



A guide to key terms related to fundamental principles and rights at work, trade and supply chains



Canada

► About the ILO

The UN agency for the world of work

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace.

The only tripartite U.N. agency, since 1919, the ILO brings together governments, employers and workers of 187 Member States, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men.

► **Understanding rights at work**

A guide to key terms related to fundamental principles and rights at work, trade and supply chains

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Foreword

The fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW) are universal human rights. They matter for everyone, everywhere. They are fundamental to human dignity, to economic and social development, and to the long-term stability of every country.

Yet many of the terms and concepts related to these rights can appear complicated and inaccessible to a wide audience. When trade-related terminology is added, the picture can be even more confusing. As the world navigates economic uncertainties, the need for accurate, easy-to-understand information about rights at work is greater than ever.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We are devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights. Understanding these rights is the first step towards achieving them. That is why the ILO has developed this publication to explain key terms and concepts in a simple, straightforward way.

This document has been produced as part of the ILO's "Trade, Labour, and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in South-East Asia" project, a five-year initiative funded by the Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Focusing on export sectors in the region, the project promotes compliance with international labour standards, particularly the fundamental principles and rights at work, and the labour provisions of free trade agreements, among Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

We hope that you will read, share and make use of this publication. By deepening our collective understanding and commitment to these principles, we can ensure that trade and growth go hand in hand with basic rights, decent work and social justice for all.



Kaori Nakamura-Osaka

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Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific

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We are also deeply thankful to other colleagues whose contributions may not be individually named here but were nonetheless valuable in shaping the final product.

Disclaimer

This publication is for educational and awareness raising purposes. It does not constitute an official ILO interpretation of any international labour standard, convention, or policy. For authoritative guidance, please refer to official ILO instruments and documents. Hyperlinks to official sources are included throughout this publication. We hope this introductory resource to the world of labour rights serves as a helpful starting point in your exploration of labour- and trade- related topics.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

How to use this publication

Labour and trade shape the world we live in, yet the language used to describe them can sometimes feel technical or hard to follow. If terms like “fundamental principles”, “labour provisions” or “trade agreements” sound unfamiliar, this publication is for you.

It is a clear and practical guide to the key terms and concepts that connect fundamental principles and rights at work, trade and decent work. It explains what these terms or concepts mean in straightforward language and why they matter for governments, employers, workers, businesses, researchers, educators, and anyone interested in how global trade relates to rights at work.

Each entry includes:



- A concise **definition** drawn from ILO and international sources.



- A plain-language **explanation** to make it easy to grasp.



- A short **example or insight** to spark reflection and dialogue.



- **Links and QR codes** for those who wish to explore these terms in greater depth.

You can read the publication from start to finish or explore the terms that interest you most.

Whether you are learning, teaching, or engaging in policy or business, this publication is designed as a practical tool to build a shared understanding of fundamental labour rights in relation to trade, supply chains, and the world of work.

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1

Decent work

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Decent work
- ▶ Fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW)
- ▶ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets 8.5, 8.7 and 8.8

► Decent work

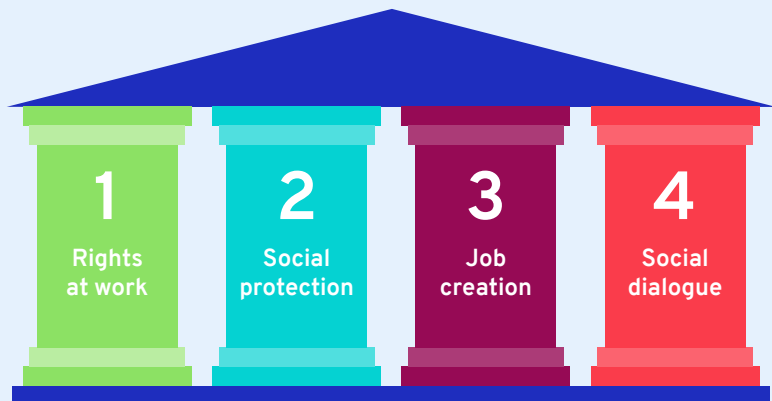


What makes work "decent"?

The ILO defines decent work as productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.

Decent work is about more than just having a job. It is about having a job that is fair, safe and respects workers' rights. It means earning a living in conditions of dignity, stability and with opportunities for growth.

Decent work is guided by four pillars of the ILO's strategic objectives:



Decent work includes:



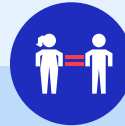
A fair
income



Decent and
productive
employment



Safe and
healthy working
environment



Equal
treatment



Social
protection
for all



International
labour
standards



Influencing wages,
working conditions
and public policy
through social
dialogue



Better prospects
for personal
development and
social integration



Did you know?

Decent work is the key to economic growth and prosperous, inclusive societies. It is a core vision of the ILO and is put into practice through the ILO's Decent Work Agenda which is central to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 8 on "Decent Work and Economic Growth".

Learn more:
ILO, "[Decent Work](#)".



► Fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW)



Photo credit: © ILO/Fauzan Azhima

What rights and why do they matter?

The fundamental principles and rights at work, established by the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), are the foundation for fair labour practices worldwide. They reflect a shared commitment to fundamental human values that are essential to social and economic life.

The five categories of universal and indivisible fundamental principles and rights at work are:



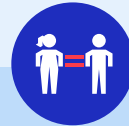
Freedom of association and collective bargaining



Eliminating forced labour



Ending child labour



Eliminating discrimination at work



A safe and healthy working environment

Related ILO Conventions

Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87)

Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)

Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)

Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)

Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (P029)

Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)

Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)

Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)

Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)

Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155)

Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187)



Did you know?

The ILO's tripartite constituents (governments, employers and workers) committed to making these rights a reality by adopting the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW).



The ILO's FUNDAMENTALS branch supports Member States in respecting, promoting and realizing the fundamental principles and rights at work by strengthening laws, practices and institutions – including employers' and workers' organizations.

Learn more:
ILO, "About the
Declaration".



Photo credit: © ILO/Aaron Santos

► Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets 8.5, 8.7 and 8.8



Photo credit: © ILO

What do SDG targets 8.5, 8.7 and 8.8 mean for labour rights?

In 2015, all Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Its 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 associated targets are designed to address the world's most pressing challenges – including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and challenges to peace and justice.

These targets include:

TARGET 8-5	TARGET 8-7	TARGET 8-8
FULL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK WITH EQUAL PAY	END MODERN SLAVERY, TRAFFICKING AND CHILD LABOUR	PROTECT LABOUR RIGHTS AND PROMOTE SAFE WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

- **SDG target 8.5:** By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.
- **SDG target 8.7:** Take immediate and effective measures to end forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.

- **SDG target 8.8:** Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants and those in precarious employment.

Indicator 8.8.2 under this target also covers respect for freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.



Did you know?

To achieve **SDG target 8.5**, the ILO, UN Women and the OECD launched the **Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC)**. It brings together governments, employers, workers and their organizations, as well as civil society and academia, to make concrete and coordinated progress towards achieving equal pay for women and men everywhere.

To achieve **SDG target 8.7**, the ILO and partners launched **Alliance 8.7** – a global partnership that brings together governments, businesses, trade unions, UN agencies and civil society to accelerate action against forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour.

To advance **SDG target 8.8**, the ILO works through initiatives like the **Global Coalition for Social Justice** and the **Fair Recruitment Initiative**. These help countries strengthen labour rights, improve workplace safety, and protect migrant and informal workers around the world.

The ILO also monitors progress through tools like **ILOSTAT**, which includes data on legal and practical compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining rights.



Learn more:
ILO, “Sustainable Development Goal #8: Decent Work and Economic Growth”.



“Measuring progress on labour rights”, *ILOSTAT Blog* (blog), 30 April 2025.





2

Freedom of association and collective bargaining

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Freedom of association (including protection against anti-union discrimination and protection against interference)
- ▶ Collective bargaining
- ▶ ILO Conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining
- ▶ Social dialogue
- ▶ Trade union
- ▶ Shop steward or union representative
- ▶ Facilities for workers' representatives
- ▶ Examination of grievances
- ▶ Types of union
- ▶ Employer and business membership organizations (EBMOs)
- ▶ Industrial relations
- ▶ Bargaining in good faith
- ▶ Levels of collective bargaining
- ▶ Bargaining power/strength
- ▶ Collective agreement
- ▶ Extension of collective bargaining agreements
- ▶ Recognition procedures
- ▶ Workplace cooperation

► Freedom of association



Can workers and employers freely form and join organizations of their own choosing?

Yes. Workers and employers both have the right to form and join organizations of their own choosing. They are free to do so without interference, either from the government or from one another. Workers should also enjoy protection against anti-union discrimination, and against the establishment of organizations under the domination of employers or employers' organizations (often referred to as "employer-controlled" or "yellow" unions). These issues are addressed in greater detail below.

This is called freedom of association. Once established, organizations of workers and employers – through their members – have the right to independently draw up their constitutions and rules, formulate and execute their programmes, affiliate with higher-level organizations, and develop training and education programmes.

The existence of workers' and employers' organizations leads to stronger, more balanced and fairer labour regulation, whether at the workplace, sectoral, national or international levels. Freedom of association ensures that the rights and interests of workers and employers are reflected in labour market policies.



Did you know?

Freedom of association **benefits everyone**.

- For **workers**, it ensures an organized, representative voice at work, helping to address concerns through dialogue rather than conflict.
- For **employers**, it promotes stability and trust, reducing disputes and improving productivity.

- For **governments**, it supports social cohesion, the rule of law, and compliance with international commitments – laying the foundation for sustainable development.

Learn more:
ILO, “Freedom of Association”.



Protection against anti-union discrimination

For freedom of association to truly exist, workers must enjoy effective protection against acts of anti-union discrimination. Such acts of discrimination fall along three main categories:

- In **hiring**, by conditioning employment on a worker not being a member of, or relinquishing membership in, a union or refusing to hire workers with a history of union activity (commonly known as “blacklisting”).
- Retaliating against or disadvantaging a worker **during employment** because of their union membership or activity.

- **Dismissing or not renewing a worker’s employment contract** because of their union membership or activity.

These protections are enshrined in a number of international labour standards.¹

The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association has underlined the critical nature of this right, stating that “[a]nti-union discrimination is one of the most serious violations of freedom of association, as it may jeopardize the very existence of trade unions” (ILO CFA Digest, para. 1072).

¹ The Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), the Workers’ Representatives Convention, 1971 (No. 135), the Workers’ Representative Recommendation, 1971 (No. 143), the Labour Relations (Public Service) Convention, 1978 (No. 151), and the Termination of Employment Convention, 1982 (No. 158).

If workers face pressure, retaliation, transfer, demotion or firing for forming, joining or participating in a union, they cannot be considered to be freely exercising those rights.

Public authorities should “*ensure an adequate and efficient system of protection against acts of anti-union discrimination, which should include sufficiently dissuasive sanctions and prompt means of redress*” (CFA Digest, para. 1165).

Learn more:

ILO, *Protection against Acts of Anti-union Discrimination: Evidence from the Updated IRLex Database*, October 2022.



Protection against interference

Workers and employers have the right to form and join organizations of their own choosing and their organizations must be able to operate free from interference. This includes interference from public authorities, and from each other. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association has requested governments to “*ensure that employers did not express opinions which would intimidate workers in the exercise of their organizational rights*”.

Particular care must be taken to ensure that employers do not take any action to bring workers’ organizations under their domination or control. Management-controlled or “yellow” unions represent a particular risk of undermining the legitimate, independent representation of workers, including through collective bargaining.

As with acts of anti-union discrimination, such protections should include legal provisions prohibiting acts of interference, as well as efficient and effective mechanisms for remedy, including sufficiently dissuasive sanctions.

Learn more:

ILO, *Protection against Acts of Interference for Employers’ and Workers’ Organizations: Evidence from the Updated IRLex Database*, February 2023.



► Collective bargaining



Why is it important to effectively recognize the right to collective bargaining?

As one key ILO publication (ILO, *Constitutional Provisions Concerning Social and Economic Policy*, 1944) which led to the adoption of the Philadelphia Declaration notes, *“The right to organize democratically without interference by employers and to bargain collectively through representatives of his own choosing are essentials without which, in an industrialized society, the worker is at an impossible disadvantage and the orderly development of satisfactory industrial relations unattainable.”*

Therefore, the right of workers to join together in organizations of their choosing and bargain collectively is the best way to settle issues while avoiding conflict and confrontation. Building on these foundations, ILO Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98) protects workers and unions, promotes collective bargaining, ensures free unions and prevents anti-union discrimination.

Collective bargaining is a process through which representatives of employers and workers negotiate to regulate terms of employment and working conditions (such as remuneration, benefits, rest periods, leave and holidays), relations between

workers and employers, or relations between their organizations.

Dialogue between the freely chosen representatives of workers and employers helps both groups understand each other's problems and find ways to resolve them. This builds trust on both sides – benefiting businesses, workers and society as a whole.





Did you know?

Collective bargaining only works if it is conducted freely and in good faith by everyone involved.

Public authorities have a responsibility to establish – preferably in consultation with the most representative unions and employers’ organizations – a legal, regulatory and institutional framework that enables the full development of machinery and processes for collective bargaining.

This includes voluntary conciliation and arbitration systems to help resolve conflicts when negotiations fail. This means that both parties:

**Voluntarily agree
to engage in
bargaining**

**Make good faith
efforts to reach an
agreement**

**Avoid unjustified
delays**

**Engage in legal
procedures to
resolve conflicts if
negotiations fail**

Learn more:

ILO, *Collective Bargaining: A Policy Guide*, 2015.



ILO, “InfoStories: Can Collective Bargaining Create a Fairer Economy?”, December 2015.



Bernard Gernigon, Alberto Otero and Horacio Guido, “ILO Principles Concerning Collective Bargaining”, *International Labour Review* 139, No. 1 (2000): 33–55.



ILO, “ILO Helpdesk: Business and Collective Bargaining”.



► ILO Conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining



What international labour standards protect freedom of association and bargaining?

Two fundamental ILO Conventions protect people's right to freedom of association and collective bargaining:

- Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
- Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)

These Conventions ensure that workers and employers can form and join organizations to negotiate with each other, and more generally to promote their members' interests.

Protecting these fundamental rights of association and bargaining – often considered “enabling rights” – helps achieve all the other “fundamental principles and rights at work” as well.



Did you know?

5

ASEAN countries

have ratified the **Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87)** – Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Timor-Leste

7

ASEAN countries

have ratified the **Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)** – Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam

"As of November 2025"



Did you know?

By ratifying these fundamental Conventions, ASEAN countries can progressively improve domestic labour legislation in line with their principles, and strengthen workers' rights and industrial relations. This harnesses energy to focus on solutions that benefit businesses, workers and society at large.

Given the particular importance of the principles and rights enshrined in these Conventions, workers and their organizations, as well as employers' organizations who believe their freedom of association rights have been violated may bring a complaint to the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association. They can do so whether or not their country has ratified these fundamental Conventions.

These two fundamental Conventions are complemented by a number of different Conventions and Recommendations aimed at supporting governments and social partners to ensure effective systems of industrial relations. These include:

- ▶ **Collective Agreements Recommendation, 1951 (No. 91);**
- ▶ **Voluntary Conciliation and Arbitration Recommendation, 1951 (No. 92);**

- ▶ **Co-operation at the Level of the Undertaking Recommendation, 1952 (No. 94);**
- ▶ **Communications within the Undertaking Recommendation, 1967 (No. 129);**
- ▶ **Examination of Grievances Recommendation, 1967 (No. 130);**
- ▶ **Workers' Representatives Convention (No. 135) and Recommendation, 1971 (No. 143); and**
- ▶ **Collective Bargaining Convention (No. 154) and Recommendation, 1981 (No. 163).**

Learn more:

ILO, "Relevant ILO Instruments on Collective Bargaining and Labour Relations".



ILO, *Rules of the Game: An Introduction to the Standards-related work of the International Labour Organization*, 2019, pp. 114–116.



► Social dialogue

Why should workers, employers and governments talk to each other?

Social dialogue includes collective bargaining, as well as other forms of consultation, negotiation and the exchange of information between or among representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest related to economic and social policy. This process of consulting, negotiating and exchanging information ensures fair decision-making. It contributes to economic growth and stable industrial relations that benefit workers, employers and society as a whole.



There is no single way to do it, but social dialogue must respect workers' rights, including the freedom to form and join organizations of their choosing, for these organizations to operate freely and independently, including through negotiating fair conditions.



Consider this example

In one country, a new labour law is proposed that will change people's working hours. Instead of making a quick decision that might overlook the needs of those affected, the Government invites employers' and workers' representatives to discuss the law. After several meetings, they agree on fair working hours that balance the needs of businesses and the well-being of workers. This is how social dialogue leads to better policies.



Learn more:

ILO, "[Social Dialogue and Tripartism](#)".



ILO, [Social Dialogue Report 2022](#), 2022.



ILO, [Social Dialogue Report 2024](#), 2024.



► Trade union



Photo credit: © ILO/ILO Jakarta

What organizations represent workers?

A trade union is an organization of workers that represents and protects the rights and interests of its members.

A union negotiates to improve working conditions, terms and conditions of employment, remuneration, wages and benefits. It also supports workers in accessing remedies when they believe their rights have been violated. This occurs through both the negotiation of and representation of workers as they access effective grievance procedures.

Countries that recognize trade unions enjoy greater workplace stability and economic growth.



Did you know?

Trade unions operate in diverse sectors – from construction and manufacturing to public service, domestic work, and even arts and culture. As the only tripartite UN agency, since 1919 the ILO has brought together governments, employers and workers of 187 Member States to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes that promote decent work for all women and men. As a main unit of workers' organizations, trade unions play a vital role at the enterprise level in this process.

Within the ILO, the Bureau for Workers Activities (ACTRAV) is the main link between the International Labour Office and its constituents (workers' organizations) in addressing challenges in the world of work and promoting labour standards.

Learn more:
ILO, "Bureau for Workers'
Activities (ACTRAV)".



► Shop steward or union representative

Why do workers need a representative?

A shop steward or union representative is a worker elected to represent members of trade unions in consultations or negotiations on various workplace issues that affect workers' welfare and rights. They are the link between workers and managers. They help to resolve conflicts constructively, benefiting both employees and employers.

Learn more:

David Macdonald and
Caroline Vandenaabee,
*Glossary of Industrial Relations
and Related Terms* (ILO, 1996).



Consider this example

Sudden schedule changes at a hotel leave workers rushed off their feet, with no time to rest.



Their elected shop steward, Amina, collects their concerns and speaks to the management. After a few meetings, the hotel agrees to set fair scheduling rules.

Through Amina, workers' concerns are heard, and more importantly they are effectively addressed, ensuring that the hotel avoids losing valuable staff members.



► Facilities for workers' representatives



Photo credit: © ILO/G. Carreon

What kind of support can workers' representatives receive?

To fully respect the right to collective bargaining, enterprises should provide facilities to workers' representatives as may be necessary to assist the development of effective collective agreements.

This may include giving workers' representatives necessary time off work, without loss of pay or social and fringe benefits, for carrying out their representative functions or for attending trade union meetings, training courses and congresses. For details, see the [Workers' Representatives Recommendation, 1971 \(No. 143\)](#).



Did you know?

Meaningful union engagement requires more than just an invitation to consult. Without adequate facilities – such as time off, access to information, training and tools – workers' representatives cannot effectively carry out their roles or influence workplaces. When such support is in place, it can help improve workplace cooperation and support broader decent work outcomes.

Through training manuals and technical support, the ILO helps strengthen trade unions' capacity to engage in social dialogue and advocate for workers' rights.

Learn more:

ILO, "[R143 - Workers' Representatives Recommendation, 1971 \(No. 143\)](#)", NORMLEX database.



Rodalind Harvey and Raghwan, [Positive Action: Reducing Poverty through Social Dialogue. A Training Manual for Trade Unions](#) (ILO, 2005).



► Examination of grievances

What happens when a worker has a complaint?



We say that workers have a “grievance” when they believe that some aspect of their rights or entitlements under law, contract or workplace rules is not being respected by their employer.

Grievances typically concern violations of existing obligations, such as non-payment of wages, denial of rest periods, discrimination or harassment.

Grievances may be individual or collective.

The ILO’s Examination of Grievances Recommendation, 1967 (No. 130), among others, affirms that every worker should have the right to submit a grievance without suffering any form of prejudice, and that all grievances should be examined through an effective procedure accessible to all workers.

Grievance handling is not about negotiating new rights – instead, it is about ensuring that existing rights are respected and enforced. When properly designed and implemented, grievance mechanisms help prevent disputes, reduce workplace tensions, and promote trust between employers and workers.



Did you know?

The ILO’s approach to grievance handling emphasizes dialogue between workers and employers within the enterprise, balancing voluntary solutions and genuine efforts to ensure a fair outcome given the imbalance of power between an individual worker and their employer.

Learn more:
ILO, “[Grievance Handling](#)”,
Factsheet No. 5, 2018.





Did you know?

Effective grievance procedures should:

Be simple, timely and clearly communicated

Allow workers to participate and be represented (e.g. by a trade union)

Protect workers from any direct or indirect penalty

Enable escalation to senior management

Provide access to external dispute resolution (e.g. arbitration, conciliation, courts) if the grievance is not resolved internally

These procedures are essential for stable industrial relations and contribute to a climate of mutual confidence in the workplace.



► Types of unions

Can workers with different roles unite in one union?

Yes. An extension of the principle that workers are free to form, join or dissolve organizations of their own choosing without previous authorization, subject only to the rules of the organization itself, is the principle that these organizations must be free to make their own decisions – democratically, through the will of their members – about the type of organization it will be, and the groups of workers it will represent. For example, an industrial union represents all the workers in the same industry, no matter what jobs they perform. This allows both skilled and unskilled workers to negotiate together for better conditions.

Unions may choose to organize themselves within particular industries or occupations. General workers' unions do not limit themselves to a specific sector, instead they represent workers from a variety of different professions and industries.

Many lower-level (enterprise and regional) unions choose to affiliate to higher level organizations (union federations or confederations). National trade union centres are peak-level national organizations that bring together unions from a variety of sectors. At the international level, global union federations represent unions in particular sectors, while the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) represents national trade union centres from around the world.



Did you know?

Industry unions cover everyone in the same industry. This can help set common rules for pay and working conditions across the whole sector, not just one workplace.

Industry unions are common in sectors like transport, construction, manufacturing and mining where many different kinds of jobs are all part of the same industry.

By contrast, craft unions organize workers based on their occupation or trade (like electricians or teachers), and enterprise unions organize workers within a single company.

Learn more:

David Macdonald and
Caroline Vandenabeele,
*Glossary of Industrial Relations
and Related Terms* (ILO, 1996).



► Employer and business membership organizations (EBMOs)



Do businesses need organizations like workers do?

Yes. Employer and business membership organizations (EBMOs) support a key asset in any society: its enterprises. Sustainable enterprises are at the heart of any strategy to create employment and improve living standards.

EBMOs help to foster the conditions for enterprise success by influencing the environment in which they do business and by providing services that improve their individual performance.

Photo credit: © ILO/Giorgio Taraschi



Did you know?

As one of the three constituents in the ILO's unique tripartite structure – alongside governments and workers – employers play a key role in shaping international labour standards and policies.

The ILO Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP) assists EBMOs in building strong, independent and representative organizations.

Learn more:
ILO, “Bureau for Employers' Activities”.



► Industrial relations

What are industrial relations?

Industrial relations mean the relationship between workers and employers, both individually and as groups.

These cover everything from wages to working hours, employment issues, safety, benefits and negotiations between unions and employers at the enterprise level, and labour legislation and welfare at the national level. Governments play a role by setting fair labour rules.



Did you know?

The ILO compiles detailed industrial relations (IR) statistics through its [IR Data system](#) which includes indicators such as trade union density and collective bargaining coverage.

Learn more:

ILO, *Guidebook on How and Why to Collect and Use Data on Industrial Relations*, 2020.



► Bargaining in good faith

What does bargaining “in good faith” mean?

It means employers, workers and their organizations genuinely trying to reach a fair agreement. It requires open communication, sharing information and making an honest effort to find common ground – not just going through the motions. This leads to stable workplace relationships and peaceful industrial relations.

Bargaining in good faith is not always fast and does not always mean agreeing – but it does mean showing up, listening, responding sincerely and genuinely seeking a solution. According to ILO principles, it also involves holding timely meetings, sharing relevant information and refraining from actions that undermine negotiations.



Consider this example

In one well-known case, a delivery company and its workers disagreed about job security and work hours, leading to a strike. But instead of giving up, both sides came back to talk.



They listened to each other, shared ideas, and worked hard to find common ground. In the end, they reached a fair deal that supported workers and kept the business going.

Learn more:

ILO, “[Compilation of Decisions of the Committee on Freedom of Association](#)”, NORMLEX database



► Levels of collective bargaining

Do all negotiations happen at the same level?

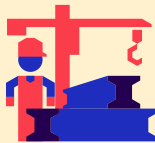
Collective bargaining can happen at different levels – within a company, across an industry, nationwide or even internationally. The level depends on workers' and employers' needs, their bargaining power, and the country's labour system. Different levels of bargaining ensure fairness across workplaces and industries.

According to the ILO's Collective Bargaining Recommendation, 1981 (No. 163), "*Measures adapted to national conditions should be taken, if necessary, so that collective bargaining is possible at any level whatsoever, including that of the establishment, the undertaking, the branch of activity, the industry, or the regional or national levels.*"



Consider this example

Workers at a steel plant want to negotiate a pay rise when they realize similar discussions are happening at other steel companies.



Instead of bargaining separately, unions and employers agree to negotiate at the industry level. This leads to a fair wage agreement across all major steel companies, ensuring stability for workers and businesses.

According to the ILO Social Dialogue Report 2022, collective bargaining helped cushion the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on inequality and strengthened the resilience

of labour markets. The report also finds that multi-employer bargaining systems, such as those at the sectoral or national level, are associated with much broader collective agreement coverage – averaging 71.7 per cent, compared to an average of 15.8 per cent under single-employer bargaining at the enterprise level.

Learn more:

ILO, "[R163 - Collective Bargaining Recommendation, 1981 \(No. 163\)](#)", NORMLEX database.



ILO, [Social Dialogue Report 2022: Collective Bargaining for an Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery](#), 2022.



► Bargaining power/strength

Is bargaining power just about who speaks loudest?

Bargaining power means how much influence workers or employers have in negotiations.

It depends on factors like union strength, corporate competitiveness and payability, economic conditions, public support and government policies.

A balance in bargaining power makes it more likely to reach fair agreements.

Learn more:

ILO, *Industrial Relations Global Toolkit*, 2022.



Did you know?

Bargaining power/strength depends not only on numbers or resources, but also on the capacity to negotiate effectively.

The ILO supports stronger bargaining power through standards and legal frameworks, as well as by providing practical training and tools. Resources such as the ILO Industrial Relations Global Toolkit (2022) offer hands-on guidance to strengthen negotiation and collective bargaining skills for workers' and employers' organizations alike. These toolkits include modules on collective bargaining, grievance handling, workplace cooperation and negotiation strategies, to help social partners engage more effectively at the bargaining table.

► Collective agreement



Photo credit: © ILO

What is a collective agreement?

According to the ILO's Collective Agreements Recommendation, 1951 (No. 91), a collective agreement is a written deal on working conditions and employment terms made between employers (or their organizations) and workers' representatives (who are freely chosen and not controlled by employers). Once signed, it is legally binding for both sides.

A collective agreement can apply to all workers in the group or workplace covered, even if they are not union members – unless the agreement states otherwise. Any individual work contract that offers less than what is in the agreement is automatically overridden by the collective agreement's more favourable terms. A contract that gives even better conditions to workers is acceptable.



Did you know?

In some countries, collective agreements can be extended by law to all employers and workers in a sector or region. These agreements should be registered, shared with workers and followed in good faith. If disagreements arise over how an agreement is interpreted, these should be resolved through proper settlement procedures. Unions and employers' organizations are expected to monitor the agreement's implementation.

In many cases, the agreement remains binding for a minimum period unless revised by mutual consent.

Learn more:

ILO, "R091 - Collective Agreements Recommendation, 1951 (No. 91)", NORMLEX database.



► Extension of collective bargaining agreements

Can a work agreement apply to people who did not sign it?

Yes, collective agreements can be extended by law to cover workplaces that were not part of the original deal.



Where appropriate and based on existing collective bargaining practices, countries may use national laws or regulations to extend all or certain parts of a collective

agreement to all employers and workers in the same sector or region, even if they were not parties to the original agreement. This is often used in sectors with many small or informal employers, such as agriculture, construction or hospitality.

The aim is to ensure fair and common working conditions, prevent unfair competition and promote inclusive labour protection.



Consider this example

The extension of collective bargaining agreements can be subject to the following conditions:

- The agreement already covers a **sufficiently representative** number of employers and workers, as judged by the competent authority.
- The **request for extension** is made by one or more **organizations of workers or employers** that signed the agreement.

- Before the agreement is extended, the employers and workers who will be affected must be given a chance to **submit their observations**.

Learn more:

ILO, *Extension of Collective Agreements: Evidence from the Updated IRLex Database*, June 2022.



► Recognition procedures

Do employers have to recognize unions?

For collective bargaining to happen, both workers and employers must recognize each other as legitimate negotiation partners. In some countries, recognition happens voluntarily. In others, laws require employers to recognize unions that meet certain conditions.

Where a union meets the required conditions and is formally recognized, the employer has a duty to bargain in good faith – engaging sincerely, listening actively and negotiating seriously.



However, while bargaining in good faith is mandatory, there is no legal obligation to reach a collective agreement.

Therefore, there are other legal procedures to resolve a deadlock in negotiations – conciliation and arbitration, in which the competent authority mediates the negotiation process of both parties.



Consider this example

When warehouse workers form a union, their employer refuses to negotiate, arguing that the union does not represent enough employees. After a legal confirms that the union is representative of workers, the company is required to recognize it and start negotiations.



Learn more:
ILO, *Collective Bargaining: A Policy Guide*, 2015.



► Workplace cooperation

What are the benefits of workplace cooperation?

Workplace cooperation can mean:

- workers' participation or involvement in decision-making;
- cooperation between workers and management; and
- participatory or cooperative practices in an enterprise.

Workplace cooperation can take many forms, such as sharing information, direct or indirect consultation, and financial participation.

Collective bargaining is also a form of, and a vehicle for, workplace cooperation. In today's competitive markets, more companies are involving both workers and managers to boost productivity and share its profits. Workplace cooperation – through open communication and consultation – can improve innovation, flexibility and productivity. It also helps improve job satisfaction, working conditions and wages, as well as creating a more stable work environment while reducing the incidence of workplace disputes.



Did you know?

Workplace cooperation is essentially a bipartite process between management and workers (in unionized enterprises, union representatives should be involved).

In this process, the role of the third party (the government) is confined to a promotional and facilitative one. Employers' and workers' organizations outside the enterprise have an important role in promoting the concept of workplace cooperation among their members and providing advice, education and training.

In some countries, laws require the establishment of workplace cooperation committees, joint consultative committees or works councils, especially in larger companies. These bodies do not replace trade unions nor are these required in unionized enterprises.

Learn more:

ILO, *Workplace Cooperation: An Introductory Guide*, 2022.







3

Child labour

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Child labour
- ▶ ILO Conventions on child labour
- ▶ Minimum working age
- ▶ Light work
- ▶ Worst forms of child labour
- ▶ Hazardous work as one of the worst forms of child labour
- ▶ Slavery and similar practices
- ▶ Use of children in armed conflict
- ▶ Illicit activities that are among the worst forms of child labour
- ▶ Commercial sexual exploitation of children
- ▶ Child labour in domestic work

► Child labour



Photo credit: © ILO/Gan-Ochir Gantulga

Is all work done by children considered child labour?

No, not all work by children is child labour. Child labour means work that:



is harmful to a child's health, safety, morals and development;



interferes with their schooling or involves excessively long hours; and/or



is performed by children who are below the minimum age for employment, as defined by national laws and international standards.

Child labour interferes with a child's right to education, rest and play.

Ending child labour is one of the fundamental principle and rights at work, and is at the heart of the ILO's mission. It is also a key aim under SDG target 8.7, which calls for the eradication of child labour in all its forms by 2025.

In South-East Asia, governments have reaffirmed their commitment to this goal through [the ASEAN Roadmap for the Prevention of Child Labour Including the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2035](#), as well as the [ASEAN Declaration on the Prevention of Child Labour, Including the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#). These regional frameworks support coordinated action to end child labour and uphold children's rights.



Did you know?

Child labour remains a problem across the world. The Global Estimates on Child Labour from 2024 reveal that:

138 million

children are engaged in child labour worldwide
(63 million girls and 97 million boys)

54 million

of these children perform hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and development



Photo credit: © ILO

Learn more:

ILO, "Child Labour".



ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2024, Trends and the Road Forward*, 2024.



► ILO Conventions on child labour



Photo credit: © ILO/Asrian Mirza

What international rules exist on child labour?

Two ILO Conventions protect children from child labour:

- Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) which sets the minimum age at which children can work legally.
- Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) which prohibits the worst forms of child labour.

These are both **fundamental ILO Conventions**. This means that all ILO Member States have an obligation to respect, promote and realize the abolition of child labour even if they have not ratified these Conventions.



Did you know?

All 187 ILO Member States have ratified **the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182)**, making it the first ILO Convention to be universally ratified. It is also the most rapidly ratified Convention in the ILO's history, with most countries ratifying it within the first three years of its adoption in 1999.

Learn more:

ILO, "ILO Conventions on Child Labour".



The Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) has also been widely ratified worldwide.

Every country in Southeast Asia has ratified both Conventions. This means all children in the region have legal protection from the worst forms of child labour and from starting to work too young.

But this does not mean that the problem has been solved. For that to happen, the Conventions need to be fully implemented, everywhere.

► Minimum working age

When is someone legally allowed to start working?

According to ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), the general **minimum age for admission to employment** or work is 15 years old. However, countries whose economy and educational systems are insufficiently developed may temporarily set the minimum age at 14 years old, as long as they take measures to gradually raise this legal minimum age.

Children may be allowed to do **“light work”** if they are 13–15 years old (or 12–14 years old in countries where the minimum age for work is 14) when the work is safe and school-friendly.

The minimum age for **“hazardous work”** is 18 years old. Some countries may allow hazardous work from the age of 16 but only under strict conditions: following formal consultation with employers’ and workers’ organizations, and only if the young persons’ health, safety and morals are fully protected and they receive adequate specific instruction or vocational training in the relevant activity.

Governments may also allow children to work in artistic performances, but only under strict conditions and with individual permits.



Did you know?

Setting a minimum age for work is one of the most effective ways to make sure (ensure) children remain at school until the end of compulsory education.

The ILO’s Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) helps countries end child labour by requiring them to set a minimum age for work, and developing national policies to eliminate child labour.

The Convention does not apply to:

- work done by children in schools as part of their education or training; and
- work done by children who are at least 14 years old in enterprises, provided that this work is part of school-based vocational training, apprenticeships or orientation programmes that are approved and supervised by a competent authority.

In both cases, however, hazardous work is not allowed.

Learn more:

ILO, *Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)*.

ILO, *ILO Convention No. 138 at a Glance*, 2018.



► Light work



Photo credit: © ILO/Remar Pablo

What limited forms of work may be allowed for younger children?

Light work is work that:

- does not harm a child's health or development; and
- does not interfere with their schooling, vocational orientation or training.

If a country's general minimum age for work is 15 years old, then 13–14-year-olds can do light work. If the minimum working age is 14 years old, 12–13-year-olds can do light work. In some cases, national laws may allow 15-year-olds who have not finished compulsory school to do light work, as long as it meets these conditions.

The ILO recommends that each country define and regulate light work in a national "light work list" based on their specific social and economic situation, in consultation with employers and workers.



Consider this example

Most days after school, 13-year-old Emma helps out at her parents' café for an hour or two. Her tasks are simple and safe – she wipes tables and arranges pastries in the display case. The work is not harmful – she does not handle hot stoves, heavy trays or work late-night shifts. It does not interfere with school – she has plenty of time for homework, to rest and play.

This is light work, and it is perfectly legal because Emma does not miss school, work long hours or perform unsafe tasks.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Convention No. 138 at a Glance*, 2018.



► Worst forms of child labour

What are the worst forms of child labour?

The worst forms of child labour are:

Slavery and similar practices
(child trafficking, debt bondage, forced labour and child soldiers)

Exploiting children in sex work or pornography

Using children in illicit activities, like drug production or drug trafficking

Hazardous work that harms a child's health, safety or morals

These practices may have a serious impact on children's physical and psychological health and development that can affect their lives. Therefore, **these worst forms of child labour are strictly forbidden.**

Learn more:

ILO, "C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)", NORMLEX database.



ASEAN Secretariat, [ASEAN Roadmap for the Prevention of Child Labour Including the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2035](#), 2025.



Did you know?

The worst forms of child labour have no place in any society. All ILO Member States agree on this principle and have ratified the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

In ASEAN, this commitment is reinforced through the ASEAN Roadmap for the Prevention of Child Labour, including the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2035.

The Convention requires countries to take immediate and effective measures to prevent the worst forms of child labour. It also requires them to withdraw children from these practices, and provide children with rehabilitation and social integration, especially girls.

The Convention has helped to focus the international spotlight on urgently ending these practices, while working towards the long-term goal of ending child labour entirely.

► Hazardous work as one of the worst forms of child labour

What is "hazardous work" for children?

According to the ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to **harm the health, safety or morals of children** is considered hazardous work for children.

Hazardous work is **strictly prohibited for anyone under 18 years old**.



Learn more:

ILO, "What is Child Labour".



Did you know?

Hazardous work that **should be prohibited for children** includes:

Work that exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse

Working underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces

Working with dangerous machinery, equipment or tools

Handling or transporting heavy loads

Working in an unhealthy environment – like being exposed to dangerous substances or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels or vibrations that can damage children's health

Working for long hours, at night, or being confined to an employer's premises

► Slavery and similar practices

Does slavery still exist?

Yes. Slavery and similar practices are severe forms of exploitation in which people are treated like property and denied their rights.

Children trapped in slavery or slavery-like practices are considered to be engaged in one of the **worst forms of child labour**.

Such practices include the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.



Consider this example

A 12-year-old girl's parents send her to work for a wealthy family to pay off a debt. She works all day, is not allowed to go to school and is punished for mistakes.



A neighbour realizes the girl is trapped in debt bondage and reports the crime. Child protection services help free the girl and place her in a rehabilitation centre where she can learn and play like other children.

Learn more:

ILO, *Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends, 2012–2016*, 2017.



► Use of children in armed conflict

How are children used in armed conflicts?

There is a strong correlation between armed conflict and child labour. One of the most serious abuses is when children are taken or used by armies or armed groups.

Using children in armed conflict means anyone under 18 years old being used to fight, as well as to carry supplies, or perform other tasks in a conflict. It includes using children as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual exploitation.

Many of these children are threatened, abused or forced to harm others. Using children in armed conflict is one of the **worst forms of child labour**.

Learn more:

ILO, *Vulnerabilities to Child Labour*, 2022.



Did you know?

1 in 5 children

in the world (426 million children in total) live in a conflict zone in 2017

Over the past 30 years, the number of children at risk of being recruited and used in conflict has tripled – from 99 million in 1990 to 337 million in 2020.

81,500

incidents of child recruitment by state and non-state actors have been verified by the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism since 2006.

► Illicit activities that are one of the worst forms of child labour

What kinds of illicit activities count as one of the worst forms of child labour?

Child labour does not only happen in factories and or on farms.

Illicit activities classified as among the **worst forms of child labour** refer to the use, procuring or offering of a child for illegal activities, particularly for the production and trafficking of drugs, as defined in relevant international treaties.

Learn more:

ILO, *Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends, 2012–2016*, 2017.



Consider this example

In country X, children between 12 and 17 years old are involved in running drugs, helping to grow cannabis on offshore islands and selling it to tourists.



Many are pulled in by their families, others are ensnared for a bit of money or food. Once involved, they are trapped in dangerous criminal networks, facing violence, fear and deep emotional harm.

► Commercial sexual exploitation of children

What does the commercial sexual exploitation of children mean?

It means using, obtaining or offering a child for sexual purposes (like prostitution, producing pornography or pornographic performances) in exchange for money, gifts or other benefits – either for the child or for someone else. This is one of the **worst forms of child labour**.

Learn more:

ILO, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children “in a Nutshell”*, 2015.



Did you know?

Playing games online, 14-year-old Sam chats to another gamer. He tells Sam about an easy way to make money – take and share private photos. When he does, Sam is blackmailed. If he does not send more, the gamer will send the photos to Sam’s family and friends.



A teacher notices Sam’s distress and connects him with child protection services to report the abuse.

► Child labour in domestic work

Isn't helping at home normal for children?

Children doing household chores refers to them performing domestic and personal tasks within their own households. When children do chores in their own homes, this is an important part of family life and of growing up. But if their work is excessive, interferes with their education, or harms their health and development, this indicates child labour.

Child domestic work means children working in the homes of employers or third parties. It can be legal – for example, if the child is above the minimum working age and the tasks are safe and suitable, or if the child is within the age range allowed for light work and the tasks meet the required criteria for such work. However, it is **illegal when it becomes child labour in domestic work**. This occurs in cases such as:

- the child is too young to work;
- the child is in the age range for light work but the tasks do not meet the conditions for such work; or
- the child is above the minimum working age but the work is among the worst form of child labour, such as hazardous work or slavery-like situations.



Consider this example

13-year-old Lina works in another family's home, cleaning, cooking and taking care of two small children.



She works long hours, sleeps on the kitchen floor and is not allowed to go to school. Her employers say she is "part of the family," but Lina is isolated, overworked and underpaid.

Many societies consider domestic work by children acceptable, especially for girls. But this can tip into child labour in domestic work, as in Lina's case, which is harmful to children and unacceptable.

Learn more:
ILO, "[Child Labour and Domestic Work](#)".





4

Forced labour

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Forced labour
- ▶ ILO Conventions on forced labour
- ▶ Indicators of forced labour:
 - ▶ Abuse of vulnerability
 - ▶ Deception
 - ▶ Restriction of movement
 - ▶ Isolation
 - ▶ Physical and sexual violence
 - ▶ Intimidation and threats
 - ▶ Retention of identity documents
 - ▶ Withholding of wages
 - ▶ Debt bondage
 - ▶ Abusive working and living conditions
 - ▶ Excessive overtime

► Forced labour



Photo credit: © ILO/Joseph Fortin

What qualifies as forced labour?

Forced labour means **all work or service** exacted from any person under the **menace of any penalty**, and for which the person has **not offered themselves voluntarily**.

In essence, persons are in a forced labour situation if they enter work or service against their free choice, or cannot leave it without penalty or the threat of penalty. Penalties do not have to involve physical punishment or constraint; they can also take other forms, such as the loss of rights or privileges.

Forced labour is typically signalled by a combination of **the following indicators**, which highlight potential coercion and should prompt further inquiry:

Abuse of
vulnerability

Deception

Restriction of
movement

Isolation

Physical and sexual
violence

Intimidation and
threats

Retention of
identity
documents

Withholding
of wages

Debt bondage

Abusive working
and living
conditions

Excessive
overtime



Did you know?

Forced labour takes various forms and is generally grouped into 2 broad categories: **privately imposed** and **state-imposed**.

- **Privately imposed forced labour** refers to situations where individuals, groups or companies in the private economy force people to work under threat or coercion. This includes both forced labour exploitation in sectors like agriculture or construction, and forced commercial sexual exploitation, particularly of children.
- **State-imposed forced labour** involves work exacted by public authorities. It may be used for purposes such as political punishment, economic development or social control. While international law permits only very narrow exceptions – such as compulsory military service, genuine emergency relief work or minor communal services – state-imposed forced labour becomes a violation when it exceeds these narrow boundaries.

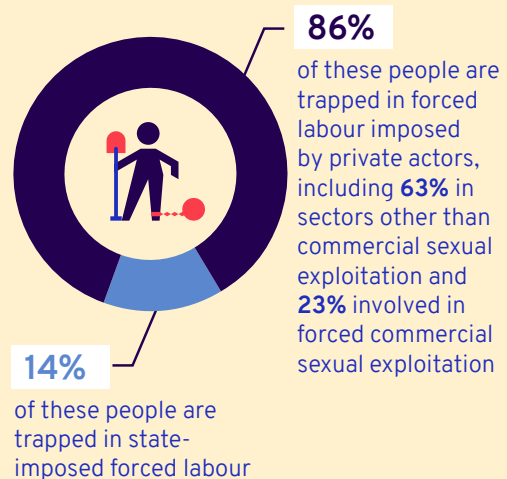
Learn more:

ILO, Walk Free and IOM,
*Global Estimates of Modern
Slavery: Forced Labour and
Forced Marriage*, 2022.



27.6 million

people are trapped in forced labour,
mostly in the private economy,
according to the 2021 **Global
Estimates of Modern Slavery**



Migrant workers are over three times more likely to be affected, especially when legal protections are weak or recruitment practices are unfair.

The number of people in forced labour has increased by 2.7 million since 2016, showing a global rise in cases.

► ILO Conventions on forced labour

What international rules exist on forced labour?

Two fundamental ILO Conventions aim to protect people from forced labour:

- Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29); and
- Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)



The Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (*the Forced Labour Protocol*) is another legally binding international instrument that

requires countries that have ratified the Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) to take effective measures to prevent forced labour, protect victims and ensure their access to justice.

Learn more:

ILO, “Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Trafficking in Persons”.



Did you know?

Ratifications of these ILO Conventions by ASEAN Member States demonstrates growing regional commitment to eliminating forced labour.

11 ASEAN countries 

have ratified the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) – Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam

7 ASEAN countries (as of 2025)

have ratified the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) – Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam

2 ASEAN countries (as of 2025)

have also ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 – Malaysia and Thailand



► Indicators of forced labour

1. Abuse of vulnerability

What makes people vulnerable to exploitation?

Anyone can be a victim of forced labour. But factors like discrimination, informality, a lack of decent work opportunities, poverty or being a migrant worker make people more vulnerable to exploitation.

Forced labour involves the abuse of vulnerabilities to trap people in exploitative work.



Consider this example

A young woman, poor and desperate for work, is hired as a domestic worker. Unable to speak the local language and knowing no one, she becomes fully dependent on her employer, who exploits her vulnerability situation to make her work long hours every day without pay and without any real possibility of leaving.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



2. Deception

How are people deceived into forced labour?

Victims of forced labour may be lied to about a job, salary or working conditions to trick them into accepting abusive work.

Victims only realize they have been deceived by false promises when they start working, and find themselves trapped. In such conditions, they have not given free and informed consent and may feel unable to leave.



Consider this example

Sam is promised a high-paying factory job in another country. But when he arrives, he discovers the job is a very low-paid position and does not reflect the job he was promised. When he tries to complain, he is threatened and is afraid to leave.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



3. Restriction of movement

**If you can't leave, is it still work
- or a prison?**

Stopping someone from leaving their job or moving around freely is a major indicator of forced labour.

Victims may be locked up or guarded to prevent them from escaping, at work or while being transported to and from work, or at their employer-provided accommodation.



Consider this example

A group of factory workers wants to quit. But the factory is watched by security guards who do not allow anyone to leave. After their shift, the workers are taken by employer-arranged transport to a dormitory where they are required to stay and cannot leave except to return to work the next morning. Their manager threatens to punish them if they try to leave.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



4. Isolation

**If no one knows you're there,
who can help you?**

Forced labour can involve keeping people away from their families, communities, or others who can help them. Victims may be placed in remote locations, denied phones or communication, or constantly monitored to prevent contact with others.

Isolating victims keeps them invisible and unable to reach help, making it easier to trap them in abusive work.



Consider this example

Migrant workers are kept working at a remote farm with no transport and no phones, which are taken "to avoid distractions." The conditions are terrible, but they have no way of contacting their families or seeking help.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



5. Physical and sexual violence

What kind of work makes you fear for your life?

Physical or sexual violence can be used to force workers to undertake tasks, to punish them, or to exert power or domination over them.

This traps victims in abusive working conditions that are often dangerous and degrading.



Consider this example

A young domestic worker is told that being slapped and hit is just “part of the job” – and that speaking up will only make things worse for her. Afraid of further violence, she feels unable to leave.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



6. Intimidation and threats

If you're too scared to say no, is working really a choice?

Forced labour can involve scaring workers with threats of punishment, arrest, deportation or other negative consequences.

Such intimidation tactics can prevent them from quitting, complaining or seeking help.



Consider this example

A migrant worker who had been trapped in forced labour recalled the threats he faced from his employers. *“They said that if I spoke up, I would be reported to the police and sent back home. So I worked harder, and stayed silent.”*

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



7. Retention of identity documents

Is it problematic if an employer keeps a worker's passport?

Yes. Keeping a worker's identity documents - such as a passport or ID card - can trap them in forced labour.

Without access to their documents, workers may be unable to leave their job, find other employment or seek help. Victims may feel fear of retaliation or immigration-related consequences if they try to leave.



Consider this example

"Don't worry," a hotel manager tells a worker. "We'll keep your passport safe - right here in this locked drawer." Without access to his personal documents, the worker becomes too scared to seek help from the authorities and is forced to continue working.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



8. Withholding of wages

If workers aren't paid on time, does this trap them in forced labour?

It can. Not paying workers on time, or at all, can keep them dependent on their employers and unable to leave.

This is a major indicator of forced labour, especially when workers rely on their income for basic needs or to repay debts..



Consider this example

Workers in a seafood processing factory are not paid for months. Desperate, they continue working in the hope that their employer will pay them.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



9. Debt bondage

Is debt bondage like a normal loan?

No. Victims of forced labour often start working to repay a debt, only to find that this is impossible.

Their work may be undervalued or they may be charged excessive fees for food, transport, accommodation or other costs, so they can never earn enough to pay off their debt and become trapped in debt bondage.



Consider this example

A farm worker borrows money from his employer. As he works to repay the debt, he is charged more than he earns for shelter and food. His debt grows instead of shrinking, leaving him with no chance of repayment and no way to leave.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



10. Abusive working and living conditions

What conditions are signs of forced labour?

Making workers work or live in dangerous, dirty or humiliating conditions can be a sign of forced labour. People may sometimes “voluntarily” accept bad conditions because of the lack of alternative jobs.

However, abusive conditions are an “alert” to the possibility that workers are prevented from leaving their job.



Consider this example

“They said the room came with free meals, but forgot to mention the rats, the broken fan, the crowded sleeping arrangements, and the strong chemical smell that never went away,” recalls a factory worker who had been trapped in forced labour.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.



11. Excessive overtime

When does overtime become a sign of forced labour?

When people are made to work too many hours, beyond the overtime limits prescribed by law, under some form of threat, pressure, or in order to earn at least the minimum wage, this is a clear indicator of forced labour.



Consider this example

A group of construction workers consistently work 16-hour days for months under the hot sun, with very few breaks. They are told they have no choice because the building must meet a deadline, and warned that they will not be paid for any of their work if they stop or leave.

Learn more:

ILO, *ILO Indicators of Forced Labour*, 2025 revised edition.





Photo credit: © ILO/Linh Pham

5

Equality and non-discrimination

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Discrimination in employment and occupation
- ▶ ILO Conventions on non-discrimination
- ▶ Indigenous and tribal peoples and discrimination
- ▶ Gender equality at work
- ▶ Gender pay gap and equal remuneration
- ▶ Violence and harassment at work
- ▶ Care economy
- ▶ Maternity protection
- ▶ Disability-inclusive social protection

► Discrimination in employment and occupation



Photo credit: © ILO/Byamba-ochir Byambasuren

What is discrimination at work?

Discrimination, as defined by the ILO's Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), refers to any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, among other characteristics.

Discrimination prevents workers from developing their potential and skills, and it deprives businesses of the full pool of talent available to them.

Non-discrimination is the opposite. It means treating workers equally, regardless of any characteristics other than their ability to do their jobs. Non-discrimination makes businesses stronger, boosts innovation, and promotes economic and sustainable growth.



Did you know?

Women are often stuck in lower-paying jobs, denied promotions, and earn less than men for the same work, similar work, or work of equal value. Minorities, migrant workers and persons with disabilities routinely face hiring biases and unfair treatment at work. These are all instances of discrimination in the world of work.

Learn more:
ILO, "[Discrimination in Employment and Occupation](#)", Leaflet No. 5, 2005.



► ILO Conventions on non-discrimination

What international standards deal with discrimination?

Two fundamental ILO Conventions promote non-discrimination:

- Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); and
- Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

These Conventions protect workers against discrimination and promote fair pay and equal treatment at work for everyone.

Other ILO Conventions that complement these two fundamental Conventions to advance non-discrimination and equality of treatment are:

- Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183);
- Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156);
- Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189); and
- Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).



Did you know? As of 2025:

10 ASEAN countries

have ratified the **Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)** – Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam – reflecting their commitment to ensuring that men and women are paid the same for work of equal value

7 ASEAN countries

have ratified the **Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)** – Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam – reflecting their commitment to ensuring equal treatment at work

Learn more:

ILO, "ILO Helpdesk: Business, Non-discrimination and Equality".



► Indigenous and tribal peoples and discrimination

Do indigenous people face discrimination in employment?

Yes. Minorities like indigenous and tribal peoples are often marginalized and face unfair treatment and a lack of opportunities. This prevents them from getting good jobs and accessing public services, including education, vocational training and skills development opportunities.



Photo credit: © ILO/Allan Barredo



Did you know?

Challenges that particularly affect indigenous and tribal peoples include:

Racial discrimination

Environmental destruction, pollution and the adverse impacts of climate change which impact their lands, livelihoods and ways of living

A lack of identity documents

Marginalization and poverty, making them vulnerable to exploitative practices such as forced labour, trafficking, hazardous work and the worst forms of child labour

Learn more:

ILO, "Discrimination in Employment and Occupation", Leaflet No. 5, 2005.

ILO, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989* (No. 169)



► Gender equality at work



Photo credit: © ILO

Shouldn't your opportunities be based on your abilities, not your gender?

Yes. Gender equality at work means equal opportunities to access employment, to be hired and promoted, and to be treated and paid equally. Advancing a transformative agenda on gender equality, equality of treatment and opportunity for all broadly includes promoting gender equality, non-discrimination and inclusion, reducing the gender pay gap, promoting decent work in the care economy, and ending violence and harassment in the world of work. Gender equality is a key part of non-discrimination. Ways to promote gender equality at work include:



Addressing the gender pay gap by ensuring equal remuneration for women and men for work of equal value



Ending violence and harassment at work, recognizing the specific challenges that women face



Supporting decent work in the care economy, including maternity protection and providing parental leave to all workers, both women and men



Did you know?

There has been progress on gender equality in employment, but [ILO research](#) shows this has been modest and uneven. Worldwide, women are discriminated against in job opportunities, wages, benefits, working conditions and decision-making. On average, employed women earn less than men, work fewer paid hours, undertake the majority of household care work, and are overrepresented in informal employment.

Women also perform more unpaid care work than men and are more likely to experience violence and harassment at work.

Tools like the ILO's [Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination Indicators](#) (GEND) database help monitor progress on gender equality and non-discrimination in employment.

In 2023, women held just

30%

of management roles worldwide

Learn more:
ILO, "[Gender Equality](#)".



Photo credit: © ILO/Adri Berger

► Gender pay gap and equal remuneration

Do women earn less than men for the same work, similar work or work of equal value?

Yes, on average. The gender pay gap is the difference between male and female earnings expressed as a percentage of male earnings. This gap means that women are paid less than men for the same or comparable work, and also for work that is found to have the same value.

Equal remuneration for work of equal value means that men and women should receive equal pay for jobs which require or entail different types of qualifications, skills and responsibilities, or are performed under different working conditions, but which are nevertheless assessed to be of equal value.

As of November 2025, the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) is one of the most ratified Conventions by countries around the world, including ten out of eleven ASEAN countries – Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam, as well as Brunei Darussalam, for which the Convention will enter into force on 10 October 2026.

These countries are committed to ensuring that men and women are paid the same for work of equal value.



Consider this example

On average globally, women are paid

20%

less than men – meaning that women earn 80 units for every 100 units men earn

The gender pay gap is an obvious and measurable form of discrimination at work. Women are concentrated in different jobs and sectors that are paid more poorly than men. A lifetime of income inequality makes women poorer than men – 829 million women live in poverty worldwide, compared to 522 million men (ILO 2011).



Learn more:

ILO, *Global Wage Report 2024-25: Is Wage Inequality Decreasing Globally?*, 2024.



► Violence and harassment at work

What do violence and harassment mean at work?

This means any behaviour at work that causes physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm.

Gender-based violence and harassment – which includes sexual harassment – targets people because of their gender. These behaviours may happen once, or they may be repeated many times.

Sexual harassment can be physical, verbal and even non-verbal. It includes:

Inappropriate/
sexually suggestive
remarks, jokes or
insults

Unwelcome sexual
invitations or
threats

Lascivious looks or
gestures associated
with sexuality

Unnecessary
physical contact
(touching, caresses,
pinching or assault)

The unwelcome display of sexually explicit
pictures and objects



Did you know?



Women are 1.6 times more likely than men to experience sexual violence and harassment at work, according to [ILO research](#). Young and migrant women are at even greater risk.

The ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is the first international treaty to recognize everyone's right to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

This includes gender-based violence and harassment. The Convention sets global standards for workplace safety and promotes zero tolerance for violence and harassment at work.

Learn more:

ILO, "[Addressing Violence and Harassment at Work](#)".



► Care economy



Why should we care about care work?

The care economy includes all paid and unpaid work that involves looking after others, both at home and in workplaces. It includes childcare, elder care, healthcare, and caring for persons with disabilities. Care work can be performed by family members, workers or through institutions.



Care work is essential to society. It ensures that everyone – from children to older adults – gets the support they need. But care workers are usually paid poorly and their important work is often not recognized or protected by law.

The ILO's Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) help bring visibility and protection to care workers. These Conventions call for fair working conditions, social protection, and policies that support workers to balance their paid jobs with their caregiving responsibilities.

Photo credit: © ILO/Mongkon Duangkhiw



Consider this example

Lina looks after three children, two grandparents and a full-time patient – but people still ask if she plans to get a “real job”. They do not recognize her care work, vital though it is, as an important form of work.

Learn more:
ILO, “[Care Economy](#)”.



► Maternity protection



Photo credit: © ILO/Mongkon Duangkiew

Why should we care about care work?

No. This is why maternity protection matters. It means pregnant women and new mothers get time off, financial support, and job security after childbirth.

Maternity protection provides income security for working mothers, and prevents harm to their health and the health of their children. It is vital to ensure that women and men have equal access to employment, to prevent discrimination, and to help workers raise families in conditions of security.



Did you know?

Discrimination related to pregnancy and maternity is widespread. It includes not hiring women at all, dismissing them when they are pregnant or nursing, refusing to let them return to their jobs after childbirth, blocking promotions, or denying pre- and post-natal benefits. Legal protections are being introduced around the world to protect working mothers, building on international labour standards, such as the ILO's Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). In addition to paid maternity leave, many countries now offer paid leave for miscarriage, stillbirth and other pregnancy-related health conditions.

Paternity leave is also expanding. But challenges remain. For example, part-time workers and those in informal or non-standard employment often struggle to access these benefits.

The ILO [Global Care Policy Portal](#) is a knowledge hub to advance the ILO's transformative agenda for gender equality and non-discrimination, where you can find data and resources on care leave policies and services.

Learn more:

ILO, *Maternity, Paternity at Work: Baby Steps towards Achieving Big Results*, 2015.



► Disability-inclusive social protection



Photo credit: © ILO/Nguyen A.

How can we support equal opportunities for persons with disabilities?

Persons with disabilities are half as likely to be employed as persons without disabilities, partly because of limited access to education, training and suitable jobs. In many countries, disability benefits are linked to not working, which can discourage persons with disabilities from seeking jobs. The lack of accessible workplaces is another major disincentive.

To truly support inclusion, social protection schemes should offer incentives for the employment of persons with disabilities, and cover any extra costs linked to their work. Disability-inclusive social protection helps persons with disabilities enter and stay in the workforce, benefitting both individuals and society as a whole.



Beyond social protection, equality in the world of work also requires equal access to employment opportunities, reasonable accommodation and decent working conditions, lifelong learning and skills development, and protection from discrimination and harassment. A holistic disability-inclusive approach combines comprehensive social protection with equal treatment and opportunities throughout the world of work.



Consider this example

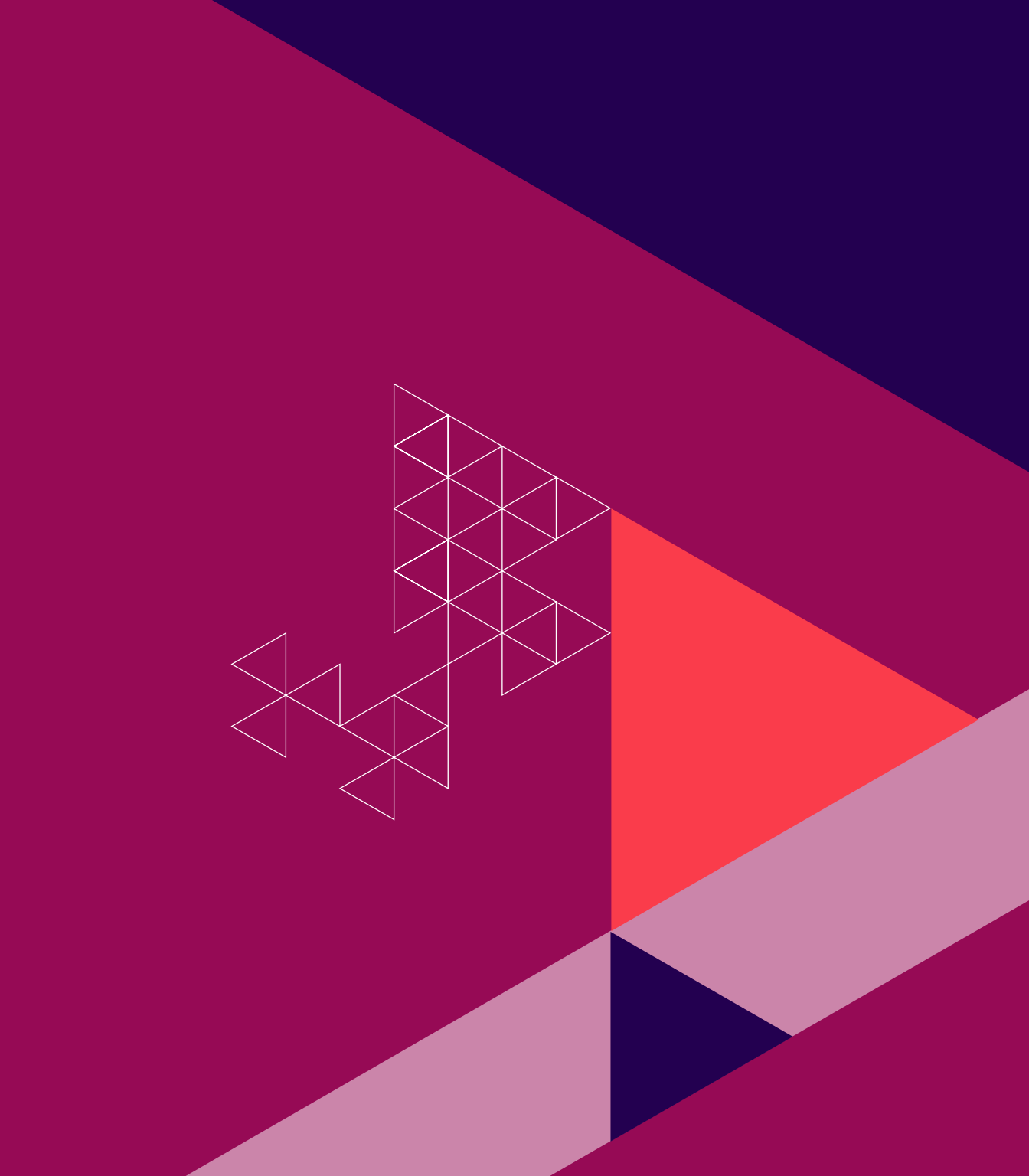
A national bank hires seven workers who are deaf with the support of the ILO and the national employers' federation. Managers have their doubts, but after sign language training and workplace adjustments, the workers excel and accomplish the same quality of work as their counterparts. Because their employer makes adjustments that meet their needs, the deaf workers have a lower turnover rate than other employees.



This decreases the company's hiring costs while securing them workers who work just as effective as their colleagues. Their example shows that disability-inclusive employment isn't just fair – it's smart business.

Learn more:
ILO, "Disability-inclusive
Social Protection".







6

Occupational safety and health

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Occupational safety and health
- ▶ ILO Conventions on occupational safety and health
- ▶ Hazard and risk
- ▶ Risk assessment
- ▶ Risk control measures
- ▶ Occupational accidents
- ▶ Occupational diseases
- ▶ OSH management systems
- ▶ Labour Inspection

► Occupational safety and health (OSH)



Photo credit: © ILO/Fauzan Azhima

What does occupational safety and health mean?

Occupational safety and health is the discipline that deals with the prevention of work-related injuries and diseases, and the protection and promotion of workers' safety and health. A safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental principle and right at work.

All ILO Member States have an obligation to respect, promote and realize the right to a safe and healthy working environment. This requires the continuous improvement of safety and health at work through the development of a national OSH system.



Did you know?

2.93 million

workers die from work-related factors every year (ILO 2023)

2.41 million

billion workers are exposed to excessive heat, threatening their health and productivity (ILO 2024)

395 million

million workers suffer non-fatal injuries every year (ILO 2023)

\$361 billion

would be saved globally every year by implementing better safety and health measures at work (ILO 2024)

Learn more:

ILO, "Safety and Health at Work".



► ILO Conventions on occupational safety and health

Are there international rules on workplace safety and health?

There are two fundamental ILO Conventions specifically on occupational safety and health:

- Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155); and
- Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187).

Nearly half of all ILO instruments deal directly or indirectly with occupational safety and health issues (more than 40 standards and over 40 Codes of Practice).

Learn more:

ILO, *The ILO Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health and its Plan of Action (2024–2030)*, 2023.



Did you know?

The ILO encourages all Member States to ratify and implement both fundamental OSH Conventions to ensure safe and healthy working environments for all.

In November 2023, the ILO's Governing Body adopted a new [Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health](#), which aims to guide the ILO in supporting its constituents to promote, respect and progressively realize the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment.

5

ASEAN countries

► As of 2025

have ratified the **ILO's Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) as of 2025** – Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam

8

ASEAN countries

have ratified the **Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187)** – Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam

► Hazard and risk

Do women earn less than men for the same work, similar work or work of equal value?

Yes, by identifying hazards.

A “**hazard**” is anything with the potential to cause injury or damage to a person’s health.

A “**risk**” is a combination of the likelihood (high or low probability) that a hazard will actually result in injury or illness, together with an indication of how serious the harm could be.

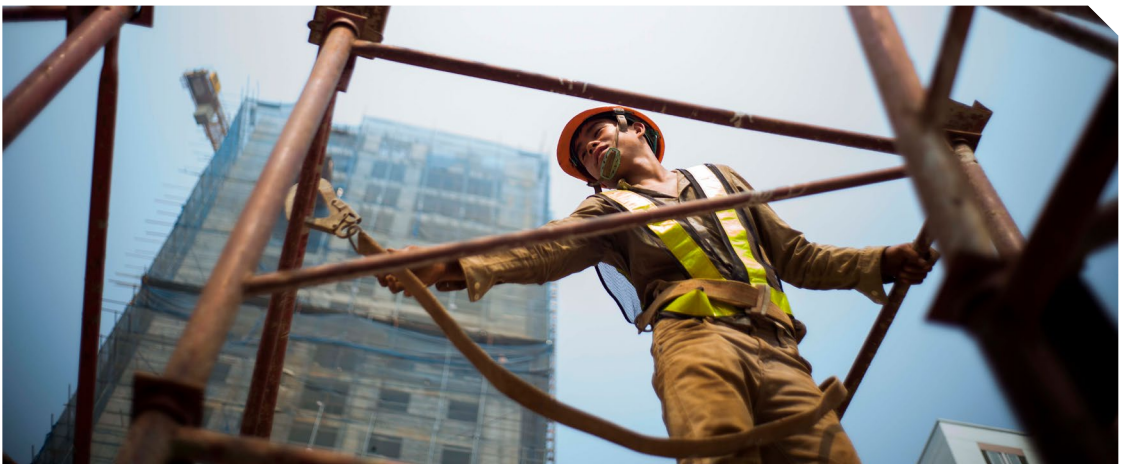


Did you know?

Hazards and risks are different concepts and the difference between them may lead to confusion. It is important to remember that while hazards are linked to a specific substance or process, risks arise from the probability of injury and the severity of the potential consequences.

Learn more:

ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training – Myanmar: Student’s Handbook*, 2023.



► Risk assessment

If you think something is unsafe, should you ignore it?

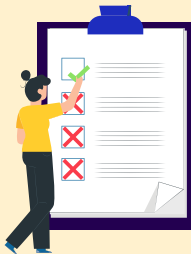
No, you should identify hazards, and assess and control the risks they pose by conducting a risk assessment. Risk assessment means a careful examination of potential work-related causes of injury or ill health.

It allows employers to determine whether they have implemented suitable risk control measures, or whether they should do more to reduce risk to an acceptable level for both workers and members of the public. The aim is to ensure that no one is injured or falls ill.



Did you know?

Risk assessment should not be a complex procedure since employers and workers know their own workplaces, and it is useful to help them find cost-effective, practical ways to control risks at work.



Learn more:

ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training*, 2023.



The five steps of risk assessment are:

Step 1: Identify hazards and why they are present

Step 2: Identify who might be harmed and how

Step 3: Evaluate risks – identify and decide on the safety and health risk control measures

Step 4: Record who is responsible for implementing which control measures and the timeframe

Step 5: Monitor and review the risk assessment and update it when necessary

► Risk control measures

How can workplace risks be reduced?

A logical and effective strategy for reducing the level of risk is the “hierarchy of controls”, which provides guidance for both employers and workers. The order of priorities for control measures is:

- Elimination of hazards
- Substitution of hazards
- Engineering, technology, equipment and tools
- Safe work methods, practices, organization, information and training, hygiene and welfare
- Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Learn more:
ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training*, 2023.



Did you know?

The use of personal protective equipment, which is widespread in workplaces, should be the last line of defence against hazards and risks as it is the least effective.



Photo credit: © ILO/M. Fossat

► Occupational accidents

Can workplace accidents be avoided?

Yes. An occupational accident is an occurrence which arises out of, or in the course of, work and results in a fatal or non-fatal injury. They can be avoided with effective risk control measures.



Did you know?

“Commuting accidents” – which are accidents that occur on the route to or from work – can also be considered occupational accidents.

Learn more:

ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training*, 2023.



► Occupational diseases

What is an occupational disease?

An occupational disease means any disease contracted as a result of exposure to risk factors arising from a work activity, such as noise-induced hearing loss, silicosis (a lung disease caused by the inhalation of dust containing free crystalline silica), asthma (from exposure to wood dust or chemicals) and musculoskeletal disorders (caused by repetitive forceful work).



Did you know?

>80%

of work-related deaths are caused by work-related diseases (WHO/ILO 2016)

Learn more:

ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training*, 2023.



► OSH management system



Should every workplace have a system to keep workers safe?

Yes. Management systems are often used in decision-making processes, both in business and in daily life.

An **occupational safety and health (OSH) management system** is a logical toolbox that is flexible and can be tailored to the size and activity of the enterprise.

It focuses on addressing hazards and risks in the workplace to ensure that:

Prevention and protection measures are implemented efficiently and consistently

Policies are established

All workplace factors are considered when assessing hazards and risks

Commitments are made

Management and workers are involved in the process at their respective levels of responsibility

Photo credit: © ILO/Fauzan Azhima



Did you know?

Emergency prevention, preparedness and response arrangements should be established, according to the size and nature of activity of the enterprise, as an element of the OSH management system.

Learn more:
ILO, *Occupational Safety and Health in Skills Training*, 2023.



► Labour inspection

Who makes sure that workers' rights are more than just words on paper?

Labour inspection is an essential part of the labour administration system, exercising the fundamental function of labour law enforcement and promoting effective compliance. It ensures fairness in the workplace and helps advance economic development.

In essence, the institution of labour inspection has a twofold nature.

- On the one hand, it supervises the enforcement of legal provisions, particularly with regard to workers' rights.
- On the other hand, labour inspection provides information and advice, as well as training.

This dual nature means that labour inspection systems play a key role in the world of work.



Did you know?

Labour inspectors don't just issue fines. They also provide training and advice so that employers understand the law and workers know their rights.

Learn more:
ILO, "[Labour Inspection](#)".



ILO, *[Guidelines on General Principles of Labour Inspection](#)*, 2022.



Photo credit: © ILO





Trade frameworks

Key terms in this section:

- ▶ Free trade agreement (FTA)
- ▶ Examples of free trade agreements:
 - ▶ Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)
 - ▶ Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)
- ▶ Free trade area
- ▶ Example of a free trade area:
 - ▶ ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA)
- ▶ Regional integration agreement (RIA)
- ▶ Rules of origin (ROO)
- ▶ Tariff
- ▶ Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)
- ▶ Non-tariff measures (NTM)
- ▶ Labour provisions in free trade agreements
- ▶ Dispute settlement mechanism (DSM)

► Free trade agreement (FTA)



Photo credit: © ILO/Fauzan Azhima

What is a free trade agreement?

A free trade agreement (FTA) is a legally binding treaty between two or more countries aimed at reducing or eliminating barriers to trade, such as tariffs, quotas and import restrictions.

The objective is to make it easier for goods and services to move among the participating countries, thereby facilitating smoother trade and investment.



Did you know?

Not all trade agreements are free trade agreements. Many trade agreements only provide preferential access, rather than establishing a full free trade area.

Trade agreements, including free trade agreements, are often detailed legal frameworks involving dispute settlement mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Some trade agreements can be bilateral (between two parties) or multilateral (between three or more parties).

Many modern free trade agreements go beyond trade. Some include labour provisions that promote respect for international labour standards, including the fundamental principles and rights at work.

Learn more:

ILO, “[Free Trade Agreements and Labour Rights](#)”.



► Examples of free trade agreements

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)

Can trade agreements address labour issues?

Yes. For example, the CPTPP is a multilateral free trade agreement among 12 countries (as of 2025) from the Asia-Pacific region and beyond: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United Kingdom and Viet Nam. Its labour chapter reaffirms the parties' commitments under the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, including freedom of association and collective bargaining, the elimination of forced labour and child labour, and non-discrimination in employment.

It also requires the parties to maintain acceptable conditions of work in terms of and occupational safety and health, minimum wages and working hours. The agreement prohibits weakening labour protections to gain trade or investment advantages, and includes mechanisms for cooperation, public engagement, dispute settlement, and enforcement.



Did you know?

The 12 CPTPP member countries have a combined population of around 593 million people – about 7.7 per cent of the world's total population. Together, they represent approximately 14.4 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), valued at US\$15.8 trillion as of 2024 according to the IMF's World Economic Outlook, October 2024.

The CPTPP agreement includes commitments to uphold labour and environmental standards, thereby promoting sustainable and inclusive trade practices.

Learn more:

Government of Canada,
"Consolidated TPP Text –
Chapter 19 – Labour".



Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

What is the largest free trade agreement in the ASEAN region?

The RCEP is recognized as the largest free trade agreement in the ASEAN region, and the world. As of 2025, it includes 10 ASEAN countries (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam) and five of their trading partners (Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea).

Together, they account for approximately

32.6%

of global GDP and

30%

of the world's population

► Updated: 2025



Did you know?

The RCEP includes commitments on trade in goods and services, investment protection, e-commerce, intellectual property, rules of origin, and streamlined customs procedures to simplify trade rules, reduce trade barriers and deepen economic cooperation across the Asia-Pacific region.

While the RCEP does not include dedicated chapters on labour rights, it presents an opportunity for complementary initiatives to support decent work through regional cooperation and dialogue.

Learn more:

ASEAN, “[Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#)”.



► Free trade area



Photo credit: © ILO/Siswanto

What is a free trade area?

A free trade area is a group of two or more countries that agree to maintain little to no trade barriers – such as tariffs or quotas – among themselves, while allowing each country to set its own trade policies towards non-members.

In essence, a free trade area is the regional arrangement or zone created by one or more free trade agreements. Without a free trade agreement, there is no formal free trade area.

Learn more:

WTO, “Territorial Application – Frontier Traffic – Customs Unions and Free-trade Areas”.



Did you know?

Free trade areas offer both opportunities and challenges.

- For **employers**, free trade areas can reduce tariffs and open access to larger markets. However, they may also increase exposure to foreign competition and regulatory complexity.
- For **workers**, free trade areas may lead to job creation in export sectors and encourage skills development. Yet, they can also result in job losses in less competitive industries, wage pressure, or weakened labour protections if labour and other social regulations are not included or effectively enforced.

► Example of a free trade area

ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA)

What is the ASEAN Free Trade Area?

The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is a practical example of a free trade area. It is a regional trade arrangement established in January 1992 to eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers among countries in Southeast Asia, with a view to integrating ASEAN economies into a single production base and creating a regional market of 500 million people.

It was established through the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme, later replaced by the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) in 2010.



Did you know?

A free trade area like AFTA often brings together economies at very different stages of development. To keep the process fair, some less developed ASEAN member states (Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam) were allowed longer timelines to lower tariffs. This flexibility helped balance integration across diverse economies.

For workers and employers, the effects can be uneven: some sectors gain new export opportunities, while others face stronger competition.

Upholding labour standards, including the fundamental principles and rights at work, helps ensure that trade integration is effective and fair for everyone.

Learn more:

ASEAN Secretariat,
Southeast Asia: A Free Trade Area, 2002.



► Regional integration agreement (RIA)

What is a regional integration agreement (RIA)?

A regional integration agreement is a treaty between two or more countries, usually within the same geographic region, that aims to reduce or eliminate barriers to trade and investment, while going beyond trade to coordinate broader economic and social policies among participating states.

RIAs often include commitments on investment, services, labour mobility, labour provisions – such as respect for international labour standards – as well as areas like environmental or social policies, and sometimes even the creation of a common market or monetary union. An example of an RIA is MERCOSUR in South America.



Did you know?

Regional integration can boost growth, efficiency, and even peace. But without the right policies and institutions, it may deepen inequalities or create new risks.

Managing positive and negative impacts on different groups, balancing sovereignty, and ensuring inclusiveness are key to making integration work for all.

Learn more:

► World Bank, "Trade blocs"



Photo credit: © ILO/Asrian Mirza

► Rules of origin (ROO)



Photo credit: © ILO/Aaron Santos

Who decides where a product is really 'from'?

Rules of origin determine this for tariff and trade purposes.

Rules of origin are the laws and regulations that determine which country a product is from – not as a factual matter, but for the purposes of applying trade agreements – based on where its materials come from and where it was assembled or substantially transformed.

These rules aim to support fair trade, prevent tariff loopholes, and may involve setting trade conditions linked to labour provisions in some cases.



Did you know?

Trade agreements can use rules of origin to ensure that products are genuinely made within the countries covered by the agreement. For example, to qualify for lower tariffs, a car may need to have most of its parts made in participating countries – and a portion of the production must be done by workers earning fair wages.

For example, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) requires that a share of a vehicle's value originates

from facilities where workers earn at least US\$16 per hour, making tariff preferences conditional on a labour-related criterion.

This helps protect jobs and promote better working conditions.

Learn more:
WTO, "[Agreement on Rules of Origin](#)".



► Tariff

Why do some products cost more when they come from another country?

One reason is tariffs. A tariff is a tax that a government places on goods imported from other countries.

Tariffs can vary by product, origin or trade agreement. The actual cost is typically borne by businesses and consumers in the country that imposes the tariff.

Tariffs are usually paid by importers when goods enter a country. These costs may be passed along the supply chain, potentially affecting the final price paid by consumers.

Learn more:
WTO, “An Informal Press
Guide to ‘WTO speak’:
Tariffs”.



Did you know?

Under the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) principle, countries must apply the same tariff rates for the same type of good to all WTO members.

Tariff preferences are exceptions to the MFN principle that allow lower or zero tariffs for specific countries, usually under trade agreements or development programmes.

Some of these preferences are conditional on respecting international labour standards, including commitments to eliminate forced labour and child labour, uphold freedom of association and collective bargaining, ensure non-discrimination in employment, and protect occupational safety and health.

Countries that violate these standards may risk losing preferential tariff access.

► Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)

What is the GSP?

The Generalized System of Preferences is a trade policy instrument through which preference-giving countries or entities (the European Union) grant unilateral tariff preferences – such as lower or zero import duties – to products from developing and the least developed countries. The goal is to promote trade, support economic development and reduce poverty through improved market access.

The GSP is not a single, unified system. Instead, it consists of a variety of national or entities' (EU) programmes, each governed by different rules and eligibility criteria depending on the granting country.

GSP schemes are voluntary and non-reciprocal, meaning that developing countries do not need to offer tariff concessions in return.



Did you know?

As of November 2025, 14 preference-giving entities operate GSP schemes worldwide. These consist of the European Union and 13 individual countries: Armenia, Australia, Belarus, Canada, Iceland, Japan, Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. In addition, the United States of America maintains a GSP programme which is currently expired and pending reauthorisation. Each administers its own GSP programmes, with unique rules of origin, eligibility criteria and coverage.

Some GSP schemes – including those operated by the European Union with its enhanced GSP+ arrangement, and, in the

case of the United States, under its GSP programme (currently expired and pending reauthorisation) – make tariff preferences conditional on labour rights. Within the GSP framework, Canada's scheme is known as the General Preferential Tariff (GPT). Effective as of 1 January 2025, Canada introduced the General Preferential Tariff Plus (GPTP). It builds on the GPT by offering enhanced tariff benefits to developing countries that adhere to specific international standards, including labour rights as defined by the ILO.

Learn more:
UNCTAD, "[Generalized System of Preferences](#)".



► Non-tariff measures (NTM)

What are non-tariff measures, and how can they affect labour rights without mentioning tariffs?

Non-tariff measures (NTMs) are government policies that affect trade through means other than customs duties – such as product standards, safety requirements, conformity assessments, import licensing, quotas, labelling and packaging rules, and testing/certification.

They are usually designed for legitimate aims – such as health, safety and environmental protection.

However, they can shape supply chains and market access, indirectly influencing labour conditions in export sectors.

NTMs are not the same as non-tariff barriers (NTBs). While NTMs are neutral policy tools, NTBs are non-tariff measures that have a trade-restrictive effect, whether intentionally or as a consequence of how they are designed or implemented.



Photo credit: © ILO/Duong Tran Thuy



Did you know?

The fundamental principles and rights at work are not classified as NTMs under the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) International Classification of Non-tariff Measures.

This classification was developed by multiple agencies – known as the “MAST” group, which includes UNCTAD, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the International Trade Centre (ITC), among others.

The fundamental principles and rights at work represent fundamental labour rights rather than direct trade measures, although trade agreements or due diligence legislation may reference them to promote decent work alongside trade rules.

Given the broad definition of NTMs, and since the classification may not be exhaustive – particularly in relation to emerging policy domains or indirect trade-related regulation – it is possible that certain domestic laws or regulations concerning labour rights could intersect with NTMs, even if they are not explicitly captured within the current taxonomy.

Learn more:

UNCTAD, “[Non-tariff Measures \(NTMs\)](#)”.



UNCTAD, [International Classification of Non-tariff Measures: 2019 version](#), 2019.



► Labour provisions in free trade agreements



Photo credit: © ILO/Phoonsab Thevongsa

Can trade agreements also protect workers' rights?

Yes. Many modern trade agreements include labour provisions to promote fair and decent work.

Labour provisions in trade agreements are commitments, cooperation mechanisms and compliance mechanisms that promote and protect workers' rights – such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, the elimination of child labour and forced labour, and safe working environments.

They often reference ILO standards and involve governments, employers and workers in their implementation.



Did you know?

One in three trade agreements worldwide includes labour provisions. The majority of these agreements reference the ILO's fundamental principles and rights at work.

Labour provisions do not reduce trade – they can actually strengthen labour laws, narrow gender gaps and foster social dialogue.

Governments negotiate agreements, while workers and employers contribute indirectly, mainly through tripartite consultation, advocacy, monitoring and capacity building initiatives.

Learn more:

ILO, *Labour Provisions in Trade Agreements: Protecting and Advancing Workers' Rights through Trade Agreements*, 2025.



► Dispute settlement mechanism (DSM)

If two countries disagree over labour rights in a trade deal, how is it resolved?

They may use a dispute settlement mechanism. This mechanism serves to resolve disputes between parties concerning compliance with the provisions of trade agreements. In some cases, this may also extend to labour rights commitments. For example, the CPTPP allows the parties to the agreement to raise concerns over violations of labour

provisions through consultations. If this fails, a panel can be established as part of the dispute settlement process.

While not all labour chapters are enforceable, where they are, countries may be required to take corrective action – or face consequences, such as trade measures or monetary assessments.



Did you know?

Labour provisions in trade agreements are often accompanied by mechanisms for cooperation, dialogue and stakeholder engagement. These encourage countries to talk and work together, which often play a more important role in practice than formal dispute settlement. At the same time, many agreements also make labour provisions enforceable through dispute settlement, providing incentives for compliance and remedies when commitments are not met.

Learn more:

ILO, *Assessment of Labour Provisions in Trade and Investment Arrangements*, 2016.



Photo credit: © ILO





8

Supply chains

Key terms in this section:

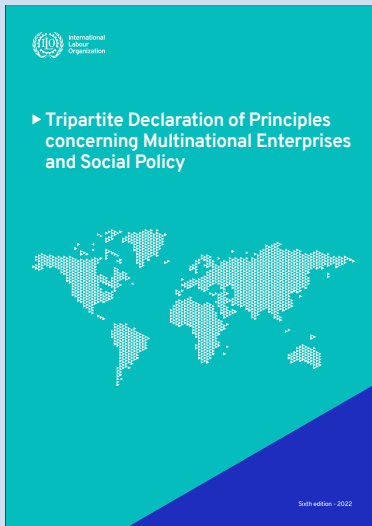
- ▶ Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (MNE Declaration)
- ▶ United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)
- ▶ Supply chains
- ▶ Value chains
- ▶ Human rights due diligence (HRDD)
- ▶ Grievance mechanism
- ▶ Remedy mechanism
- ▶ Dispute resolution mechanism (DRM)
- ▶ Examples of mechanisms
 - ▶ State-based dispute resolution mechanism (SBDRM)
 - ▶ Non-state-based grievance mechanism (non-SBGM)
 - ▶ Multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI)

► Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (MNE Declaration)

What is the MNE Declaration?

The MNE Declaration is an ILO policy instrument that provides guidance to enterprises (multinational and national) on social policy and inclusive, responsible and sustainable workplace practices.

It was adopted more than 40 years ago and amended several times – in 2000, 2006, 2017 and most recently in 2022.



Did you know?

The MNE Declaration is the only global instrument adopted by governments, employers and workers that offers direct recommendations to businesses on labour rights, employment, training, working conditions and industrial relations – all grounded in international labour standards.

Learn more:

ILO, "Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (MNE Declaration)".



► United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)

What are the UNGPs?

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights were endorsed by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2011, representing a watershed moment in efforts to tackle the adverse impacts that business activities can have on people.

The UNGPs provide a globally recognized, authoritative framework for the respective duties and responsibilities of governments and businesses to prevent and address such impacts. The principles apply to all UN Member States and to all business enterprises, both transnational and others, regardless of their size, sector, location, ownership and structure.



Did you know?

The UNGPs consist of a set of principles clustered along three pillars:

Learn more:
OHCHR, "[OHCHR and Business and Human Rights](#)".



► Supply chains



Photo credit: © ILO/Tiffany Tsang

If a t-shirt is made in three countries, where does it really come from?

It comes from a supply chain. This is a network of people and companies – sometimes across many countries – involved in making a product and delivering it to consumers. Businesses often depend on multiple countries to make a single product.

Learn more:

United Nations, "[Chapter 1. Global Supply Chains: Turning Disruption into Opportunity](#)", in *Economic Development in Africa Report 2023: The Potential of Africa to Capture Technology-intensive Global Supply Chains* (UNCTAD, 2023).



Did you know?

Still unsure about the difference between supply chains and value chains? You're not alone. In simple terms: a supply chain manages the **FLOW of goods** from raw material to customer; a value chain expands that to include all the activities that **ADD VALUE** to those goods for end-users.

► **Supply chain:** Tracks Palm fruit → crude palm oil → refined palm oil → packaged cooking oil → shipping → supermarket.

- **Value chain:** Palm fruit harvesting → processing into crude and refined oils → making different products → certification, ethical branding, and marketing → selling in markets → Each step adds market value.
- **Domestic production:** All steps happen in one country.
- **Global production:** Palm fruit is grown in country A, processed in country B, packaged in country C, branded in country D, and sold in country E.

► Value chains

Why do some companies sell a US\$10 watch, while others sell a watch for US\$100?

A value chain refers to the full range of activities required to bring a product or service from conception, through production, to delivery to final consumers – with an emphasis on how each step adds value (economic, functional or perceived) to the product.

This can explain why similar products or services can have very different prices.



Consider this example

A coffee producer buys raw beans at a low price. By roasting, branding and putting them in premium packaging, they sell their final product at a much higher price.

Learn more:

ILO, *Value Chain Development for Decent Work: A Systems Approach to Creating More and Better Jobs*, 2021.



Photo credit: © ILO

► Human rights due diligence (HRDD)

Can a business claim ignorance when human rights abuses happen in its supply chain?

No. Companies must make sure they do not harm people's rights.

Human rights due diligence is a process that allows enterprises to identify, prevent and/or mitigate their actual and potential negative human rights impacts and account for how they address such impacts. It is a central element of responsible business conduct.

The expectation that enterprises should carry out human rights due diligence was first introduced in the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework concerning business and human rights (2008), which are the basis of the UNGPs (2011). The ILO's MNE Declaration also affirms the role of human rights due diligence, particularly in labour-related contexts.



Did you know?

Key elements of human rights due diligence, as outlined in the UNGPs, are:

- Assessment of actual and potential human rights risks.
- Integration of the assessment's findings into internal systems and decision-making.
- Action to prevent or mitigate impacts.
- Tracking the effectiveness of responses.
- Communication about how impacts are addressed.

Enterprises should engage with affected stakeholders through meaningful consultation, especially where there is a high risk of harm. According to the ILO, this includes engaging with workers' organizations, and emphasizing the importance of freedom of association, collective bargaining and social dialogue.

Learn more:

OHCHR, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*, 2011.



► Grievance mechanism

If a worker's rights are violated, how can they get help?

A grievance mechanism is a process that individuals or groups can use to raise concerns, report unfair treatment, or signal potential harm. It provides a channel to raise concerns early before issues escalate into disputes.

They may be: **State-based** (such as labour inspectorates or ombudspersons), or **Non-state-based** (such as workplace grievance systems, industry mechanisms or multi-stakeholder initiative complaint channels). Grievance mechanisms can be either **judicial** or **non-judicial**; many operate non-judicially but some include judicial components or lead to referral to judicial bodies under national law.



Consider this example

In some countries, factory workers who are not paid the legal minimum wage can file a complaint with the Labour Department. Labour officers investigate, mediate between the worker and employer, and may issue an order for back payment if the claim is proven.

Learn more:

ILO, [Grievance handling](#), 2018.



► Remedy mechanism

What happens if a company harms people?

When harm occurs, a remedy mechanism provides a way for affected individuals or groups to receive redress. Remedies may include compensation, back pay, restitution, rehabilitation, reinstatement, or other corrective measures.

This mechanism can be state-based or non state based, and judicial or non-judicial. Remedy mechanisms help ensure that businesses take responsibility for their actions.



Consider this example

After discovering that a supplier used forced labour, a buyer sets up a fund to compensate affected workers and helps them find new, decent employment.

Learn more:

OHCHR, [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), 2011.



► Dispute resolution mechanism (DRM)

If dialogue or early grievance processes fail, what mechanism can be used to resolve the disagreement?

A dispute resolution mechanism may be used to resolve a disagreement.

If dialogue or early grievance processes fail, a more formal process may be needed. A dispute resolution mechanism is any formal, structured process designed to resolve an existing dispute between people, companies or countries.

It may involve going to court, but it can also include non-judicial approaches such as mediation or arbitration. In some organisations, certain grievance procedures also function as dispute resolution mechanisms when they include formal, structured decision-making.

Going to court is not always the best option – many issues are solved faster through other ways, like mediation, dialogue or other alternative dispute resolution methods.



Did you know?

Dispute resolution mechanisms may involve:

- **Judicial**, such as courts or labour tribunals; or
- **Non-judicial**, such as mediation, conciliation, or arbitration.

They can be:

- **State-based**, such as courts, tribunals, or government-run conciliation or arbitration offices; or
- **Non-state-based**, such as independent mediation centres, industry arbitration panels, or dispute boards established under multi-stakeholder or contractual arrangements.

In trade and labour, dispute resolution mechanisms help ensure that countries and companies meet their labour commitments.

Many trade agreements with labour provisions, such as the CPTPP and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), include special dispute panels to resolve such issues between countries.

Learn more:

Aristea Koukiadaki,
*Individual and Collective
Labour Dispute Settlement
Systems – A Comparative
Review* (ILO, 2020).



Examples of mechanisms

► State-based dispute resolution mechanism (SBDRM)

How can government systems resolve labour and trade disputes?

A state-based dispute resolution mechanism is a government-run process to settle work and trade disputes.

These can use judicial (like courts) or non-judicial (such as administrative bodies or ombudspersons) ways to resolve disagreements and ensure justice.



Consider this example

Workers at an office are underpaid and take their case to a labour court. It rules in their favour. As a result, they receive the full amount they should have been paid.

Learn more:

[Labour Disputes: Evidence from the updated IRLex database](#), ILO Working Paper 2020



► Non-state-based grievance mechanism (non-SBGM)

What is the alternative to government systems for resolving disputes?

A non-state based grievance mechanism is a process that helps workers, communities or other affected groups report concerns and seek solutions. These mechanisms include those administered by a business enterprise alone or with stakeholders, by an industry association, or by a multi-stakeholder initiative. They are generally faster and more accessible than government system, but they depend on voluntary cooperation. Some workers and communities use non-state systems – like company hotlines, NGO-led platforms or industry helpdesks – to report issues and get help.



Consider this example

A farmworker is denied her wages. Instead of going to court, she uses a grievance system run by a labour rights group. The process is successful and the worker receives her full salary.

Learn more:

National Action Plans on Business and Human Right "[Non-judicial Grievance Mechanisms](#)".



► Multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI)

Can companies and workers work together to advance decent work?

Yes. One way they do this is through multi-stakeholder initiatives. These are voluntary partnerships through which companies, trade unions, civil society groups and sometimes governments work together to address labour and human rights issues in supply chains. Multi-stakeholder initiatives are grounded in social dialogue, bringing different actors to the table to find shared solutions.



Did you know?

Multi-stakeholder initiatives bring together different groups to set shared rules and improve conditions like fair wages and safe work, helping to make trade more fair and responsible for all.

These initiatives can strengthen accountability, but their impact depends on clear commitments, independent monitoring and the meaningful participation of workers.

Other approaches, such as legally binding agreements between companies and trade unions (such as the Bangladesh Accord or the Dindigul Agreement, and the Lesotho Agreement) also aim to improve labour rights. While these agreements rely on enforceable contracts, multi-stakeholder initiatives focus on cooperation and dialogue to build lasting change.

Learn more:
ILO, “Multi-stakeholder
Partnerships (MSPs)”.



► Understanding rights at work





International Labour Organization

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ilo.org/regions-and-countries/asia-and-pacific