



► Policy Brief

prepared for the Second World Summit for Social Development

July 2025

Promoting evidence-based policymaking for fair and effective governance of labour migration¹

Key considerations for WSSD2

- **The share of migrants in the global labour force should be recognized as a stable and essential component of the world economy.** In 2022, international migrants accounted for 4.7 per cent of the global labour force, representing an estimated 167.7 million people.
- **Most international migrant workers are of prime working age, highlighting the value placed on skills and experience in labour migration systems.** In total, 61.3 per cent are men and 38.7 per cent are women. High-income countries account for 68.4 per cent (114.7 million), followed by upper-middle-income countries at 17.4 per cent (29.2 million).
- **More than two thirds of international migrants in the labour force contribute to the services sector, underscoring their vital role – especially women, who are disproportionately represented in the care economy.** This trend is driven by the growing demand for healthcare and domestic work in high- and middle-income countries, largely due to ageing populations.
- **In advancing a fair and effective labour migration agenda, the ILO supports governments and employers' and workers' organizations in three core areas:**
 - promoting sustainable labour migration governance institutions;
 - strengthening linkages between migration and well-functioning labour markets;
 - enhancing rights, protection and access to justice for migrant workers.

► Introduction

International labour migration is a critical component of the global economy. Migrant workers enhance productivity by filling labour shortages and bringing diverse skills to destination countries. At the same time, they play an important role in their home countries by sending remittances, which reduce poverty, support education and healthcare and raise consumption – thus contributing to economic growth. The skills and knowledge acquired abroad also create long-term development benefits upon return.

Gaps in data create challenges in assessing the full economic and social impact of migration. Despite the substantial contributions of international migrants in the labour force to both origin and destination countries, significant data limitations impede a comprehensive understanding of their labour force participation, employment patterns and working conditions. On the one hand, countries of origin face persistent issues, such as a brain drain, where the emigration of skilled professionals creates domestic labour shortages,

¹ This policy brief is based on ILO (2024a), which presents the most recent estimates on the stock of international migrants in the labour force, employed international migrants and unemployed international migrants for the reference year 2022. The estimates are disaggregated by sex, country income group and region.

alongside limited oversight of recruitment practices, which may lead to exploitation. In addition, the integration of returnees into national labour markets may be incomplete, impeding the longer-term benefits of migration from being realized. On the other hand, destination countries may face difficulties when it comes to accurately forecasting labour shortages and addressing skills mismatches. These limitations restrict policymakers in the design of evidence-based frameworks that maximize migration's benefits while mitigating economic and social challenges.

This policy brief examines international labour migration through the lens of labour markets, presenting important insights into global and regional trends to help policymakers identify key issues in preparation for the 2025 Second World Summit for Social Development.

The brief analyses participation among international migrants in the labour force, highlights the key sectors of employment and offers insights into the economic drivers behind their participation. It also delves into the demographic composition of international migrants in the labour force, including age and differences between women and men. The analysis underscores the barriers and opportunities for migrant women, particularly in female-dominated sectors, such as healthcare and domestic services. In 2022, 155.6 million international migrants – 60.9 per cent of all international migrants of working age – were employed, with most working in the services sector. Despite their contributions, migrants faced higher unemployment rates than non-migrants, partly due to language barriers, unrecognized qualifications and discrimination.

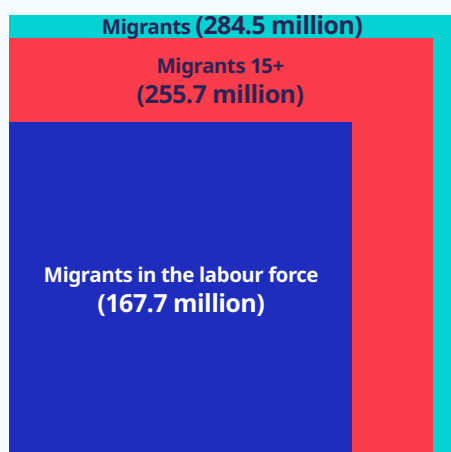
► International migrants in the global labour force

The global migrant population reached 284.5 million in 2022, with 255.7 million of working age, of whom 167.7 million were classified as international migrants in the labour force, accounting for 4.7 per cent of the global labour force (see figure 1). High-income countries remained the primary destination for international migrants in the labour force, hosting 68.4 per cent in 2022, up from 67.1 per cent in 2013. This increase could be attributed to demand for skilled labour and immigration policies that prioritize skilled workers or those who already have job offers (Ruhs 2008).

Upper-middle-income countries also experienced an increase, rising from 15.7 per cent in 2013 to 17.4 per cent in 2022, reflecting growing industrialization and services-sector expansion in these economies. Conversely, the share of international migrants in the labour force in lower-middle-income countries declined from 13.8 per cent to 10.9 per cent, reflecting a range of factors, including limited opportunities for skilled employment and broader economic conditions that may constrain job creation and employment prospects.

Regionally, Europe and Central Asia hosted the largest proportion of international migrants in the labour force (34.5 per cent), followed by the Americas (27.3 per cent), led by Northern America. The Arab States consistently accounted for 13 to 14 per cent of international migrants in the labour force over the decade, underscoring their reliance on migrant labour in construction, domestic work and essential services (ILO 2024b). Changes over time reflect the evolving dynamics of global migration, shaped by economic growth, demographic transitions and regional labour demands (Kalleberg 2020; OECD 2018).

► **Figure 1. Global estimates of the stock of international migrants and those in the labour force, 2022 (million)**

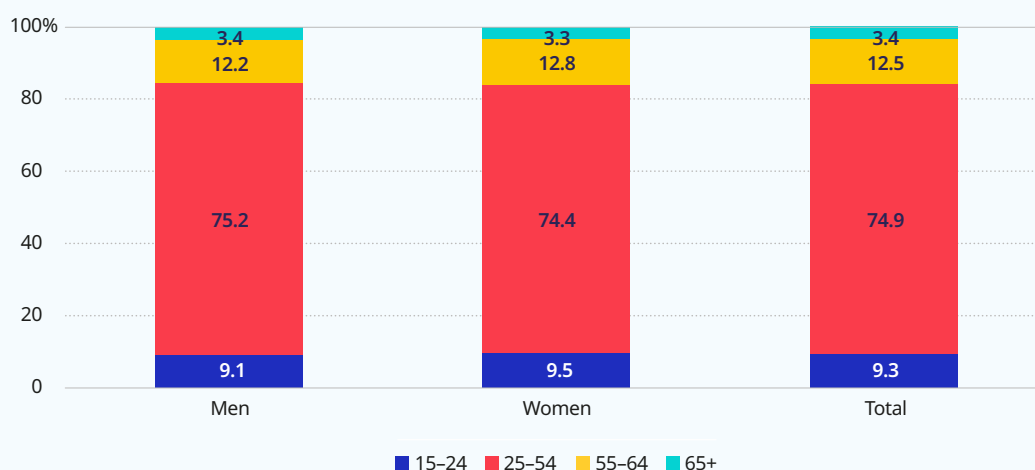


Source: ILO estimates.

Age and sex composition

In 2022, prime-age adults (aged 25–54) made up the majority of international migrants in the labour force at 74.9 per cent. Youth accounted for 9.3 per cent, while those aged 55–64 comprised 12.5 per cent, and individuals 65 years and older represented 3.4 per cent (see figure 2). The high representation of prime-age international migrants in the labour force can be attributed to their greater financial resources, higher earning potential and stronger social networks compared to younger migrants, who often have less

► **Figure 2. Global age composition of international migrants in the labour force by sex, 2022 (percentage)**



Source: ILO estimates.

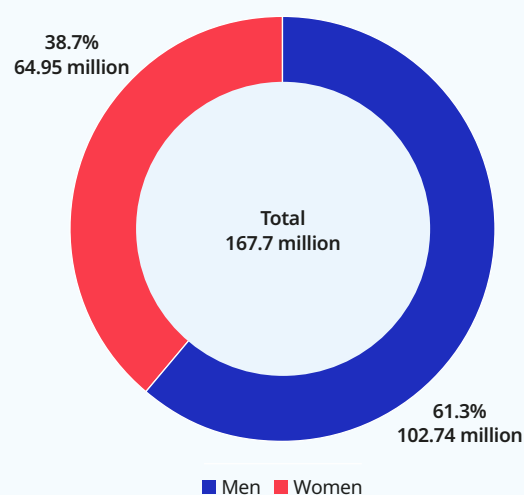
experience. In contrast, older workers have fewer years left in the labour market. This makes prime-age migrants more motivated and better equipped to pursue work opportunities abroad (ILO 2021a).

Young international migrants (aged 15–24) are most represented in the labour force of low-income countries, with their share declining as income levels rise. This pattern, seen in both men and women, reflects policies in high- and upper-middle-income countries, which favour skilled, experienced workers (Bossavie et al. 2022). Regionally, young international migrants in the labour force (aged 15–24) – both men and women – are most represented in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2022, men made up 61.3 per cent of international migrants in the labour force globally, while women accounted for 38.7 per cent (see figure 3). This lower representation of women can be attributed to their slightly smaller share of the total migrant population (48.2 per cent) and their lower labour force participation rates. A total of 70.3 per cent of women international migrants in the labour force were based in high-income countries, compared to 67.2 per cent of men. In countries where women generally have higher labour force participation, migrant women may also face fewer barriers to entering the workforce (Moussié 2020). For instance, the availability of childcare and employment-friendly policies in these economies can support greater inclusion of women migrants.

Regionally, women were highly concentrated in Northern America (25.7 per cent) and Northern, Southern and Western Europe (27.3 per cent), where broader access to employment in the services sector and more inclusive labour policies facilitated their

► **Figure 3. Global distribution of international migrants in the labour force by sex, 2022 (million and percentage)**



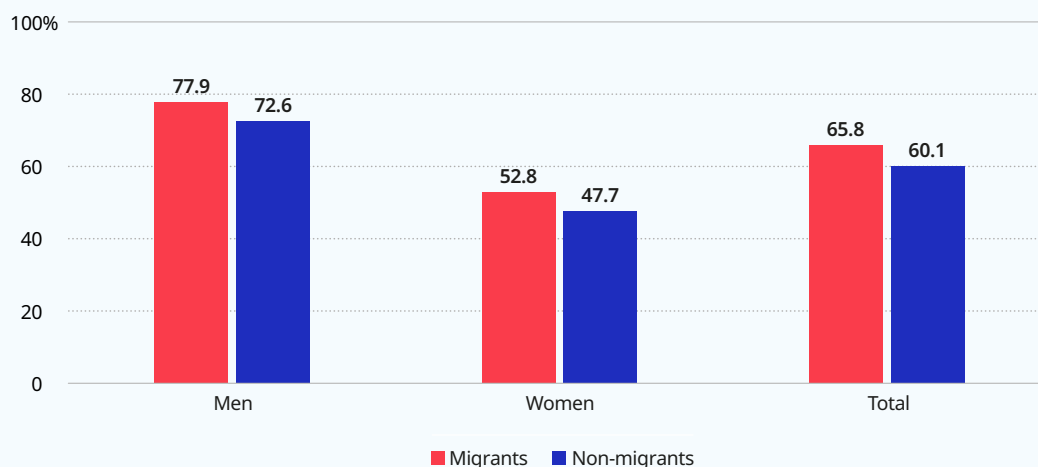
Source: ILO estimates.

participation (Platt, Polavieja and Radl 2022). The Arab States hosted one of the lowest shares of women international migrants in the labour force in 2022 (5.2 per cent), reflecting fewer employment options outside of the care industry, and domestic work in particular (Esim and Smith 2004; ILO 2021a; Kagan 2017).

Labour force participation rate

Globally, migrants had higher labour force participation rates than non-migrants, 65.8 per cent and 60.1 per cent, respectively (see figure 4) – a stable gap observed since 2013.

► **Figure 4. Global labour force participation rate of international migrants and non-migrants by sex, 2022 (percentage)**



Source: ILO estimates.

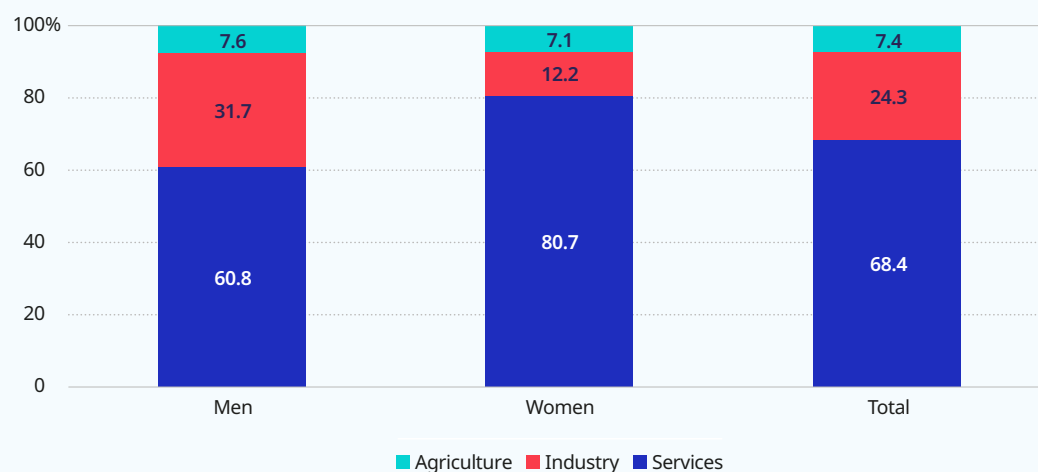
Many migrants move for better job opportunities and higher wages, leading to greater participation in the labour force. By income group, high-income countries had the highest migrant labour force participation rate at 67.5 per cent. Regionally, migrant labour force participation was highest in the Arab States at 73.9 per cent, supported by economic growth and the significant contribution of migrant workers to meeting rising labour demand (Wagle 2024). In contrast, North Africa recorded the lowest migrant labour force participation rate at 46.5 per cent,

which may be partly explained by the prevalence of transit migration in the region.²

Distribution by sector

Employment patterns among international migrants have remained relatively consistent over time. In 2022, the services sector remained the largest employer of international migrants, accounting for 68.4 per cent of the labour force (see figure 5). The concentration

► **Figure 5. Distribution of employed international migrants by sex and broad category of economic activity, 2022 (percentage)**



Source: ILO estimates.

² See ILO (2015) and <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/northern-africa>.

of migrant workers, particularly women, in services is largely driven by rising global demand for care and domestic work. Notably, one in three international migrant women is employed in the care economy, compared to one in five non-migrant women.

In high-income countries, the share of international migrant women working in services accounted for 87.6 per cent in 2022, reflecting expanding employment opportunities in healthcare, hospitality and domestic work (ILO 2015; Yeates 2009). In low-income countries, agriculture remained a critical sector, employing 24.7 per cent of migrant men and 48.9 per cent of migrant women in the labour force due to limited industrial and services-sector development.

In the Arab States, Europe and Northern America, employment in the services sector is particularly high, reflecting strong demand for caregiving, construction and hospitality workers (ILO 2021a, 2024c). In contrast, agriculture remained a key sector in Africa and parts of Asia, where economic diversification is still evolving and subsistence farming continues to be an important livelihood source. Over time, the global trend of shifting employment from agriculture to services among international migrants in the labour force has highlighted broader economic transformations, urbanization and increasing specialization in high- and middle-income countries (Sorgner 2021).

Employment-to-population ratio

In 2022, 155.6 million international migrants, which represented 60.9 per cent of all international migrants of working age, were employed. In both sexes, migrants had higher employment-to-population ratios than non-migrants, meaning a greater share of migrants aged 15

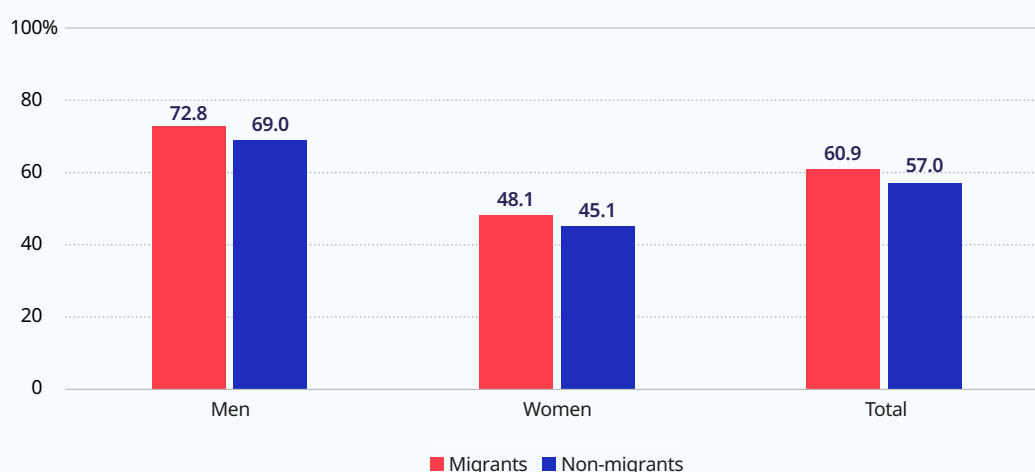
and over were employed. This ratio rose between 2013 and 2019, then dipped slightly in 2022. The increase reflects more migrants finding jobs abroad, partly due to ageing populations in high-income countries. The 2022 decline may be partly due to the impacts of COVID-19 (see figure 6).

By income group, high-income countries maintained the highest employment ratio for migrants at 63.0 per cent in 2022, steadily rising from 61.6 per cent in 2017 due to robust demand for skilled labour and policies facilitating workforce participation (Duman, Kahanec and Kureková 2022; Hanson and McIntosh 2016). In contrast, low-income countries experienced a notable decline in migrant employment, with the ratio decreasing from 57.9 per cent in 2017 to 49.8 per cent in 2022. This trend may be attributed to labour market constraints and fewer formal employment opportunities available for international migrants. Regionally, employment rates for migrants were highest in the Americas and Europe, underpinned by strong services and industrial sectors that absorbed a large share of the workforce. In Africa, employment rates for migrants showed stagnation or declines, reflecting regional economic volatility and structural constraints in labour markets (African Union Commission 2021). These trends underscore the critical role of country-income-level dynamics and regional labour demands in shaping employment outcomes for migrants globally.

Unemployment rate

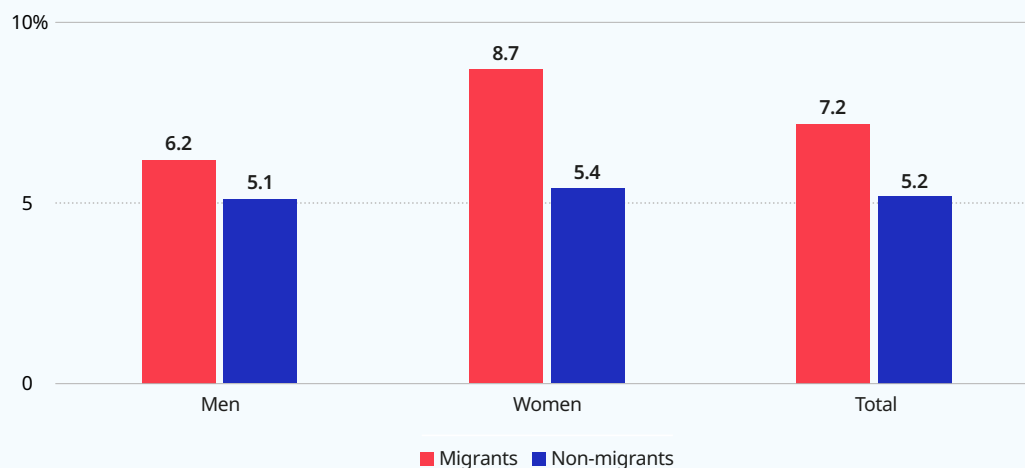
The global unemployment rate for international migrants in the labour force was 7.2 per cent in 2022, a decline from 8 per cent in 2019, but still higher than that of non-migrants at 5.2 per cent. Possible

► **Figure 6. Employment-to-population ratio of international migrants by sex, 2022 (percentage)**



Source: ILO estimates.

► **Figure 7. Unemployment rate of international migrants and non-migrants by sex, 2022 (percentage)**



Source: ILO estimates.

factors contributing to higher unemployment among migrants include language barriers, the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and the presence of discrimination. Furthermore, migrant women consistently face higher unemployment rates than men due to gender-specific barriers in accessing the labour market (see figure 7).

Across income groups, low-income countries recorded the highest unemployment rates among international migrants in the labour force, reaching 16.3 per cent in 2022, up from 14.3 per cent in 2017. This increase may reflect economic fluctuations and constraints in formal employment opportunities (Lam and Elsayed 2022). Conversely, upper-middle-income countries recorded the lowest unemployment rates for international

migrants in the labour force at 5.4 per cent, driven by expansion in the industry and services sectors (ILO 2021a). High-income countries showed a steady improvement, with unemployment rates declining from 10.1 per cent in 2017 to 6.3 per cent in 2022, reflecting stable labour markets and policies favouring skilled international migrants in the labour force (OECD 2023).

From 2017 to 2022, migrant unemployment declined in Africa, the Arab States and Europe and Central Asia. In the Americas, rates remained stable, supported by generally positive employment trends (ILO 2023). In Asia and the Pacific, rates first declined but rose again in 2022, largely due to the impact of COVID-19 on sectors such as tourism, which employ many migrants (ILO 2021b).

► Conclusion

Protecting migrant workers is central to the ILO's mission, as stated in its Constitution, which emphasizes safeguarding "the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own".³ International migrants are an important part of the solution to address global labour market supply mismatches. Migrant workers fill essential shortages in agriculture, industry and services sectors, while also contributing to development through remittances and knowledge transfers upon return. Nevertheless, as this brief has shown, they continue to face challenges.

Renewing the commitment to decent work for all will help unlock their full potential and maximize their contributions in destination and origin countries alike. Achieving this requires a coordinated effort to address inequalities and ensure that the benefits of migration are realized for all.

The ILO seeks to support governments and employers' and workers' organizations to effectively govern labour migration. Its approach is based on the following three main elements:

³ Preamble of the ILO Constitution.

► **Promoting sustainable labour migration governance institutions**

Enhancing global collaboration is key to effective governance of labour migration. Strengthening dialogue between origin and destination countries, with active participation from employers' and workers' organizations, can lead to well-informed and balanced policies. Engaging social partners in migration policy discussions from the outset not only enhances policy sustainability but also ensures that migration frameworks are responsive to evolving labour market needs, supporting productivity, economic growth and improved working conditions. Moreover, reliable and up-to-date labour market and migration statistics are essential for developing evidence-based policies that address labour market shortages, strengthening regulatory frameworks, ensuring effective enforcement of international labour standards and fostering public confidence in migration governance.

► **Strengthening linkages between migration and well-functioning labour markets**

Labour migration plays a crucial role in balancing supply and demand, boosting productivity by addressing labour shortages and fostering just transitions by equipping industries with the expertise needed to enhance economic resilience. To fully harness its benefits, countries may consider strengthening their capacity to govern migration effectively, including implementing targeted policies that support both skills development and the

protection of migrant workers. Ensuring coherence between labour migration, employment, education and training policies is essential for building well-functioning labour markets that are both inclusive and adaptable to evolving economic needs.

► **Enhancing rights, protection and access to justice for migrant workers**

Effective labour and social protection coverage for migrants remains essential, particularly in sectors with elevated risks of forced labour, exploitation, occupational hazards and exclusion. Improving recruitment practices, facilitating access to formal employment and expanding avenues for representation are critical components of a comprehensive policy approach. Persistent gaps between men and women among international migrants, including the concentration of women in low-wage and precarious employment, highlight the need for targeted interventions. In low-income countries, the significant presence of youth in the migrant labour force points to the importance of early-career support, while the predominance of prime-age workers underscores the relevance of policies that sustain their economic contributions over time. These dynamics underscore the importance of evidence-based strategies to address labour market imbalances, promote decent work and ensure that labour migration supports equitable outcomes for countries of origin and destination, as well as for migrant workers themselves.

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