

An Analysis of the Effectiveness of International Human Rights Instruments in Protecting the Rights of Migrant Workers

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ABSTRACT

Migrant workers constitute a significant portion of the global labor force, often filling labor gaps in both developed and developing countries. Despite their critical contributions to host economies, migrant workers frequently face systemic discrimination, exploitation, and limited access to legal protections. This study seeks to analyze the effectiveness of international human rights instruments in safeguarding the rights of migrant workers, focusing on key frameworks such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Through a qualitative and comparative approach, this study explores how various states incorporate international legal norms into their domestic legislation, the challenges of ratification and enforcement, and the role of international monitoring bodies. Particular attention is given to the gap between ratification and implementation, highlighting how political, economic, and social factors affect the practical realization of migrant workers' rights. Case studies from regions with high levels of labor migration such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the European Union, and South-East Asia are examined to assess how well these international instruments are being operationalized on the ground. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of soft law instruments and multilateral cooperation in promoting accountability and improving working conditions for migrants. Furthermore, it considers the emerging global trends in migration governance, including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and how they interact with established legal protections.

Findings suggest that while international human rights instruments provide a comprehensive legal foundation for the protection of migrant workers, enforcement remains weak due to lack of political will, inadequate legal infrastructure, and insufficient international oversight. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the international legal regime for migrant workers and strengthening compliance mechanisms.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Human Rights Law, ICMW, International Labour Standards, Legal Protection.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, labour migration has become an essential feature of the international labour market. Migrant workers play a vital role in sustaining economic growth and development in both sending and receiving countries. However, despite their economic contributions, migrant workers often face a range of human rights violations, including unsafe working conditions, wage theft, lack of social security, discrimination, and limited access to justice. These challenges are further exacerbated for undocumented migrants and those employed in informal or low-skilled sectors. Recognizing these vulnerabilities, the international community has developed a series of legal instruments to safeguard the rights and dignity of migrant workers.

At the forefront of international efforts is the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1990. The Convention provides a comprehensive legal framework aimed at ensuring the equitable treatment of migrant workers, irrespective of their legal status. Alongside the ICMW, several International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, including Convention No. 97 (Migration for Employment) and Convention No. 143 (Migrant Workers - Supplementary Provisions), specifically address the protection of migrant labor. General human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also provide universal protections applicable to all individuals, including migrants.

Despite the existence of these robust legal frameworks, the practical implementation and enforcement of migrant workers' rights remain highly inconsistent across countries and regions. Many nations have not ratified key international instruments, while others struggle with institutional and political barriers that hinder effective enforcement. In several jurisdictions, national interests, especially those related to economic policy and immigration control, often overshadow human rights obligations. This results in a gap between international legal standards and on-ground realities, leaving many migrant workers without adequate legal recourse or protection.

The objective of this study is to critically analyse the effectiveness of international human rights instruments in protecting migrant workers. It aims to assess the degree of compliance by state parties, examine the role of international organizations and monitoring bodies, and identify the institutional, legal, and political challenges that undermine the enforcement of migrants' rights. The study will further explore case studies from different regions including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), European Union, and South-East Asia to provide a comparative understanding of implementation practices and their outcomes.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The phenomenon of labour migration has emerged as a defining characteristic of the 21st-century global economy. As globalization continues to reshape labour markets, millions of individuals move across borders in search of employment opportunities and better living conditions. Migrant workers fill essential roles in various sectors such as construction, agriculture, domestic work, healthcare, and manufacturing often performing jobs that are labour-intensive, low-paid, and socially undervalued. While these workers make significant contributions to both their home and host countries, they are frequently subjected to conditions that violate their fundamental human rights.

Migrant workers often face a range of challenges including discrimination, exploitation, poor working and living conditions, wage theft, lack of access to health care, and social exclusion. In many instances, they are denied legal protections and are vulnerable to abuse due to their immigration status, language barriers, and limited awareness of their rights. These challenges are particularly acute for low-skilled and undocumented migrants, as well as for women, who are disproportionately employed in domestic and caregiving roles under informal arrangements. The international community has developed a body of legal instruments aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of migrant workers. Chief among these is the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), adopted by the United Nations in 1990. This convention sets out a comprehensive framework of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights applicable to all migrant workers, regardless of their legal status. In addition to the ICMW, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has introduced key conventions and recommendations, including Convention No. 97, Convention No. 143, and Convention No. 189, which provide guidelines on fair recruitment, equal treatment, and protection against forced labour and exploitation. Despite the existence of these international legal instruments, the extent of their implementation and effectiveness remains a subject of concern. Many major migrant-receiving countries have not ratified the ICMW, citing concerns over sovereignty and labour market flexibility. Even where ratification exists, enforcement mechanisms are often weak or absent. Migrant workers continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice and remedies for rights violations and national laws frequently fail to align with international standards. Moreover, the rise of restrictive immigration policies, populist nationalism, and xenophobia has further undermined the protection of migrants' rights in several parts of the world.

This study is grounded in the growing need to evaluate how international human rights instruments are functioning in practice and whether they effectively serve the interests of migrant workers. By analysing legal frameworks, case studies, and the roles of international and regional bodies, this research seeks to identify the gaps between legal commitments and actual protection. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the on-going discourse on migration governance, human rights, and social justice, offering insights that can inform future policy development and advocacy efforts to ensure the dignity, security, and well-being of migrant workers worldwide.

Objectives of the Study

- 1. To examine the scope and provisions of key international human rights instruments related to the protection of migrant workers.
- 2. To assess the extent to which state parties have implemented these international legal instruments into national laws and policies.
- 3. To identify the challenges and barriers that hinders the effective protection of migrant workers under international human rights law.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Migrant workers are among the most vulnerable groups in the global labour market, often exposed to exploitation, discrimination, and violations of their fundamental human rights. Despite their vital contributions to host economies, they frequently lack access to basic protections such as fair wages, safe working conditions, legal representation, and social security. These challenges are especially prevalent among low-skilled, undocumented, and domestic migrant workers, who are at greater risk due to their marginalized legal and social status. In response to these concerns, the international community has adopted a number of legal instruments designed to safeguard the rights of migrant workers. Chief among these is the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), along with relevant ILO Conventions and general human rights treaties. These instruments outline a comprehensive legal framework for the protection and promotion of migrant workers' rights, regardless of their nationality or immigration status. Many major migrant-receiving countries have not ratified key conventions, citing concerns related to national sovereignty and economic priorities. Even in countries that have ratified these instruments, enforcement is often weak, and migrant workers remain subject to abusive recruitment practices, poor labour conditions, and inadequate access to justice. The lack of political will, institutional capacity, and international oversight further hinders the realization of these rights.

4. CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

Human rights are universal, inalienable, and inherent to all individuals by virtue of their humanity, regardless of nationality, legal status, or place of residence. In the context of migration, the principle of universality becomes particularly critical, as migrant workers often cross borders into jurisdictions where their rights may be inadequately recognized, poorly protected, or actively violated. The concept of human rights as applied to migrants emphasizes the idea that all individuals including migrant workers, whether documented or undocumented are entitled to the full spectrum of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. These include the right to life, liberty, security, non-discrimination, fair working conditions, access to healthcare, education, legal remedies, and protection against exploitation and abuse.

The intersection between human rights and migration is grounded in several core international instruments, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These foundational documents assert that human rights must be respected and fulfilled for all individuals, including migrants. Specific instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW) go a step further by articulating rights tailored to the unique vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers, such as protection against arbitrary expulsion, the right to equal treatment in employment, and access to consular assistance.

Despite these legal guarantees, the realization of human rights for migrants remains a persistent global challenge. Migrants often face structural discrimination, exclusion from legal protections, and hostility in host countries, driven by xenophobia, restrictive immigration policies, and weak enforcement of international standards. In this context, the human rights framework serves not only as a legal foundation but also as a moral and ethical imperative to ensure that migration governance is grounded in the principles of dignity, equality, and justice.

Thus, understanding the concept of human rights in migration entails recognizing migrant's not merely as economic agents but as rights-holders whose protection must be a priority in international and national legal frameworks. The integration of human rights principles into migration policies is essential for fostering inclusive, humane, and equitable societies.

5. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL INSTRUMENTS PROTECTING MIGRANT WORKERS

The protection of migrant workers' rights at the international level has been a major area of concern for decades, leading to the creation of several significant legal instruments aimed at safeguarding their dignity and ensuring fair treatment in both origin and destination countries. The international legal framework for the protection of migrant workers is primarily comprised of treaties, conventions, and recommendations developed under the auspices of international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). One of the most comprehensive international instruments is the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1990. The ICMW is specifically designed to safeguard the rights of migrant workers and their families, regardless of their migration status. It establishes a robust legal framework encompassing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, emphasizing non-discrimination and equal treatment. The Convention outlines the right to work, equal pay for equal work, access to social services, and protection from exploitation and arbitrary expulsion. However, despite its comprehensive nature, the ICMW has faced slow ratification, with many migrant-receiving countries, particularly in the Global North, opting not to ratify it, citing sovereignty concerns and the challenges posed by regulating migration.

Alongside the ICMW, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed several key conventions aimed at improving the conditions of migrant workers, particularly in the context of labour migration. ILO Convention No. 97 (Migration for Employment), adopted in 1949, addresses the treatment of migrant workers, specifically focusing on workers migrating for employment purposes. It establishes key principles such as non-discrimination in employment, equal access to

social benefits, and the requirement for transparent and ethical recruitment practices. In addition, ILO Convention No. 143 (Migrant Workers - Supplementary Provisions), adopted in 1975, strengthens the provisions of Convention No. 97 by addressing issues related to irregular migration and protecting workers from being exploited due to their undocumented status. Both these conventions emphasize the need for labor migration policies that respect the rights and dignity of workers, including their access to decent working conditions, healthcare, and social protections.

Further protection for migrant workers is also provided through ILO Convention No. 189 (Domestic Workers), adopted in 2011, which specifically focuses on the rights of domestic workers a sector largely dominated by migrant women. This Convention calls for the recognition of domestic workers as employees, ensuring their access to labor rights such as minimum wage, working hours, rest periods, and social protections. It also addresses issues like forced labour, violence, and discrimination, which are particularly prevalent in the domestic work sector. In addition to these legally binding conventions, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, provides a foundational framework for migrant protection, asserting that all individuals, regardless of nationality, have the right to work, equal pay for equal work, and the right to access social services. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) further reinforce these rights by ensuring the non-discriminatory treatment of all persons, including migrants.

While these international legal instruments offer a strong foundation for the protection of migrant workers, their effectiveness is often hampered by inadequate implementation, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the reluctance of states to fully embrace these protections. Moreover, the global political climate, which often prioritizes border control and national security, continues to pose significant challenges to the protection of migrant workers' rights. Nonetheless, these instruments remain critical in shaping the legal discourse on migration, providing a basis for advocacy and reform.

6. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

While international legal instruments provide the foundational framework for the protection of migrant workers, the effective implementation of these instruments often depends on the regional and national mechanisms designed to enforce these rights. The gap between international commitments and the actual protection of migrant workers is often bridged by regional agreements and national policies that translate international standards into local contexts. The success of these mechanisms varies widely, with different regions and countries adopting varying approaches based on their specific migration patterns, political climate, and legal systems.

At the regional level, various regional human rights bodies and labour organizations have been established to ensure the protection of migrant workers. One prominent example is the European Union (EU), which has enacted numerous regulations to safeguard the rights of migrant workers within its member states. The EU Free Movement Directive (2004/38/EC) guarantees the right to free movement for citizens of EU member states, enabling them to live and work in any of the EU countries without discrimination. Additionally, the European Social Charter and EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ensure the social rights of migrant workers, including access to healthcare, housing, and education, among other protections. However, the rights of non-EU migrant workers in Europe remain less protected, especially in countries with restrictive immigration policies, where migrants may face difficulties in accessing social services or in obtaining permanent legal status.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising six Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman), and labour migration is central to the economies, with millions of migrant workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia, employed in construction, domestic work, and service industries. However, migrant workers in the GCC face significant challenges, such as poor working conditions, lack of legal protections, and vulnerability to exploitation. The Kafala system, which ties a migrant worker's residency and employment to a sponsor, has been criticized for creating conditions conducive to abuse and exploitation. In response to international pressure, some GCC countries have introduced limited reforms to improve migrant workers' rights, but enforcement remains inconsistent and often inadequate.

In Latin America, regional instruments such as the MERCOSUR Protocol on the Rights of Migrants and the Andean Migration Agreement promote the free movement and rights of migrant workers within the region. These agreements allow for easier movement between member states and the establishment of safeguards to ensure equal treatment in terms of employment, healthcare, and social security. However, despite these protections, many migrants in the region still face barriers in accessing their rights due to administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of awareness about their rights.

National implementation mechanisms, such as domestic laws, immigration policies, labour regulations, and social security systems, play a crucial role in the protection of migrant workers. Many countries have enacted laws that incorporate international labour standards into their national legal frameworks. For instance, countries like Canada and Australia have robust labour laws that ensure migrant workers' rights, including minimum wage laws, occupational health and safety standards, and anti-discrimination provisions. Furthermore, these countries have established independent monitoring bodies, such as labour inspection systems and human rights commissions, to oversee the enforcement of these laws.

However, the situation is different in many migrant-receiving countries where political and economic factors limit the

effectiveness of national laws. In developing nations or countries with significant informal labour markets, migrant workers often face challenges in accessing formal channels of justice. In some countries, the lack of political will, weak judicial systems, and corruption prevent the effective implementation of migrant protection laws. Migrant workers, particularly those in irregular status or employed in informal sectors, often lack awareness of their rights or face fear of deportation if they attempt to seek legal redress.

7. ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND ENFORCEMENT GAPS

The protection of migrant workers' rights largely depends on how effectively domestic legal frameworks implement international labour standards and human rights norms. While many countries have legal provisions designed to protect migrant workers, significant enforcement gaps remain, often leaving these workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Domestic legal frameworks must align with international standards, but their success depends on the political will of governments, the strength of legal institutions, and the actual implementation mechanisms within each country.

In many migrant-receiving countries, labour laws explicitly prohibit discrimination against migrant workers and offer basic protections, such as equal pay for equal work, safe working conditions, and access to healthcare and social benefits. For example, in countries like Canada and Australia, labour protections are relatively strong, with comprehensive regulations for temporary foreign workers, including minimum wage laws, health and safety standards, and avenues for redress in cases of exploitation. These countries also have well-developed labour inspection systems that monitor workplaces to ensure compliance with the law. Additionally, these nations allow migrant workers to join trade unions, empowering them to negotiate better conditions and stand up against exploitation.

However, the situation is vastly different in many other countries, where the legal protection for migrant workers remains inadequate. In many parts of the world, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Southeast Asia, migrant workers are often subject to the Kafala system, which ties their legal residency status to their employer. This system can create significant vulnerabilities, as workers may be unable to change employers without their sponsor's consent, leaving them open to exploitation and abuse. Despite international criticism and calls for reform, many countries in the GCC have made limited or cosmetic changes to the Kafala system, with enforcement often remaining weak. The legal framework in these countries may offer protections on paper, but enforcement gaps render them largely ineffective. Migrant workers in these regions may fear seeking help from authorities due to the risk of deportation or retaliation, leading to underreporting of labour rights violations.

In countries with large informal economies or where large numbers of migrant workers are undocumented, domestic legal frameworks often fail to provide sufficient protection. For instance, India and Pakistan, which send large numbers of migrant workers abroad, have laws to regulate recruitment agencies, but the enforcement of these laws is often weak. Migrant workers in the informal sector such as domestic workers or agricultural labourers are typically excluded from formal labour protections, making them vulnerable to abuse. Even if these workers are covered by national laws, the lack of legal documentation, as is often the case with undocumented migrants, complicates their ability to seek justice or claim rights under the law.

One major gap in many legal systems is the lack of legal awareness among migrant workers. Many workers, especially those from low-skilled backgrounds or those migrating through irregular channels, may be unaware of their rights or unable to access the legal resources needed to assert them. In some countries, legal assistance is scarce, expensive, or difficult to access for migrant workers, particularly those without proper documentation. This lack of awareness and access to justice exacerbates the vulnerability of migrant workers and limits the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks. Furthermore, even in countries with relatively strong legal frameworks, enforcement often fails due to political, economic, and social factors. For example, governments may prioritize the interests of businesses or national security concerns over the welfare of migrant workers, particularly in times of economic downturn or political unrest. In such cases, migrant workers may face increased scrutiny, reduced access to social services, or discrimination, all of which undermine the protections offered by the law.

8. ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS AND MONITORING BODIES

Effective enforcement mechanisms and independent monitoring bodies play a crucial role in ensuring that the legal protections afforded to migrant workers are upheld in practice. While national laws and international conventions outline the rights of migrant workers, the success of these frameworks hinges on robust enforcement systems that can detect violations, hold perpetrators accountable, and provide migrant workers with avenues for redress. These enforcement mechanisms can take the form of labour inspection systems, government agencies, international bodies, and civil society organizations that collaborate to monitor the treatment of migrant workers and ensure their rights are respected.

At the national level, labour inspection systems are among the most common enforcement mechanisms for monitoring compliance with labour laws. In countries with a significant migrant workforce, labour inspectorates are tasked with inspecting workplaces, identifying unsafe conditions, and ensuring that employers adhere to labour laws, including those relating to wages, working hours, and occupational safety. For example, in Australia and Canada, labour departments are

responsible for overseeing the employment standards of both local and migrant workers. They conduct regular inspections, investigate complaints, and impose penalties on employers who violate workers' rights. These systems are often complemented by the provision of migrant worker advocacy services that help workers understand their rights and report violations.

However, the effectiveness of labour inspection systems is often hindered by insufficient resources, corruption, and the informal nature of many migrant workers' employment. In countries with large populations of irregular or undocumented migrants, labor inspectors may be less inclined to investigate due to the risk of deporting workers or dealing with politically sensitive issues. For example, in many Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where millions of migrant workers are employed in low-wage sectors such as construction and domestic work, enforcement mechanisms are often weak. Labour inspectors in these countries may avoid inspecting the most vulnerable sectors due to pressures from employers or lack of political wills, leaving workers exposed to exploitation and abuse.

At the international level, organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations (UN) play a significant role in promoting compliance with international labour standards and monitoring the treatment of migrant workers. The ILO's supervisory mechanisms, including the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), monitor compliance with ILO conventions such as Convention No. 97 (on migration for employment) and Convention No. 143 (on migrant workers' rights). Through periodic country reports, the ILO assesses whether states are adhering to international labour standards and makes recommendations for improvements. While the ILO does not have the power to enforce compliance directly, its influence lies in the visibility it provides to states' non-compliance and the pressure it can exert through international forums.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants also plays a critical monitoring role by investigating and reporting on human rights violations that affect migrant workers globally. The Special Rapporteur conducts country visits, gathers data, and publishes reports that highlight human rights abuses and recommend policy reforms. This independent monitoring mechanism ensures that migrant workers' issues are brought to the international stage and that governments are held accountable for their treatment of migrant populations.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including trade unions, migrant rights groups, and NGOs, are essential in monitoring migrant workers' rights and advocating for policy reforms. These organizations often provide direct support to migrant workers, such as legal assistance, shelter, and advocacy for improved working conditions. For instance, organizations like Migrant Rights in the Middle East and The Migrant Workers' Centre in Canada play a pivotal role in educating migrant workers about their rights and providing them with platforms to report abuses. Through campaigns, litigation, and grassroots organizing, these groups help amplify the voices of migrant workers and influence both domestic and international policies.

Despite the existence of these monitoring bodies, enforcement remains a challenge. Many migrant workers, particularly those in irregular status or employed in informal sectors, are often unaware of their rights or fear retaliation if they report violations. Furthermore, the reluctance of some governments to prioritize migrant rights or the exploitation of workers for economic gain often undermines enforcement efforts. Therefore, improving the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms requires a multi-faceted approach that includes better training for labour inspectors, greater access to justice for migrant workers, and enhanced international cooperation to address cross-border labour exploitation.

9. CONCLUSION

The global movement of labour has become an indispensable component of modern economies, yet migrant workers often find themselves at the margins of legal protection, vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. This study critically examined the effectiveness of international human rights instruments in safeguarding the rights of migrant workers, exploring both their strengths and limitations. It is evident that while frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), and core International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions establish comprehensive rights and standards, the true challenge lies in their implementation at the national level.

Many countries have ratified these instruments but fall short in enacting corresponding domestic laws or ensuring robust enforcement. Issues such as restrictive immigration policies, weak labour inspection systems, lack of legal awareness, and political unwillingness further diminish the impact of these international commitments. Moreover, migrant workers in informal sectors or under temporary visa schemes remain particularly exposed to violations due to limited access to legal remedies and support services.

Nonetheless, the existence of these international instruments remains crucial, providing a normative foundation for advocacy, legal reform, and international cooperation. Organizations like the ILO, UN bodies, and civil society groups play a pivotal role in monitoring state compliance and amplifying the voices of migrant communities.

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