

Study Guide

Week 15

Exploitation of migrant workers in the global supply chain (ILO)

TLDR:

The exploitation of migrant workers in global supply chains is a critical issue, with millions facing forced labor, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions due to weak legal protections and systemic supply chain vulnerabilities. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) leads efforts to combat these abuses through conventions like the Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and initiatives promoting corporate accountability. However, enforcement gaps and limited worker protections remain significant challenges, requiring stronger laws, ethical business practices, and greater international cooperation.

Addressing these issues involves strengthening labor laws, regulating recruitment agencies, improving immigration policies, and fostering international partnerships. Universal adoption of ILO conventions, linking trade agreements to labor rights, and enhancing global monitoring systems can reinforce protections.

Asian countries focus on balancing economic growth with worker protection, Western nations emphasise stricter regulations and corporate accountability, and developing nations seek fair recruitment practices and international support. Collective action is vital to safeguarding migrant workers' rights globally.

1) Background information

The exploitation of migrant workers is a pressing issue in global supply chains, posing challenges for economic and social systems. Migrant workers often endure forced labour, wage theft, unsafe conditions, and other abuses. Despite their critical roles in sectors like agriculture and construction, they remain disproportionately vulnerable due to systemic supply chain issues and insufficient legal protections.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 28 million people were in forced labor globally in 2021, with many being migrant workers. These workers are frequently misled during recruitment, trapped in debt by high fees, and subjected to exploitative conditions. Female migrant workers, particularly in domestic and cleaning sectors, face greater risks of gender-based violence and discrimination.

The ILO, a United Nations agency, leads efforts to combat this issue. Through instruments like **the Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and its 2014 Protocol**, the ILO requires states to prevent forced labor, protect victims, and provide remedies. Initiatives such as the Global Business Network on Forced Labour unite governments, businesses, and civil society to implement practical solutions. In Uzbekistan, ILO's third-party monitoring of the cotton harvest significantly reduced systemic forced labour.

The ILO also influences corporate practices through frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, encouraging due diligence in supply chains. Despite these efforts, enforcement gaps and limited support for workers persist. Addressing these challenges requires stronger laws, ethical business practices, and sustained international cooperation to ensure migrant workers' rights and dignity.

2) Discussion points

2.1) Addressing Systemic Vulnerabilities of Migrant Workers

Migrant workers are among the most vulnerable groups in global labor markets, often subjected to exploitation due to systemic weaknesses in governance, immigration policies, and recruitment processes. These workers face challenges such as forced labor, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions, often exacerbated by their precarious legal status and limited access to justice. Women, undocumented migrants, and those from low-income countries face heightened risks, particularly in sectors like domestic work, agriculture, and construction.

Possible solutions could include strengthening labor laws and enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance and protection for migrant workers. Regulating recruitment agencies to eliminate illegal fee-charging and contract substitution has proven effective in some contexts, such as bilateral agreements between nations. Improving immigration policies to offer secure migration pathways is another vital step. International cooperation, like the ILO's monitoring efforts in Uzbekistan's cotton sector, has demonstrated success in reducing forced labor. Additionally, educating workers about their rights and providing accessible reporting mechanisms can empower them to seek justice and prevent exploitation.

2.2) Strengthening International Frameworks

Strengthening international frameworks is essential to address the exploitation of migrant workers effectively. Current frameworks, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, set global labor standards, including the Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and its 2014 Protocol, which require preventive measures and victim protection. However, enforcement gaps and inconsistent adoption by nations undermine their impact. Possible solutions include encouraging universal ratification of these conventions and enhancing compliance through international monitoring systems. Multilateral efforts like linking trade agreements to labor rights enforcement have shown

promise. Expanding collaboration between governments, the ILO, and regional organizations can ensure stronger protections for vulnerable workers worldwide.

2.3) Improving migrant policies

Improving migration policies is crucial to reducing the exploitation of migrant workers. Restrictive immigration laws often force migrants into informal or precarious work, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Possible solutions could include creating legal and accessible migration pathways that provide workers with secure employment rights and protections. Some countries have introduced visa programs that allow workers to change employers without risking deportation, reducing dependency on exploitative employers. Additionally, bilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries can establish fair recruitment practices and ensure labor protections. Strengthening oversight of temporary work programs can also safeguard migrant workers from exploitation.

3) Major Stakeholders

3.1) Asian countries

Asian stakeholders play a significant role in addressing the exploitation of migrant workers, as many Asian countries are both major labor-sending and labor-receiving nations. Countries like India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Indonesia send millions of migrant workers abroad, while others like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Gulf states rely heavily on migrant labor for economic growth. Their stance on this issue often involves balancing economic interests with protecting their citizens. Labor-sending countries may advocate for stronger international labor protections, fair recruitment practices, and bilateral agreements to safeguard their workers abroad. At the same time, labor-receiving countries might emphasize the need for regulated migration systems that align with economic demands while committing to labor rights reforms. For example, the Philippines has implemented strict deployment policies and mandatory welfare programs for overseas workers. Asian stakeholders could promote regional cooperation through forums like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to harmonise labor standards, enforce ethical recruitment, and enhance protections for migrant workers across borders.

3.2) United Kingdom

Western countries, as major destinations for migrant workers, often focus on balancing economic needs with labor rights protections. Their stance typically emphasizes implementing stricter labor regulations, enforcing corporate accountability in supply chains, and promoting ethical recruitment practices. The European Union, for example, has proposed banning products made with forced labor, while countries like the U.S. enforce import bans on goods linked to exploitation. Western nations may also advocate for stronger international labor standards through organisations like the ILO. However,

rising anti-immigration sentiment can challenge efforts to fully protect migrant workers' rights.

3.3) Developing nations

Developing nations, many of which are both labor-sending and labor-receiving countries, face unique challenges in addressing migrant worker exploitation. Their stance often focuses on promoting economic growth while seeking better protections for their migrant workers abroad. These countries may advocate for fair recruitment practices, stronger bilateral agreements, and increased international support to safeguard their workers' rights. However, limited resources and weak enforcement mechanisms can hinder progress. Developing nations may also call for greater financial and technical assistance from international organizations to strengthen labor laws and improve oversight. Balancing economic dependency on migrant remittances with worker protection remains a key priority.

4)Sources:

1. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/big-issues/labour-rights/migrant-workers-in-global-supply-chains/>
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3. <https://www.forumforthefuture.org/blog/can-migrant-workers-in-global-supply-chains-be-recruited-ethically>
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6. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/international-affairs/reports/what-we-heard-forced-labour-global-supply-chain.html>