and is the most comprehensive international treaty dedicated to the rights of migrant workers and their families. It provides protection against forced labor, arbitrary confiscation of property, and collective expulsion, and guarantees such rights as freedom of movement, security of person, and access to justice. The treaty also calls for equal treatment of migrant workers in terms of working conditions, social security, and legal proceedings, and includes special protection for regular migrants, such as the right to remit earnings and protection against employer abuse (OHCHR; Amnesty International). Ratification is low, however, especially among the large migrant-receiving countries.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions

The ILO has developed two key conventions on labor migration: the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143). No. 97 requires states to give equal treatment between nationals and migrant workers regularly employed concerning conditions of work, trade union rights, and social security. Convention No. 143 also exceeds the social norms in that it obliges states to prohibit abusive types of labor migration and to guarantee the fundamental human rights of all migrant workers, whether or not they are regularized. Both conventions promote non-discrimination and equal opportunity, and are followed by recommendations including advice on best practice (ILO)

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018)

The UN General Assembly adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in 2018 to set the world's first complete international framework on all issues related to migration. The GCM offers objectives for protecting migrant workers from exploitation while enhancing labor protections and supporting international cooperation for fair and safe terms of employment. The report prioritizes the importance of ethical recruitment and legal protection against exploitation and calls on countries to revise their regulations according to international standards set by the ILO (ILO).

UN General Assembly Resolutions

The UN General Assembly has also adopted several resolutions, like A/RES/70/147 and A/RES/72/149, attempting to address the rights and protection of migrant workers. The resolutions recommend efforts of the member countries in the fight against labor exploitation, especially of women and children, and in providing access to justice, avoiding arbitrary arrest and forced mass expulsions. The resolutions also advocate for improved national policies and international cooperation in objecting to stop trafficking as well as forced labor (UN General Assembly).

Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families

UN agency tasked with the protection of migrant workers and their families. This UN committee oversees the implementation of the Migrant Workers Convention by countries. The approach is to review government reports, make recommendations, and interpret the treaty commitments. The Committee's efforts assist in ensuring that nations meet their commitments and discover persistent protection deficits for migrant workers worldwide (OHCHR).

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Many nations and organizations have, in various ways, established legislation, policy, and programme interventions aimed at curbing the exploitation of migrant workers. While some success has been achieved, many of these efforts are hindered by enforcement challenges, loopholes in legislation, and institutional inequalities.

The United Kingdom's Modern Slavery Act (2015)

The UK passed the Modern Slavery Act to criminalize human trafficking and severe exploitation. It introduced higher penalties and established the position of an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to direct enforcement. However, according to critics, its effectiveness is undermined by conflicting immigration laws, for instance, the Immigration Act 2016, which criminalizes illegal migrants and dissuades possible witnesses from reporting abuse because if they do, they will be deported (MBIE, 2024).

The Act helps by establishing a legal framework for punishing traffickers and assisting victims, enhancing public awareness, and coordinating. It has to be improved by supporting victims from immigration regulations to encourage greater reporting by victims of crimes without risk of removal.

Australia's Migrant Workers' Taskforce

Australia established a Migrant Workers' Taskforce in 2019, which proposed 22 reforms, including legislative changes and increased penalties for exploitative employers. A government Inter-agency Assurance Protocol was established, which encouraged migrant workers to report exploitation without fear of their visa being revoked. Despite such measures, the protocol rests upon voluntary arrangements, which put workers at risk of deportation and weaken confidence in authorities (MBIE, 2024). This assists by facilitating a platform to identify exploitation and strengthen protections for workers. To be effective, it must include legally enforceable protections for workers reporting against abuse and improved oversight to ensure compliance.

Canada's Migrant Worker Support Network

Canada launched a Migrant Worker Support Network in 2018 in British Columbia, which will coordinate stakeholders and enhance protections. Legal aid, health services, and awareness campaigns are proposed for the program. While the program is promising, it is still limited in ability and duration, with expansion plans that depend on funding (MBIE, 2024). It would help by concentrating support services and raising awareness about migrant workers. Expanding nationwide coverage and maintaining long-term funding would maximize its coverage and effectiveness.

Italy's Flows Decree (2025)

Italy's new Flows Decree offers residence permits and free legal assistance for exploited workers, and clears the way for regularisation for unauthorized foreigners, lowering risk and opening up access. This kind of faces obstacles from administrative delay and failure to reach out to migrant communities (ECOSOC Report, 2025). This decree helps by providing legal recourse and protection to victims, who are thus less exposed. To further enhance, Italy might make administrative processes simpler and invest in community awareness so that migrants are aware of and can access these protections.

Gulf States' Labor Reforms

Changes have been made in Qatar's and Bahrain's kafala system, including increased wages and job mobility for migrant workers. Enforcement remains unstable, and practices like document seizure, withheld wages, and hazardous working conditions persist for workers across the region. While these changes have occurred, systemwide exploitation remains unaddressed (HRW, 2024). These reforms help by legally recognizing the right of mobility and fair pay for migrant workers. The enforcement mechanisms, however, need to be maintained, and full dissolution of the Kafala system has to be sought to ensure full protection for migrant workers.

Possible Solutions

Addressing Transparency, Responsibility, and Protection of Migrant Workers

A significant issue in helping migrant workers is that the hiring process and work environment are often unclear and unjust. This makes it easy for workers to be mistreated, not paid, or have their contracts broken. To address this, countries can establish regulations that require clear records of jobs and contracts, conduct regular workplace inspections, and ensure that workers can report any issues safely. For example, governments can create a system where all migrant workers and their contracts are listed, allowing officials to verify if rules are being followed and provide assistance to workers as needed. Making it easier for workers to access legal help and conducting more frequent workplace inspections will help ensure that employers treat their workers fairly. Stopping unfair fees from job agencies will also help, since these fees can put workers in debt and make them more likely to be abused. By focusing on clear rules, regular checks, and easy ways for workers to get help, countries can better protect migrant workers and make workplaces safer and fairer for everyone.

Strengthening Social Protections for Migrant Workers

Another big problem is that migrant workers often cannot get basic help like health care, emergency aid, or legal support because of their legal status or where they're from. It is important to set up strong ways to protect these workers, especially where mistreatment is common. Governments, employers, and international groups can work

together to create systems that give migrant workers access to health care, emergency help, and legal support, no matter their status. For example, they can collect money together to pay for medical care, help workers who are not paid, and support those who are abused or stuck in another country. These steps help make sure all workers, no matter where they are from or what their legal situation is, can get help when necessary. By making sure these protections are available to everyone, countries can fill a big gap in worker safety and make things fairer and safer for migrant workers.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

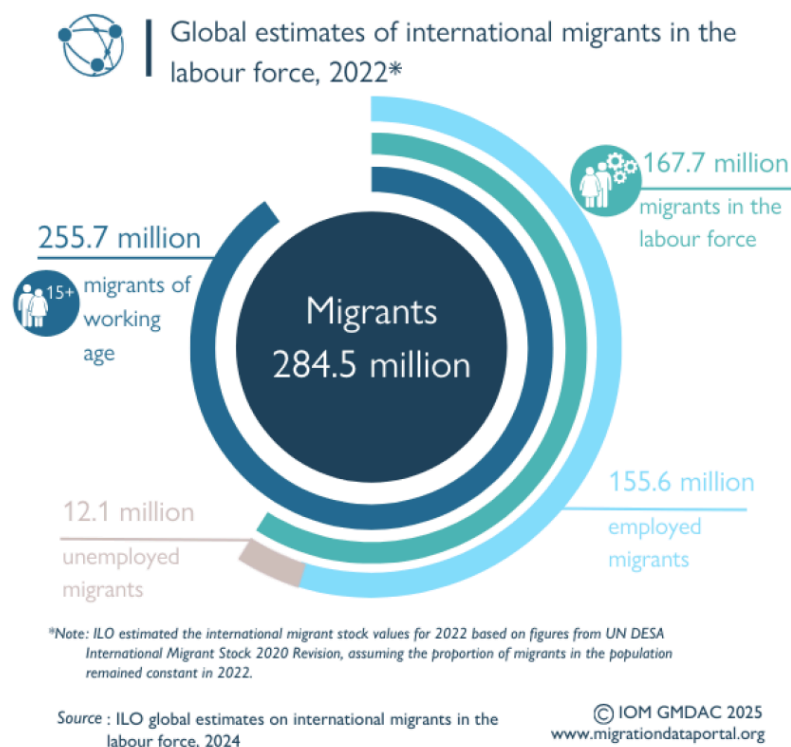
SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth

Sustainable Development Goal 8, “Decent Work and Economic Growth,” is directly connected to the global challenge of migrant labor exploitation. SDG 8 aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for everyone. A core element, Target 8.8, specifically calls for the protection of labor rights and the promotion of safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, women, and those in dangerous jobs (ILO, 2024).

Migrant laborers are often exposed to unsafe working conditions, wage theft, debt bondage, and discrimination, especially in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work. These are aggravated through a lack of meaningful labor protections, exclusion from legal redress, and threats of deportation or retaliation if one reports abuse. SDG 8 recognizes that the abolition of forced labor, an end to modern slavery and human trafficking, and decent recruitment are essential for economic prosperity and social justice (ILO, 2022).

Appendix

The purpose of this area is to give delegates useful resources to use when doing their research.



Source A: This Migration Data Portal chart indicates that in 2022, there were estimated to be 167.7 million international labor migrants in the global labor force. It puts into perspective the magnitude of exploitation and the importance of labor to the global economy (Migration Data Portal).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHbxeFaQUsc>

Source B: This YouTube video made by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) documents the lives and experiences of migrant workers, their roles, and their exposure to exploitation while being employed. The documentary emphasizes the responsibilities of the states and companies in protecting the rights of the migrants and preventing forced labor (International Organization for Migration).

<https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/the-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-around-the-world>

Source C: This detailed report by the Human Rights Research Center presents elaborate

information about the exploitation of workers who migrate around the world. The report gives an overview of abuses, including wage theft, hazardous working conditions, prohibitive fees for illegal labour recruitment, and discrimination against workers who migrate to other countries. The report presents systemic abuses such as tied visas and failure to provide legal safeguards, which give representatives an overview of human rights abuses against workers who migrate. (Human Rights Research Center, 2025)

<https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/the-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-around-the-world>

Source D: This ILO web page provides in-depth statistics and analysis of forced labour around the world, including the exploitation of migrant workers. It explains methods of exploitation and worldwide action on forced labour, and is a good platform for learning policy context (International Labour Organization, 2023).

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