



International Labour Office

Migrant Work & Employment in the Construction Sector

by

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This study is part of a larger ILO effort to close knowledge gaps regarding labour issues in economic sectors where migrant workers can be found in considerable numbers, such as agriculture, construction and mining.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report broadly addresses the role that migrant workers play in the construction industry internationally, and explores some of the barriers they can face in accessing fair, safe and decent work in this sector. Migrants, both internal and international, have long been a key source of labour for construction markets across both industrialized and industrializing nations. This report focuses specifically on international temporary migrants – individuals who live and work across national borders and whose residency and citizenship status where they work is in some way temporary – to explore how this group of workers is currently being incorporated into local labour markets, and to examine some of the intersecting factors – political, institutional, economic and geographical - that can make migrants employed in the sector vulnerable to exploitation or substandard working conditions. While recognizing that the structure of construction labour markets and construction activities in different places can vary immensely, this report both explores the variation of working conditions and employment relations for migrants employed in construction, and identifies some common conditions and shared challenges for fair, safe and decent work that international migrants often face – some of which extend beyond any single labour market.

The construction industry, by its very nature, is rooted in place. The product differs from site to site, which frequently requires flexible teams of workers with a variety of skills, and the industry is highly sensitive to changes in the broader economy. Construction is thus often deeply dependent upon migrant workers because they are a mobile labour force that is also flexible and expendable in times of economic decline. Through a review of the literature documenting the incorporation of international migrants into construction labour markets, and case studies of migrants' roles in the construction labour markets of five specific countries – the United Kingdom (UK), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Thailand, Canada and South Africa – this report reaches the following conclusions:

- Construction markets are expected to grow rapidly across both industrialized and industrializing countries, with forecasted growth particularly concentrated in India, China and the USA;
- Driven in part by factors such as skills shortages, rapid urbanization, state infrastructure spending, and ageing construction workforces, the demand for migrant labour is expected to grow in coming decades;
- While international migrants have long been a crucial source of labour for construction labour markets globally, migration through *temporary* forms of residency (for e.g. international student visas, circular migration, working holiday visas, temporary work visas, and asylum claims) is becoming more commonplace in some countries;
- In both high- and lower-waged segments of the industry, migrants bring crucial skills and tacit knowledge to the construction markets of the countries in which they work;

- Informal recruitment channels on which many construction migrants and labour markets rely heavily are a key barrier to fair, decent and safe work for migrants;
- Migrants at the lower end of the construction wage ladder tend to be at a disproportionately higher risk of workplace injuries and fatalities;
- Migrants also tend to be disproportionately represented in lay-offs and retrenchments during times of industry bust;
- Wage theft and wage-withholding by employers is a systemic characteristic of many local construction markets; it is especially experienced by migrants with precarious legal status, migrants at the bottom of subcontracting chains, and migrants with no formal access to workplace representation or recourse;
- Trafficking and unfree labour is a significant problem in construction, particularly in some North American and Western European nations as well as parts of the Middle East, Asia and Africa;
- Most of the case studies in this report reveal a deepening polarization of the labour market in construction, with a small and diminishing number of 'core' workers employed on a permanent basis and a much larger number of temporary workers who are employed on short term contracts, are self-employed or work for labour-only subcontractors. Migrants tend to be disproportionately represented in the latter groups;
- Construction offers a crucial form of 'survival' work, especially for male migrants who cannot find work in their fields. As a result, however, many migrants who work in construction experience de-skilling, including those who have trades and architectural certifications but cannot use them in their destination country.
- By contrast, growing skills shortages and competition for migrants with hard-to-find qualifications (especially highly experienced professionals with project management skills and training, highly specialized technical skills or others with niche skills in civil and industrial construction) may result in upward mobility for some migrants and work opportunities that they were not able to access in their home countries.
- The factors that make migrants economically vulnerable extend beyond worker-employer relations, and into migration debt and the insecure nature of employment in the industry generally;
- The propensity for employers to often provide makeshift or substandard housing for construction migrants, coupled with immigration laws that tie workers to a single employer for extended periods of time can make some migrants extremely reliant on their employer, and thus vulnerable to employer abuses.



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<http://www.ilo.org/migration>

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