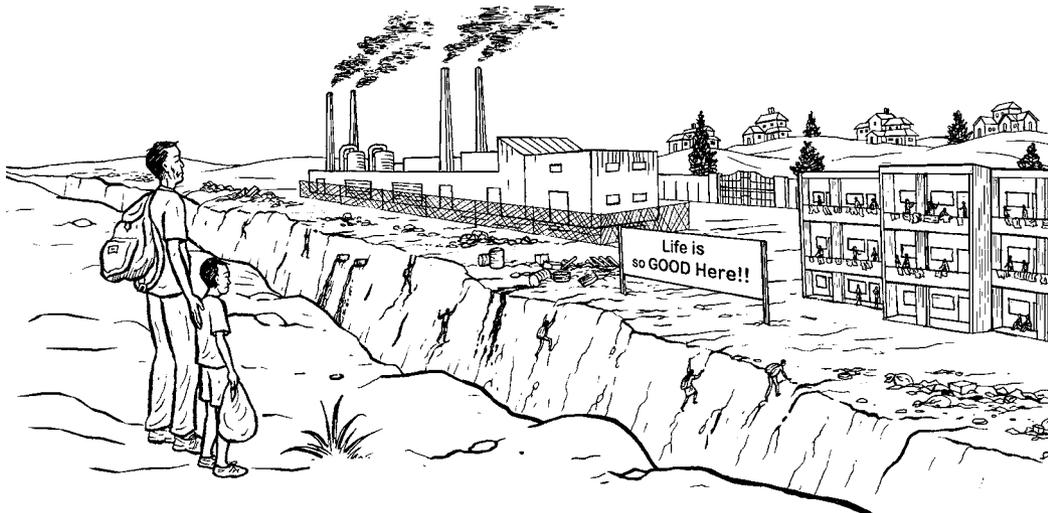


23

Workers who migrate



Many men, women, and children move to different cities or countries in search of better jobs, wages, and opportunities for themselves and their families. What they often find are new challenges and risks. Although they work as hard or harder than other workers, people who migrate face discrimination inside and outside the factory, legally and illegally, in ways that ultimately hurt all workers, not just migrants.

Like other workers, migrant workers deserve and need:

- safe living and working conditions, and a living wage
- access to health care, social services, and education, for themselves and their families
- the right to organize in unions, with materials in their own language
- freedom from violence and threats of displacement or deportation

Most important, people should have the right **not** to migrate, to stay in their ancestral homes, participate in the social and political life of their regions, and find ways to make a decent living in the place they or their families were born.

Learn about migrating before you leave

To better prepare for the challenges ahead, find out ahead of time what to expect while traveling and then arriving in your new city or country. If your arrangements are being made by another person, find out as much as you can about what is being planned. If possible, ask for a written agreement and leave a copy with your family or friends at home. Learn about migration and work laws, culture and behaviors, and how they might affect you. Ask about what is important to bring with you and what should be left behind for safe-keeping.

Recruiters and smugglers

Recruiters work for the large export factories that need workers. They charge the worker to get her a job, and charge the owner to find workers. Recruiters sometimes work with smugglers, who move people from one country to another, usually without legal permission. Dishonest recruiters and smugglers often lie about the conditions of work or travel, saying it is much better than it really is. They might change their fees as soon as you leave home, and they might put you in dangerous situations.

Getting into debt to get a job

I was so excited to have a chance to work in a factory in Taiwan. The recruiter promised more than I could earn at home in the Philippines.

I borrowed money from my family to pay the labor broker to take me to Taiwan. There, I was met by another recruiter who wanted even more money to get me work at a factory. I did not have much choice, so I agreed to pay him a little each week. Then I found out the factory also charges expensive room and board for the dormitory, deducts taxes, and withholds “savings” for when I finish my contract.



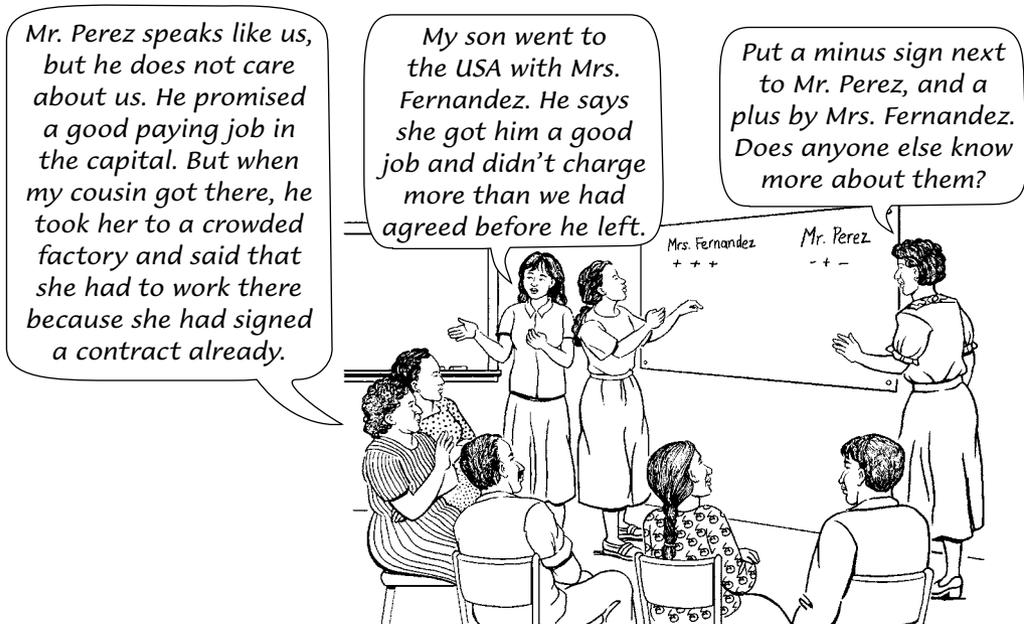
Each week after I pay the bills, I am left with little money to live on. I have to stay here and work until I can pay all that I owe. But it will take years to pay off this debt! I tell my sisters, brothers, cousins, and everyone back home to stay away from the labor recruiters. They promise a wonderful life but it is a lie.

Activity

Gather information about recruiters

Sharing information helps protect people from dishonest recruiters.

1. Ask other workers and their families about the recruiters and smugglers who work in your community:
 - Are they local or from other communities? Are they easy to find?
 - Who do they work for?
 - How are they paid?
 - How much do they charge the worker? The company?
 - What do they promise and what do they deliver?
 - Have they hurt or lost anybody?
 - Can they be trusted?
2. Share information with others so that everyone in your community can make better decisions when choosing a recruiter.
3. Make and post a list of recruiters who hurt or cheat workers.



Collect information about migrating

If you or someone you know is planning on migrating, gather as much information as you can about your destination from people who have migrated or their families, community centers, churches, health centers, NGOs, and the Internet. This can help you anticipate and avoid problems.

Try to find out about:

- **jobs available** in other parts of your country. Begin by asking in government offices, looking at newspapers, and talking to people. Maybe you do not have to migrate so far.
- **the real benefits and challenges of migrating**, including working conditions, costs, income, dangers, and how long you might have to stay.
- **recruiters, traffickers, and employers**, their honesty and helpfulness. Knowing what might be causes for concern can help you make better decisions. For instance, if the recruiter offers you a job that seems too good to be true, you should be cautious about accepting the job.
- **the destination city or country**, including type of jobs available, working and living conditions for migrant workers, local customs, and language.
- **the process for travel** to the destination country, fees to be paid, permits to be obtained, and waiting periods required.
- **how to get medical attention**. Make a list of low-cost or free services that are available to migrant workers on the way and at your destination.
- **how to manage money**, from opening a bank account and understanding basic banking processes, to learning how to save for the future, how to send money home, and how to help family members understand how you want them to use the money.
- **contact information** for resources in the new country such as embassies, migrant groups, unions, and human rights groups. Memorize some phone numbers of family members or friends in case of emergency.



Prepare for challenges in your new place

One of the reasons workers are encouraged to migrate is that employers find that migrants, who may not understand local languages or customs, or may not be protected by national laws, are easier to control than local workers. So migrant workers face more social dangers than other workers.

Sharing our stories

The Rural Development Foundation (RDF), an NGO in Indonesia, holds workshops for people interested in migrating. They learn about migrant worker rights and explore some of the dangers of migrating. If a person decides to migrate for work, they prepare him or her for life in the new place, focusing on family relationships, learning to resolve problems during long separations, and how to manage money.

When and if workers return, the RDF encourages them to share their stories with others who want to migrate, so that they too can prepare for the challenges of migration.

Returned workers can also receive trainings on managing businesses, credit unions, cooperatives, learning to invest, and using money wisely so they do not have to leave again.

Violence against immigrants

Moving to a new country without legal papers puts workers at the mercy of smugglers and other people who want to take advantage of them. Workers are often alone, afraid of being caught by the police, and in unfamiliar places or situations. For reasons that have nothing to do with the immigrants themselves, local groups often stir up anger, fear, and hatred against migrants. See chapter 21: Discrimination.

Women who migrate are most at risk for violence, not only because they are doing something risky — migrating — but also because recruiters, smugglers, labor contractors, employers, and even law enforcement think they can get away with hurting women. Sometimes women are told they will be given factory jobs but are instead forced into sex work. Women's organizations often provide help and shelter to migrant women in danger. See chapter 22: Violence.

Deportation or forced repatriation

Many countries have built their economies on the labor of migrant workers. Bosses try to get away with paying very low wages, following few or no safety regulations, and providing no protections or benefits. If workers complain or demand better conditions or pay, bosses threaten them with deportation.

Even workers who have legal documents to work in a new region or country are sometimes threatened with deportation. Usually, legal aid groups or clinics offer services in places where there are a large numbers of migrants. Ask around to find out which do the most affordable and responsible work.

Language and culture

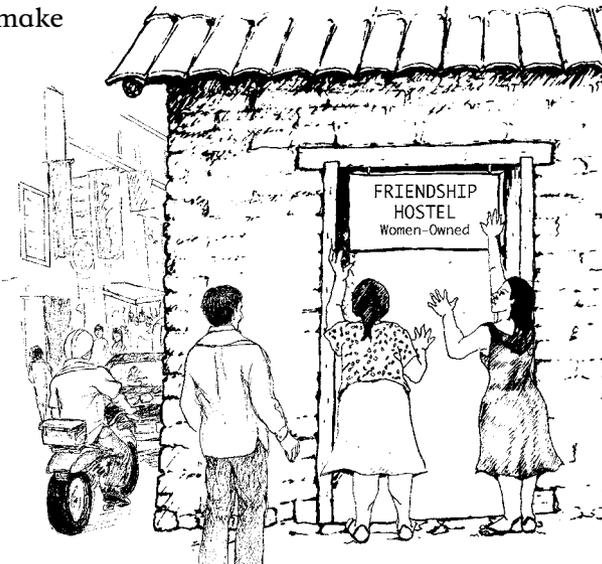
If you do not speak the local language, it may be hard to make friends and fit into the community. Learning the local language and customs makes it easier to protect yourself, talk to other workers, and get and give support. But it is also important to have spaces to celebrate your own culture and language.

Ask the union and worker organizations to translate written materials into the different languages that workers in your factory speak, so that all workers can participate. Having interpreters in your meetings can help migrant workers participate more actively.

Housing and transportation

Factories that offer housing make it easy to find a place to live, but factory dormitories can have many disadvantages. See chapter 32: A decent place to live for ideas on how to organize for better housing.

In Bangladesh, workers have formed hostels that are cheaper and safer than factory dorms.



Access to health care

Some factories have medical services, but they are often very basic and the company-paid doctors often refuse to recognize work-related health problems. But using medical services outside of the factory can be difficult for migrant workers. Workers without documents might fear that by going to a health facility they will be reported to immigration authorities.

Even when health services are run by the government, that does not mean that they will report you. Low-cost or free medical services for migrant workers, regardless of legal status, in your language and respectful of your cultural and religious beliefs may be available. Ask other migrant workers and unions, social services, and churches about where to get care.

Some health programs offer migrant workers particular services, such as reproductive and sexual health information. Other organizations that work with migrant workers may not generally offer health services but do provide free tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, as well as free condoms and medicines. Do not be afraid to ask.

Meaningful contact back home

Living without the support of the family and community you left behind can be lonely, stressful, and exhausting. The pressure to send money home can create tension and sometimes make family relationships more difficult. Finding ways of connecting to family back home can help reduce stress and other mental health problems. See chapter 27: Stress and mental health.

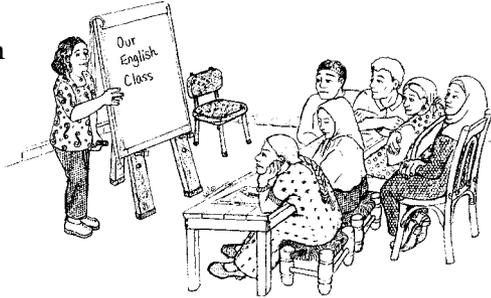
We offer many free workshops for migrant workers. A popular one shows them how to use the computers in internet cafes to connect with their families. It is very cheap and easy to set a regular call schedule with their families. We also help them set up money transfer accounts. That way they can send the same amount of money at the same time each month. If they have more money, they save it for the times when they have less. Their family knows how much to expect so it is a little less stressful.



Life in your new place

Tips to protect yourself in your new community:

- **Keep originals and copies of important documents.** Always keep your passport, work permit, and other personal papers. Do not turn them over to your employer or recruiter. Leave a copy of your ID and other information in your home country and have an extra copy with you as well, in case the employer takes your documents.
- **Do not sign a document** you do not understand or do not agree with.
- **Learn basics of the local language** and if you can, teach other workers the basics of your language.
- **Make sure the employer tells you the duties and conditions of the work.**
- **Keep track of your hours, payments, and deductions.**
- **If you are told you owe money,** ask why and check if the information is correct. Seek help from groups that support workers if you feel the amount is wrong.
- **Do not sign for pay you have not received.**
- **Do not let your employer “save” your wages** or transfer your pay to your home country for you. Ask to be paid in cash or with checks you can cash or deposit at a local bank.
- **If you are abused or attacked,** write down the place, time, who was involved, and anyone who saw the abuse. The important thing is not to be alone: go to a church, a community organization, the union, or any network that you feel can help you and accompany you if you decide to go to the police.
- **Make new friends** to reduce feelings of loneliness and anxiety.
- **Keep your money safe** and learn to manage it: save some for your future or an emergency, do not send it all home, and teach family back home to manage money.



Remember: You have the right to return home permanently and take your income, savings, property, and family members back to your country of origin.

The right to organize

Some governments and unions do not allow migrant workers to join unions. Local workers might feel migrant workers are not interested in organizing because they do not plan to stay in the area. But migrant workers can contribute to the collective effort and might even have helpful personal experience from organizing in their own countries.

Learn about your rights and resources

Each country has labor laws that affect migrant workers, even those who do not have legal papers. Learn about your rights from worker organizations, unions, other workers, the government, or research on the Internet. These might also be good places to find out what organizations can help you to get medical care, to learn the language, or, for example, if you get fired.



The rights of migrant workers



The **UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights** applies to all people, including migrant workers.

The **UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families** says every migrant worker and every member of his or her family:

- has the right to protection by the law.
- will receive the same treatment as nationals regarding conditions of work (hours, pay, and overtime) and social security.
- is entitled to cultural, religious, and freedom of association rights.
- will be protected against violence, threats, intimidation, and forced labor.
- has the right to join trade unions and the right to organize.

The **ILO Conventions on Migration for Employment (No. 97)** and **Migrant Workers (No. 143)** say governments should offer:

- free assistance and information services to migrants.
- facilities for the departure, journeys, and reception of migrants.
- medical services for migrants and the members of their families.
- the same labor and human rights as local workers.

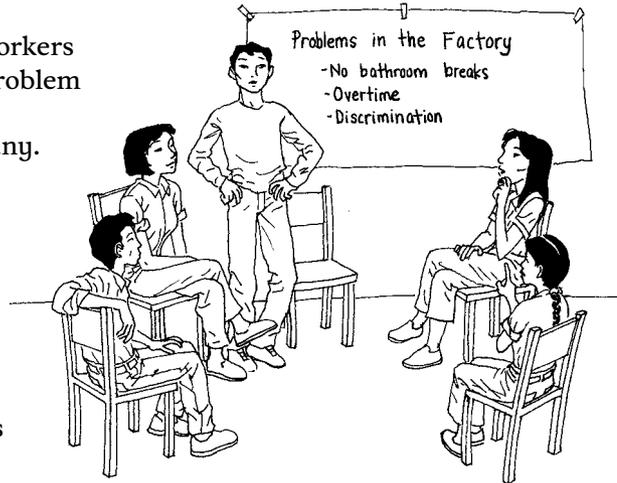
The roles of the UN, ILO, and other international organizations that promote workers' rights are explained in Appendix A.

Talk with other workers about common problems

Although there are things that may cause workers to experience the workplace differently, such as gender, age, and ethnicity, there are many dangers in the factory that affect all workers, such as low pay, unhealthy or unsafe conditions, and forced overtime.

Make time to talk with other workers about the problems they face. A problem that affects one person can easily become a problem that affects many.

Developing relationships with other workers in your factory can also help you feel less lonely and stressed. You can develop a resource guide from the information that each of you knows or a map that shows the dangerous areas of the city, stores to buy less costly goods, health centers, and police stations.



Empty Night, Not Alone

My name is Xiaomei and I moved to Shenzhen to work in a factory. I was very sad when I moved here. I didn't have any friends and I didn't want to tell my family about my problems because they would worry. I actually didn't want to work in the factory at all. When I was growing up, I dreamed of working in a radio station. So when I moved here, I would go to the local radio station whenever I had free time and offer to help. One day, the radio host was sick so they asked me to host the show. I didn't know what to talk about, so I started talking about my life in the factory. I talked about feeling lonely and the conditions in my factory, which were not good. The owners of the factory heard the show and fired me the very next day. I was really upset! But then the radio station owner told me that many people liked the show. When I told them I had been fired, they offered me a job.

My show is called "Empty Night, Not Alone" and it is a space for young migrant women workers to share their experiences and feel like they are "not alone," that someone understands the challenges of their lives, their joys and sorrows. We talk about worker rights and some of the resources available in Shenzhen, where to find internet cafés to connect with our families, where to learn the language, how to protect ourselves, and many other things.

Build a social organization

Many migrants move to a new place because they have family or friends who have already moved there. You can begin to get together on days off to share traditional foods from your region and discuss problems faced in the workplace, news from home, and how you might help family and friends left behind. Migrant associations provide a supportive place to socialize and often raise funds for projects back home, such as buying a community ambulance or helping a school. Working with your new community, you can organize for better conditions for yourself and other migrant workers while you nurture your connections to your culture and home.

Social centers for migrant workers

The National Workers' Congress (NWC) in Sri Lanka opened union membership to migrant workers in 1995. But organizing migrant workers inside the export factories was no easy task because many were scared of organizing. The boss controlled their free time and since they lived and worked inside the factory compounds, they ended up working a lot. The boss had also threatened that if they joined the union they would be fired and sent back to their countries.

To give migrant workers a safe space to explore organizing, NWC created "Friendship Houses." These spaces are located outside the factory compounds. Workers can go there to borrow books or magazines, talk to other workers, watch television, and find information about labor rights. The staff also organizes health trainings and invites workers to attend conversations about union organizing. They want to empower workers to take more control over their work lives and become leaders in their own factories.

It was at the NWC Friendship House that I first heard of trade unions. I had gone there to use the library, and found out that it was possible to take training courses there on workers' rights. After 3 years I became a member of NWC and started organizing other workers.



Make migrants part of worker movements

Migrant workers are often exposed to some of the worst conditions of work, from poverty wages and violence to fear of deportation, especially if they do not have legal documents. When migrant workers are unorganized, employers think they can pay all workers less. However, when unions and other worker organizations fight for the rights of migrant workers they are helping to eliminate these conditions and forcing their governments to enforce labor laws and standards for all workers.

For example, labor rights groups in the United States, where many workers migrate for jobs, campaign for the rights of migrant workers on International Workers Day, May 1 (also known as May Day). On May Day they launch campaigns to bring awareness to the working conditions of migrant workers and to demand that the government of the United States give full rights to these workers, including access to education, medical care, and housing.

Unions are strengthened when they make an effort to include migrant workers in workplace organizing and social activities. When workers of different ethnic or language groups are used to working together, the boss cannot use racism or rivalry between groups to divide and weaken the union. By communicating in the languages of the workers in a factory, the union can make sure that everyone knows what is going on and that workers have a way to pass information back to the union. And when a union stands up for equality and people's rights both inside and outside the workplace, it builds loyalty, respect, and support that can help it win struggles for its members into the future.



Migrant Burmese workers' union in Thailand

Sandar crossed the border from Burma into Thailand to work for the Value Trend Company garment factory in Mae Sot. The workers were paid less than half as much as Thai workers, even though they were doing the same amount of work. And although all the workers had work permits and were fully guaranteed labor rights according to Thai labor law, the employer kept the original copies of the workers' permits. If the Burmese workers demanded their rights, they were fired, deported, or even murdered by police or gangsters. In a nearby factory, a male worker was killed and 3 women workers were raped as a warning to other workers to stop organizing.

Sandar was afraid of being deported or attacked, but she felt it was time to fight for her rights and the rights of her people. She began to talk one on one with other workers to find out what their problems were and if they were interested in fighting for better conditions. At the same time, she learned about worker and human rights through trainings organized by the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCOWA), a union that supports and organizes Burmese workers in Thailand. She started holding secret meetings with other workers to tell them about the YCOWA union, and soon many workers joined. YCOWA organized workers to leave their jobs to demand better pay and working conditions. When 119 of them left together, the employer was really surprised. He had not thought the migrant workers would organize. The union stepped in to represent the workers in the negotiations with the owner. Through a well-planned campaign that involved the community and support from local and international organizations, the workers were able to win a new union contract with many improvements. The employer promised to pay them minimum wage, which was more than double what they had earned before, and higher overtime pay. He also returned their original work permits, so they could have control of their working lives.