

SPOTLIGHT REPORT

ON GLOBAL MIGRATION



2026

The International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) is scheduled for 2026, and will be the second comprehensive global review of the implementation of the United Nations Global Compact for Migration (GCM). The IMRF is a key moment for states to take account of their commitments towards the implementation of the GCM.

The Spotlight Report on Global Migration 2026 (SRGM26) is a joint effort of Women in Migration Network (WIMN) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), and builds on the first Spotlight Report, published in 2022 towards the initial IMRF. SRGM26 aims to uphold and strengthen human rights for migrants and is an integral part of an organizing and advocacy strategy towards the IMRF 2026 and beyond.

Women in Migration Network is an international network focused on the rights of all women affected by migration. WIMN takes an intersectional, feminist approach to promote women's human rights in migration and development policy, and to promote migrant rights in feminist advocacy. WIMN lifts up and supports the experiences, voices and agency of all women affected by migration as essential change makers on the road to a more just world. WIMN members are organizations and individuals working at the national, regional and international levels.

This report is published with support of **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung**, the oldest political foundation in Germany, and which carries a rich tradition in social democracy dating to its founding in 1925. It is a non-profit institution active in Germany and around the world, with offices in more than 100 countries. FES advocates for peaceful coexistence and human rights; promotes the establishment and consolidation of democratic, social, and constitutional structures; and paves the way for free trade unions and a strong civil society.

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Executive Summary

SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON GLOBAL MIGRATION

People have migrated since long before passports or borders were imposed, but today governments worldwide pour enormous resources into efforts to exclude, deter and punish them. Such efforts tend to ignore major push factors for migration, such as conflict, genocide, climate crises, and an economic system that perpetuates global inequality.

In the overview to the Spotlight Report on Global Migration 2026, **Carol Barton** notes multiple and interlinked challenges: the impact of environmental exploitation on Global South countries; the visa apartheid which blocks many of their citizens from easily crossing borders; populist leaders who villainize people born elsewhere; violence committed by security forces and vigilantes; overly bureaucratized and exclusionary migration pathways; the profitable surveillance and detention industries.

This report presents alternatives to our punitive, rights-averse status quo: positive initiatives by governments and by civil society. Migrants must be understood first and foremost as rights holders – with their human rights remaining intact regardless of whether or when any border is crossed. Governments must cease treating migrants as default threats, and instead reflect on the threats that their own policies and practices have posed to migrants – taking measures to transform them.

Roula Seghaier advocates for expansion of regular pathways to benefit migrants of all nationalities, incomes, skills and sectors. Their labor should not be enjoyed at the expense of their rights to political participation and family life.

Migrant domestic workers, excluded from labor legislation in many countries, are at particular risk of exploitation. **Adriana Paz Ramirez, Bariyah,** and **Grace Papa** call for abolishing employer-tied visas, reducing the potential for abuse.

The world has been slow to address climate migration, but **Amber S. Khan** and **Mayuri Anupindi** highlight positive moves in the Pacific. States must consult with affected people to develop frameworks, while taking genuine steps to reduce emissions.

Irregular migration is due to structural barriers, not personal choice. **Glenda Belen Huerto Vizcarra** makes the case for simplified regularization mechanisms that reflect migrants' realities, with pathways to permanent residence and citizenship available to all.

Hayat Akbari, Hannah Jambunathan and Carolina Gottardo argue that, as per the Global Compact for Migration, detention must be a genuine “measure of last resort”. Regularization must be prioritized, and current trends toward criminalizing assistance to migrants must be reversed.

Technology is being used to target migrants in increasingly drastic ways. **Antonella Napolitano** calls for limits to the scope and use of surveillance technologies, and safeguards to avoid misuse or overcollection of personal data.

An intersectional approach must be taken across these measures, recognizing structural barriers such as race, gender, class and religion. Migrants' own perspectives must be centered. With first-hand experience, they are best placed to identify the problems that persist in existing migration frameworks – and their solutions.

Xenophobic narratives now dominate our world. From “citizens-only” initiatives to physical harm, politicians and policymakers have normalized the idea that human rights do not apply to non-nationals, especially those with irregular migration status. But the threats faced by migrants today are not only interlinked. They are a close-up of those faced by everyone: expanded surveillance, climate crises, rollbacks of long-won human rights.

In 2026, the second International Migration Review Forum must make clear that migrants can no longer be excluded from fundamental human rights, from public and family life, from decent work, or from influencing the policies that impact them more than anyone. It's time for meaningful change.

Key Recommendations

URGENT AND ONGOING ACTION IS NEEDED

The Women in Migration Network calls on the United Nations and member states:



to stop visa discrimination and ensure access to rights-based regular pathways for all, including Global South citizens and workers in low-wage, manual, and caregiving sectors

- Expand and safeguard regular pathways and routes to permanent residence and citizenship
- Prioritize pathways that allow migrants to reunite with family, participate in civic life, and access social protections
- Prohibit recruitment fees and ensure visa portability and migrants' freedom to change employers and claim justice without risking deportation.



to ensure rights-based and gender-responsive regularization, permanent residence, and pathways to citizenship

- Adopt simplified, flexible and affordable regularization mechanisms adapted to reflect migrants' realities
- Ensure family unity regardless of parents' migratory status, granting children registration and extending secure administrative status to parents of all genders
- Guarantee access to employment, social protections and public services, including healthcare and education, and ensure portability of benefits across borders.



to ensure labor rights and decent working conditions for migrants of all genders and work sectors, including workers in the care economy and other informal sectors

- Recognize migrant domestic workers and other informal workers as workers
- Implement International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 29, 87, 98, 189 and 190, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW)
- Ensure freedom of association without discrimination by sector or migration status, and end retaliation against unionized migrant workers.

to ensure that action on climate migration is based on extensive consultations with impacted communities, with particular attention to women and other marginalized groups

- Develop regional frameworks on climate mobility
- Provide permanent residency visas for those displaced by climate-related factors, including rights to employment, education, healthcare, and family reunification
- Pair action on climate mobility with commitments to reduce emissions and invest in adaptation that supports communities' desires to stay in place.



to reverse the trend of criminalizing migration, and instead protect migrants' human rights at borders and in transit, acknowledging them as rights-bearing individuals

- End migrant detention, and invest in community, rights-based alternatives, ensuring access to work, health and services, as well as status and legal safeguards
- Demilitarize borders and end the outsourcing of border control and engagement in "third-country deportations"
- Address hostile narratives about migrants and decriminalize the provision of assistance to them.



to uphold privacy protections that establish clear data protection frameworks and conduct rights impact assessments before deploying technological systems

- Limit the scope and use of surveillance technologies with narrow, specific mandates for technologies used at borders
- Ban the use of predictive analytics that can reinforce biases or lead to discriminatory practices
- Ensure that migrants have the right to data erasure and ability to opt out of data collection.



Overview

IN THIS TIME OF BACKLASH, WE MUST UPHOLD MIGRANT RIGHTS

Carol Barton

Member, Women in Migration Network (WIMN)

Nations and stakeholders will gather in 2026 to measure progress on the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), a landmark agreement towards rights-based, gender-responsive, migrant-centered migration policy and governance. This assessment – the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) – takes place at a time of political, economic and social turmoil and growing international divisions. The world faces crises of development and humanitarian aid funding, of multilateralism and the rule of law, of climate and debt, and intensified conflict. Draconian anti-migrant policies reflect and reinforce deep-seated racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia.

States must embrace a 360° holistic approach to policy rather than focusing on a few GCM objectives

The hard-won space for advancing rights-based migration policy is more critical than ever. The IMRF must be a roadmap for change, offering actionable steps to be implemented in national policy, with cooperation at regional and international levels. It must comply with international labor standards and human rights law. It is critical that all stakeholders protect and advance the GCM and the international migration governance system, while naming egregious realities now occurring. Together, we must affirm the essential, meaningful role of migrants and civil society, and use an intersectional feminist lens that understands and addresses power relationships. States must embrace a 360° holistic approach to policy rather than focusing on a few GCM objectives. This will require a frank and honest assessment, willingness to take real measures in implementing rights-based national migration

policy, coordination across ministries and with civil society, and immense political will. To move forward together, we need truth-telling and a real commitment not only to the GCM but to the New York Declaration, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and international human rights treaties that undergird it.

This *Spotlight Report on Global Migration* brings the perspectives of migrant and other civil society experts to assess the realities of migrants while highlighting concrete initiatives that states and civil society groups have taken to advance GCM objectives. Because terms like “safe, regular and orderly migration” and “gender responsiveness” have become buzz words with multiple meanings, this report seeks to clarify what these would mean in practice.

International migration policy: Celebrating gains

Building an international migration infrastructure has been the work of decades – involving states, the UN system and stakeholders. It met with deep resistance over the years, making the emergence of the GCM all the more noteworthy. A 2016 UN General Assembly [Summit for Refugees and Migrants](#) produced the [New York Declaration](#). This set in motion negotiations for two Global Compacts, on migration and on refugees, in 2017-2018. The GCM was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018.

Accompanying this process was the building of international civil society infrastructure. Civil society helped to shape the GCM and its implementation, consistently affirming the centrality of migrant rights, women’s rights and workers’ rights, and addressing the structural causes of migration, the systems of power that create vulnerabilities, and the intersectional nature of exclusion. This is reflected in the GCM’s “cross-cutting and interdependent guiding principles” and the inclusion of stakeholders as essential partners

in migration policy. The creation of the UN Network on Migration has served as a mechanism to actively involve states, agencies and stakeholders in shaping implementation, grounded at the national level.

Consistent grassroots engagement is difficult due to the urgency of frontline struggles, funding limitations, and visa discrimination

GCM constraints

Civil society was deeply disappointed by [what was left out of the GCM](#)¹— including recognition of freedom of association; the need for regularization programs; access to services, labor rights and justice regardless of status; non-refoulement; ending child detention; and a deeper understanding of gender equity in all aspects of policy. The GCM did not reaffirm some key commitments approved in the New York Declaration nor some ILO standards and human rights treaties. The 1990 UN [Migrant Workers Convention](#) has been sidelined by this non-binding Compact. These aspirations must not be lost.

Civil society continues to challenge marginalization of stakeholders and tokenization of migrant voices. Consistent grassroots engagement is difficult due to the urgency of frontline struggles, funding limitations, and visa discrimination. Stakeholder involvement will be particularly challenging at the IMRF in the US in 2026, given US [visa bans](#) for numerous predominantly Muslim and/or sub-Saharan African nations.

A “migration and development” framing dominates global discourse, sidelining migrant human rights for the expediency of national and private economic interests. Destination countries too often see migrants as disposable sources of labor to meet employment needs and to feed pension and social security systems as their populations age. Migrants are needed and actively recruited, yet demonized and denied rights, inclusion, and paths to permanence. Countries of origin rely on remittances as an essential source of revenue while failing to protect their nationals’ rights in countries of transit and destination or to build just and sustainable economies that enable them to remain at home. Wealthy nations also welcome remittances as a replacement for development aid, passing the burden of development financing to low-wage, exploited migrants. As WIMN [noted](#)² in a June 2025 open letter to the UN Network on Migration responding to its statement on remittances, the focus on “migrant contribution to development” instrumentalizes migrants and comes at devastating personal costs, while obscuring the inequality, climate impacts and lack of decent work that push people to migrate.

States too often view women and other marginalized people in migration primarily as “victims” and “vulnerable populations” rather than addressing the systems that put them in vulnerable situations or recognizing their agency and leadership. The [few references](#)³ to women in the 2022 IMRF Progress Declaration are in the context of motherhood, gender-based violence, healthcare, or work. Constant references to “women and children” ignore separate rights frameworks for each category and cast women only in a child-rearing role. Framing women and non-binary migrants as “victims” too often leads to harmful “protections”.

Wealthy nations welcome remittances as a replacement for development aid, passing the burden of development financing to low-wage, exploited migrants



The current global context

We are witnessing a frontal attack on democracy, the rule of law, shared responsibility for development, and the multilateral system. The growing power of oligarchs in setting economic and political agendas is accompanied by authoritarian governments that build their base through xenophobia. Unprecedented cuts to international humanitarian aid, development assistance and UN agency budgets threaten millions of lives.

Migration is inseparable from global economic realities. The financialization of the global economy is a central element of this century. Products, nature, and services are turned into assets, driving indebtedness and dispossession of the majority while concentrating wealth and income.⁴ Governments turn to private equity bonds to finance everything from hospitals to climate adaptation to gender equality programs. Yet these bonds are costly and open the way for creditors to shape public policies. According to DAWN, 61% of Global South external debt is now in the hands of private equity creditors. Financialization, concentration of capital and indebtedness limit South nations' ability to address critical national priorities, including equitable social, climate, and macroeconomic policies. Vagisha Gunasekara observes that Sri Lanka's 2022 default and the subsequent external management of the economy led to large waves of out-migration. Remittances are Sri Lanka's largest source of foreign exchange, and women were encouraged to seek overseas jobs.

Internal conflicts and external aggressions are rising internationally as military budgets soar. Many of the growing numbers of displaced people cannot obtain visas and instead face costly and treacherous journeys seeking safety.

Decades of work to dismantle discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and national origin are being swept away in some nations. This has given permission for overt racism, including anti-Blackness, and for xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are being criminalized and defunded, and LGBTQI+ rights, particularly trans rights, are under attack.

An intensified level of transactional foreign policy is undermining international law and shared international goals. Migration policy is being used as a bargaining chip in trade deals. A growing number of bilateral trade deals⁵ include migration-related clauses, while such binding authority is absent from the GCM.

Civil society actors are horrified by the expansion and normalization of draconian migration policies which ignore due process and make detention and deportation the default setting, increasingly relying on third nations to enforce borders and detain migrants. Conditions in detention centers often go unmonitored and violate human rights. Migration enforcement has become a lucrative industry for private companies, while increasingly involving the military at borders, in internal enforcement and even in other nations. Poor nations buffeted by debt, aid cuts and climate change are pushed to take funds in exchange for migration enforcement roles. Some recent enforcement examples include:

- The US offering deals to El Salvador, Eswatini, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda in exchange for detaining migrants.
- The EU's Asylum and Migration Pact, which allows for fast-tracked expulsions, limited access to asylum procedures, and containment at the EU's periphery.
- Australia's "Pacific Solution", which has sent asylum seekers to offshore detention centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.
- India's National Register of Citizens, which threatens to render millions stateless and at risk of detention and deportation, and Citizenship Amendment Act, which provides a pathway to citizenship for refugees but excludes Muslims.
- Forced returns of many in the SWANA region despite claims of "voluntary return" – while Palestinians are denied the right to return.
- Spain's subcontracting of migration enforcement to several African governments, providing equipment and training while testing new technologies that contribute to a privatized migration enforcement export industry. The Spanish civil guard is deployed on Senegalese and Mauritanian beaches and waters.

Many of the growing numbers of displaced people cannot obtain visas and instead face costly and treacherous journeys seeking safety

An intensified level of transactional foreign policy is undermining international law and shared international goals. Migration policy is being used as a bargaining chip in trade deals

Time for an honest reckoning

The GCM and the creation of an international migration governance framework is a huge achievement (albeit limited by what was left out), but the 2026 IMRF process cannot be “business as usual”. In this time of drastic inequality, injustice and anti-democratic practices, the risk is that the GCM and this IMRF could merely serve as window dressing to cover up ongoing exploitation and rights violations. It is instead time for bold, concerted action.

A needed review of national migration policies must address the economic and political interests that drive migration at the expense of migrants. Migration must be seen in the context of the massive cuts to development aid, the failure to adequately fund climate adaptation, unjust and unpayable sovereign debt, unequal trade deals, armed conflict and militarization. This review must name the private profits being made from migration enforcement, the violations of international law including ongoing genocide, and the intentional denial of basic services such as healthcare.

States, stakeholders and the UN system cannot ignore:

- that climate displacement is real, growing and sometimes permanent, requiring long-term rights-based responses;
- that migrants are being “disappeared” to third-nation detention centers without due process, merely due to their race, national origin and/or migration status;
- that IOM, the lead agency for migration, supports “assisted voluntary return” of migrants (including asylum seekers detained in third-country detention facilities) to countries of origin, yet draconian national enforcement policies too often mean that migrants feel forced into such decisions;
- that some of the same states professing “rights-based” migration policy are externalizing detention, turning away asylum seekers, labeling exploitative labor migration schemes as “safe and regular” migration, or implementing policies that drive people into irregular migration;

- that claims to support “gender-responsive” policy ring hollow while states also promote women’s temporary migration contracts for domestic work, too often leading to exploitation, sexual abuse and trafficking; and
- that surveillance equipment sent to some countries to prevent irregular migration is being used to suppress internal dissent.

Conclusion

There has been important progress in building migration infrastructure and implementing programs and policies to advance migrant rights. Yet migrant lives are in greater jeopardy today than four years ago. The GCM’s guiding principles must be central and cross-cutting. Migration must be viewed in the broader context of development, debt, trade, war, global inequities, and climate change. We must honor the rights of all, without discrimination; acknowledge migrant realities; and recognize the contradictions between words and policies. The IMRF process offers us the possibility to do this, to identify and replicate positive policy examples, and to move forward together.

Author information

Carol Barton is a founding member of Women in Migration Network (WIMN), and co-led the Network for over a decade. She has been active in organizing WIMN’s presence during negotiations of the Global Compact for Migration, and served as a member of the UN Women-sponsored Expert Working Group for Addressing Women’s Human Rights in the Global Compact for Migration.

Regular Pathways

A CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE, NOT OF MIGRATION: PERMANENT PATHWAYS AS A SOLUTION

Roula Seghaier

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Editor's note: This piece was written through a conversation with women advocates of migrant rights. Special thanks to Anila Noor and our anonymous interlocutor, who, due to the strain experienced by migrant organizers, was obliged to exercise additional due diligence and keep their identity private.

Introduction

The global migration system is at a crossroads. Amid tightening borders, xenophobic rhetoric, and an over-reliance on temporary labor schemes, migration governance has become increasingly extractive – designed more to exploit than to protect. Migrants are often treated as disposable labor, recruited to fill low-wage jobs under restrictive conditions that deny them basic rights, mobility, and – crucially – any meaningful path to permanent residence or citizenship.

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Temporary programs, presented as “regular” migration pathways, are often short-sighted and inadequate, creating cycles of precarity rather than stability and leaving migrants vulnerable to exploitation while still failing to address long-term demographic, economic, and social realities.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) reaffirms the importance of regular pathways, including avenues toward permanent

residence and naturalization. Yet in practice, this remains among the most politically contested commitments. Without new or expanded regular pathways, more migrants will be pushed into irregular channels of movement, heightening their risks of exploitation, trafficking, and statelessness. In some contexts, such as the USA, even existing visa categories that once provided routes toward permanent residence and eventual citizenship are being curtailed, signaling a worrying retreat from durable solutions.

The urgency of this conversation will only deepen with the long-term consequences of climate change. As sea-level rise, desertification, and extreme weather make some regions uninhabitable, migration will not simply be a matter of short-term labor supply but of survival and adaptation. Migration is, tactically and realistically, a core adaptive mechanism – and it requires coordinated intergovernmental planning, not piecemeal temporary work programs. Those displaced by climate change must not be reduced to filling immediate labor market needs; they need long-term pathways to relocate, settle, and build futures with dignity.

Well-designed regular migration pathways produce tangible benefits for both migrants and governments. For migrants, they reduce vulnerability to exploitation, increase mobility, and provide dignity through legal recognition, permanent status, and social inclusion. For governments, regularization supports efficient labor markets, increases tax revenue, and reduces enforcement costs. Formal pathways lessen reliance on detention and deportation systems, freeing up resources for other

Regular pathways today are not broadly accessible; they are selective, exclusionary, and designed to benefit host countries rather than provide rights or long-term stability for migrants

priorities. By investing in long-term stability, states also enhance social cohesion and mitigate risks associated with irregular migration, including trafficking, debt bondage, and exploitation. Local governments and sanctuary cities have already demonstrated that such inclusive approaches can be both viable and beneficial, underscoring that alternatives to restrictive models are already within reach.

Migration systems today: Restriction by design

Migration is often framed in binary terms – regular vs irregular, skilled vs unskilled. Yet these categories are political, not neutral, and largely defined by European and Western institutions with little input from those most affected. Regular pathways today are not broadly accessible; they are selective, exclusionary, and designed to benefit host countries rather than provide rights or long-term stability for migrants.

While some states claim to be expanding “regular” migration options, these often take the form of restrictive, employer-tied visas. In many countries, pathways that could lead to permanent residence or citizenship are narrowing rather than growing. Governments continue to rely on temporary fixes, treating migrants as “guests” – expected to work but not to belong.

The limits of temporary schemes and non-labor pathways

Temporary labor programs dominate migration systems. These visas are conditional, tethering workers to specific employers and preventing them from changing jobs, organizing, or claiming fair wages without risking deportation. Family reunification is rarely permitted. Civic rights and political participation remain restricted, ensuring that migrants remain outsiders in societies they sustain through their labor.

This restrictive design is not accidental – it prioritizes short-term labor market needs over long-term social cohesion. Recruitment fees, weak enforcement, informality, and debt bondage keep migrants dependent and vulnerable. Non-labor pathways such as family reunification or humanitarian visas are constrained, reinforcing the logic that migration should serve markets first and people last.

A gendered and racialized system

Migration policies are deeply shaped by racism and nationalism. Host states often resist permanent inclusion of people perceived as “outsiders”, particularly those who do not belong to the dominant

ethnic or racial group. Temporary labor schemes fit this logic neatly: they allow migrants to fill immediate market needs without “compromising” population diversity through long-term settlement. Whether in South-North or South-South migration, racial and ethnic hierarchies are decisive factors in shaping policy.

For women, access to pathways is further constrained by gendered stereotypes and patriarchal structures. Those who do migrate are frequently confined to low-wage, undervalued work in domestic or caregiving sectors, where protections are weakest. Men are similarly funneled into construction and agriculture. These forms of occupational segregation entrench inequality.

Even when policies acknowledge vulnerability, they often tokenize suffering – prioritizing, for example, compulsory visibility of LGBTQI+ persecution cases – forcing migrants to compete for recognition based on trauma rather than ensuring broad, intersectional protection. This reduces human beings to bureaucratic categories of worthiness rather than affirming their rights.

Global commitments must be implemented

The world does not lack frameworks. The GCM, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, and ILO standards all point to fair, rights-based approaches. Yet implementation lags behind, blocked by weak political will and entrenched donor-driven agendas. In particular, recent shifts in donor priorities – especially in major Global North countries – are cutting funds to civil society organizations and steering remaining aid toward narrowly defined national security, defense, or economic interests rather than human rights or migrant protection.

Too often, states invoke global commitments rhetorically while designing policies that entrench exclusion. Migrant-led organizations and local communities remain marginalized in decision-making processes, relegated to symbolic participation at conferences rather than empowered as partners in shaping governance.

Principles for designing effective pathways

Policymakers aiming to reform migration systems should consider a set of guiding principles that prioritize both human rights and labor market efficiency. First, labor market alignment is essential. Independent commissions can objectively assess labor needs and guide visa issuance to prevent exploitation and ensure workforce stability. Second, freedom

Migrants should never pay for the right to work; employers and intermediaries must bear responsibility for all costs

from recruitment fees must be guaranteed. Migrants should never pay for the right to work; employers and intermediaries must bear responsibility for all costs. Third, visa autonomy is critical: workers should retain control over their status, able to change jobs or challenge abuse without fear of deportation. Fourth, integration pathways should provide a clear route to permanent residence and eventual citizenship, ensuring that temporary migration does not become a permanent state of precarity.

Family reunification is another foundational principle. Long-term workers should not have to choose between earning a livelihood and maintaining familial bonds. Access to civic rights – such as voting, association, and freedom of expression – further enhances social cohesion and belonging. Gender equity must be actively promoted, with monitoring to break occupational segregation. Finally, coherence between migration and labor policy is essential. Ministries

must collaborate to create systems that recognize the interdependence of workforce planning, labor protections, and migration governance.

Change requires coordinated action by multiple actors: trade unions; gender and women’s organizations; ministries of labor and migration; multilateral bodies, including the ILO and regional frameworks; and employer groups. Origin-country governments also have a role to play, shifting focus from remittance extraction to supporting their citizens’ rights abroad and facilitating their reintegration should they choose to return. Coalitions, such as Migration that Works, exemplify how multistakeholder collaboration can amplify impact and accountability.

Most of all, effective migration pathways must prioritize migrants’ rights, not just labor market efficiency. Employment-based access to permanent residence and citizenship can support economic needs, but must not come at the cost of human dignity.

Real-world examples of reform

Examples exist that, though imperfect, combine rights protection with long-term stability.

- Germany’s Triple Win Program recruits Filipino nurses with structured support including training, certification, and integration services, offering a pathway to permanent residence and citizenship after five years.
- Canada’s Express Entry and skilled refugee programs provide structured access to permanent residence, with community sponsorship models demonstrating how civil society can expand durable pathways.
- Spain introduced a significant reform in May 2025, reducing the required period of residence for the “arraigo sociolaboral” (social labor roots) from three to two years. This change aims to facilitate the regularization of undocumented migrants who have established ties to the country, offering them a route to legal status and eventual citizenship.
- Portugal extended the validity of residence permits that expired between 22 February 2020 and 30 June 2025, until 15 October 2025. This measure provides temporary relief to migrants affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing them to maintain legal status while awaiting renewal procedures.



- The Philippines’ “no placement fee” rule illustrates how origin countries can reduce debt and protect workers in migration processes.

Despite their limitations, these models prove that regular migration pathways can be designed to ensure stability and inclusion rather than perpetual precarity.

The cost of inaction

When governments fail to invest in regular, rights-based pathways, irregularity grows by design. Migrants turn to informal channels because legal routes are inaccessible, exploitative, or prohibitively expensive. This fuels debt, dependency, and vulnerability, while governments double down on enforcement, detention, and deportation.

The costs are immense: fractured families, segmented labor markets, wasted enforcement resources, and societies weakened by division. Most importantly, the human toll is profound – millions forced to live in fear and uncertainty, contributing labor but denied belonging.

Conclusion: Migration systems that work for all

Policymakers face a critical choice. They can continue investing in systems that exploit labor, deny rights, and criminalize movement. Or they can build migration pathways that are regular, fair, gender-responsive, and grounded in human dignity.

Migration is not a crisis. The crisis lies in how we govern it. The future depends on our willingness to shift from short-term extraction to long-term justice. Regular migration pathways are not a concession. They are a necessity.

Author information

Roula Seghaier is an interdisciplinary organizer working with migrant, refugee, and diasporic communities on movement building. Most recently, her work has focused on advocacy within international spaces such as the International Migration Review Forum, Global Compact for Migration, and Conference Committee on the Application of Standards reviews.

Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objectives 5 on regular pathways and 16 on inclusion and social cohesion, states must:

- 1 Expand and safeguard regular pathways without discrimination by nationality, work sector or income.
- 2 Establish and protect routes to permanent residence and citizenship, ensuring access not only for high-wage or “skilled” workers but also for low-wage, manual, and caregiving sectors.
- 3 Prohibit recruitment fees.
- 4 Ensure visa portability. Protect migrants’ freedom to change employers and claim justice without risking deportation.
- 5 Ensure family unity and integration. Prioritize pathways that allow migrants to reunite with family, participate in civic life, and access social protection – building inclusive, cohesive societies.

Care Economy

MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE CARE ECONOMY: ESSENTIAL BUT UNPROTECTED

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Introduction

Since the first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) in 2022, the care economy has moved to the center of global debates, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant domestic workers, the vast majority of them women, proved to be essential frontline workers during the crisis. Their labor – too often invisible, unprotected, and undervalued – kept households and entire societies functioning.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that care work represents 381 million jobs worldwide – about 11.5% of all employment. At least 25% of these jobs are performed by domestic workers, many of them migrants. Demand for paid care is only growing: the ILO projects around 300 million new jobs by 2035.¹ But the question remains: what kind of jobs, and under which conditions?

Connecting the GCM, the care economy, and migrant domestic workers

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) is a non-legally binding, cooperative framework that upholds the responsibilities of states and their obligations under international law to ensure that migration is safe, orderly, and regular, and that the rights of all migrant workers are protected. Yet, the realities of migrant workers in the care economy, especially migrant domestic workers, show a deep gap between commitments and practice.

Today, migrant domestic workers face contradictory realities. On one hand, governments and societies depend heavily on their labor. On the other, policies and legal frameworks deny them basic rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation,

On one hand, governments and societies depend heavily on migrant domestic workers' labor. On the other, policies and legal frameworks deny them basic rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and precarity

and precarity. Their situation lays bare the urgent need for GCM commitments to be realized through concrete protections for migrant workers in the care economy.

Several GCM objectives, such as Objective 6 on fair and ethical recruitment, Objective 7 on reducing vulnerabilities, Objective 15 on access to basic services, and Objective 17 on eliminating discrimination, directly address these issues. By incorporating international labor standards, such as C189, in their GCM implementation, states can ensure migrant domestic workers are included in legal frameworks, social protection systems, and mechanisms that uphold decent work conditions. Protecting migrant domestic workers is essential to achieving the GCM's broader goals of dignity, safety, and rights for all migrants.

Current context of migrant domestic workers

There are over 75 million domestic workers globally, including at least 12 million migrants,

Employer-tied visa systems place workers under their employers' control, with no freedom of movement or to change employer, and have been equated with modern-day slavery

the majority (80%) of them women. Driven by limited opportunities in their countries of origin, they migrate to provide for their families – most often to high-income countries where demand for care work is greatest. Yet this reliance on migrant labour is paired with systemic rights violations. Migrant domestic workers often face deception by recruiters, excessive fees leading to debt bondage, long working hours with little or no rest, restrictions on movement, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Many endure non-payment or underpayment of wages, occupational health risks, and limited access to justice.²

Exclusion from labor laws remains a major barrier. In many countries, migrant domestic workers are excluded from labor legislation altogether, or granted only partial protections. Their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are often denied due to their temporary or irregular status. Employer-tied visa systems, such as the kafala system in several Arab states and similar systems in other parts of Asia and Africa, place workers under their employers' control, with no freedom of movement or to change employer, and have been equated with modern-day slavery.

Precarious immigration status compounds exploitation. Undocumented and irregular migrant domestic workers are left with no access to legal protections, making them especially vulnerable to abuse, retaliation, and forced labor. Even in countries where labor laws have been extended, implementation and enforcement gaps remain widespread.

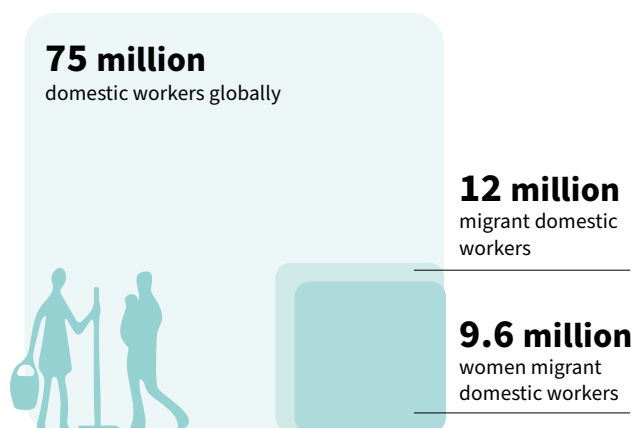
Finally, rising xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment further undermine democratic spaces and protections for migrant domestic workers. Border securitization and restrictive migration policies continue to deepen precarity rather than create safe and regular pathways in line with GCM objectives.

Organizing for rights and protections

Despite facing numerous and intersecting challenges, migrant domestic workers have organized across the globe through unions, community-based associations, and transnational alliances. They come together to share experiences and advocate for their rights, and have achieved significant victories, demonstrating the power of collective action, persistence, and global solidarity.

Ratification of C189

Through persistent organizing, migrant domestic workers and allies have achieved 36 ratifications of C189. The strongest momentum has come from Latin America and the Caribbean, where ratification has driven legal reforms and expanded protections. In Europe, ratification has led to significant reforms in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and advanced protections in Belgium, France and Italy. In the Philippines, it provided a foundation for the enactment of the Domestic Workers Law. In North



Despite facing numerous and intersecting challenges, migrant domestic workers have organized across the globe through unions, community-based associations, and transnational alliances. They come together to share experiences and advocate for their rights, and have achieved significant victories

America, it contributed to Domestic Workers' Bills of Rights in multiple US states. Yet ratifications remain absent in most of Africa and Southwest Asia, leaving large numbers without this basic protection.

Reforms in labor legislation

Worker organizing has pushed governments to recognize domestic work as legitimate employment. In Brazil, FENATRAD secured equal wages for domestic workers, while other countries in Latin America reformed national laws to recognize domestic work. In Thailand, the Network of Domestic Workers (NDWT) won an eight-hour workday, a weekly rest day, and 98 days of maternity leave.³ In Hong Kong, the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union (FADWU) achieved annual minimum wage increases. Italy's collective agreements set wages and conditions; France's agreements and CESU tool, which simplifies employment for personal home services, ensure protections; Belgium's service-voucher system formalizes domestic work and secures rights for those with regular status.

The majority of domestic workers worldwide remain excluded from social protection, particularly migrant domestic workers who are undocumented or have irregular status

Social protection victories

Globally, 81% of domestic workers are in the informal sector, rising to nearly 100% in Arab states and much of Africa.⁴ Organizing has secured progress despite these barriers. In Malaysia, migrant domestic workers have been included in mandatory social security schemes (SOCSO) since 2022. In Kuwait, bilateral agreements pushed by the Philippines secured improved protections for migrant domestic workers. In Spain, domestic workers were fully integrated into the social security system, and granted access to unemployment benefits, addressing a long-standing gap. However, the majority of domestic workers worldwide remain excluded, particularly migrant domestic workers who are undocumented or have irregular status.

Safe and fair recruitment

Organizing has challenged abusive recruitment practices. In Indonesia and the Philippines, affiliates secured zero-cost recruitment policies. In Hong Kong, financial penalties against abusive employment agencies were increased sevenfold, together with a six-year imprisonment term for such violations. In Kenya, litigation victories addressed wage theft, setting an important precedent in Africa. In Jordan and Kuwait, advocacy promoted alternative migration models. In Trinidad and Tobago, skills validation schemes strengthened migrant domestic workers' protections.

Access to regularization

The regularization of irregular migrant domestic workers has proven instrumental in expanding their rights across various nations. This process grants them access to labor protections, healthcare, social security, and the crucial ability to challenge abusive employers and seek justice. Several European countries, including Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom, have successfully implemented regularization models, securing independent migration status and work permits for migrant domestic workers. In Malaysia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Asosasyon ng mga Makabayang Manggagawang Pilipino Overseas (AMMPO) and Persatuan Pekerja Rumah Tangga Indonesia Migran (PERTIMIG) successfully advocated for a "recalibration program" that included irregular migrant domestic workers, allowing them to obtain work permits.

In many countries, the regularization pathway remains challenging, with processes frequently hindered by high administrative burdens, including excessive fees, extensive documentation requirements, and lengthy processing times. Furthermore, the involvement of recruitment agencies often introduces additional challenges, with unscrupulous agencies exploiting migrant domestic workers' desperation by charging exorbitant fees, confiscating passports, or providing misleading information, ultimately jeopardizing their regularization efforts.

Conclusion

The global care crisis is deepening, and demand for care work is rising. Migrant domestic workers stand at the center of this crisis: essential to households and societies, yet denied recognition, rights,

and protections. Their situation embodies the contradictions of migration governance today.

Migrant domestic worker organizing has demonstrated the importance of collective power in achieving rights. Their victories provide lessons for governments: that progress is possible when workers are recognized, organized, and engaged in social dialogue.

Yet gaps remain stark. Many countries still deny migrant domestic workers the status of workers, excluding them from labor protections. Enforcement is weak even where laws exist. Driven to informality and irregular migration, millions remain exposed to abuse. The persistence of kafala systems, employer-tied visas, and anti-migrant policies directly contradict the commitments of the GCM and undermine the rights of women workers on whom economies depend.

States must take responsibility: by ratifying and implementing C189, reforming labor laws, and creating safe pathways. But until governments fully recognize domestic work as work, ensure rights for all migrants regardless of status, and align national laws with GCM commitments, migrant domestic workers will remain in conditions of exploitation and invisibility.

The future of the care economy must not be built on the denial of rights to the very workers who sustain it.

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Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 6 on recruitment and decent work and GCM Objective 7 on reducing vulnerabilities, states must:

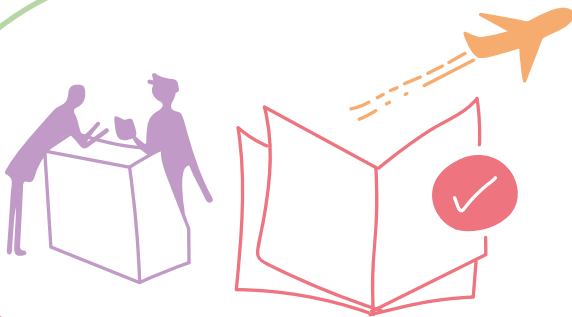
- 1 Recognize migrant domestic workers as workers. Ratify and implement ILO Conventions 29, 189 and 190, and the UN Migrant Workers Convention (1990).
- 2 Ensure freedom of association. Ratify ILO Conventions 87 and 98 and end discrimination and retaliation against unionized migrant domestic workers.
- 3 Expand social protection. Guarantee equal access for all migrant domestic workers, including portability of benefits across borders.
- 4 Guarantee safe and rights-based migration. Abolish employer-tied visas, enforce zero-fee recruitment policies, and establish accessible grievance and justice mechanisms.
- 5 Provide regular pathways. Implement inclusive, affordable regularization programs.

favorable conditions that enhance people's choice to migrate or stay.

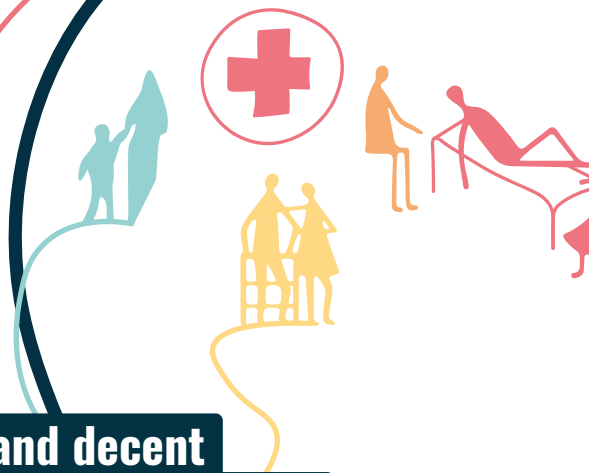


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a narrative on migration that respects and humanizes migrants.

actions regardless of status.

migration free from discrimination, stigmatization, violence and unjust, punitive actions.

access to full and meaningful participation of all migrants in civic life and policymaking.

WELCOME



Climate Crisis

THE RISE OF INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE PACIFIC

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Acknowledgment: The authors give their deepest thanks to Richard Gokrun, Pefi Kingi, Salote Soqo, Liam Moore, and Manasa Bollempalli for sharing their insights, which vastly improved the piece. In particular, the authors recognize the Tuvalu Climate Action Network, from whose leadership we have learned so much. Any errors are the authors' alone.

The climate crisis is driving unprecedented migration worldwide, displacing millions through both sudden-onset disasters and slower ecological shifts, such as drought and sea-level rise. Simultaneously, climate change is exacerbating political and economic instability, and contributing to conflicts over resources, further driving displacement. While the majority of climate-induced displacement occurs internally within countries,¹ cross-border displacement is a significant risk facing communities in Pacific low-lying atoll states.

Climate change is exacerbating political and economic instability, and contributing to conflicts over resources, further driving displacement

International climate migration policies

The Pacific region has become a focal point for emerging forms of international climate migration governance. Although Pacific Island nations have contributed a meager 0.03% to global greenhouse gas emissions, they are on the frontline of an unstable

climate. The nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati and Marshall Islands are undergoing existential threats from sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and an increase in storm severity. In response, grassroots advocacy groups are organizing for urgent mitigation of emissions and adaptation funding so that they can stay on their land, but also for dignified mobility as a last resort.

Existing international legal frameworks lack clear pathways for people displaced due to climate change. However, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) recognizes climate change as a driver of migration and encourages states to address the issue. Some promising legal precedents are emerging, most recently, recognition by the International Court of Justice² and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights³ that people may be entitled to international protection, including non-refoulement, where they face life-threatening risks due to climate change. In 2023, two promising developments marked a shift toward formalizing international climate migration pathways in the Pacific:

- The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty,⁴ which commits Australia to setting up a human mobility pathway for Tuvalu citizens to move to Australia.
- The Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility,⁵ a multilateral framework to coordinate climate mobility efforts across Pacific Island nations.

The nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati and Marshall Islands are undergoing existential threats from sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and an increase in storm severity

Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union

By late July 2025, most Tuvalu citizens had applied for visas under the Falepili Union, which entered into force in August 2024. Of the 8,750 who applied, 280 have been randomly allocated visas. While the Falepili Union marks an achievement as the first bilateral treaty to promise permanent visas in the context of climate change, it has faced several criticisms.

First, the Tuvalu and Australian governments did not consult the Tuvalu people until after the Treaty text had been agreed, creating distrust. In a bid to assuage Australia's fears about China's influence in the Pacific, the Treaty states that "Tuvalu shall mutually agree with Australia any [...] engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters", potentially undermining Tuvalu's independence and resurrecting colonial power dynamics. Nowhere in the agreement does Australia, the Pacific region's largest emitter, commit to greater reductions in emissions – the ultimate driver of climate-induced displacement. However, Australia does commit to "work with" Tuvalu to help ensure Tuvaluans can adapt and stay in their homes, including through international advocacy. Australia also commits to assisting Tuvalu in the event of a natural disaster, public health emergency, or military aggression.

Despite these concerns, as seen in this pilot year, demand far outpaces supply for the visas. The visas are inclusive of people of all ages and of people with disabilities. Successful applicants are selected by ballot, and will be given permanent residency with travel rights, enabling them to work or study in Australia while maintaining ties with Tuvalu. They will also be eligible for all benefits of permanent residents on arrival, which further supports mobility with dignity. And should the worst come to pass, and Tuvalu's land be submerged, Australia recognizes Tuvalu's continuing statehood and sovereignty.

Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility

In November 2023, the Pacific Island countries endorsed the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility, one of the first regional agreements comprehensively addressing climate mobility. It aims to "guide Pacific Islands Forum governments, communities, non-state actors and partners in ensuring rights based and people-centred movement in the context of climate change." Developed under the auspices of the IOM-led Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security (PCCMHS) Programme, it was informed by consultations with Pacific communities. The Framework's governing principles are leadership and collaboration; human rights, human security and protection; protecting cultural heritage, identity and dignity; and continuing statehood regardless of sea-level rise.

Unlike the Falepili Union Treaty, the Framework explicitly recognizes the need for emissions mitigation, and commits to action to limit warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Parties commit to expanding policies on humanitarian admission and stay; coordinating cross-border evacuations; creating safe migration pathways; and providing support for cross-border migrants. The parties also state that they will consider labor mobility arrangements to deal with socioeconomic climate harms. On planned cross-border relocations, the parties commit to determine best practices to ensure that when these are necessary, they are carried out in a safe, dignified and timely manner, respect human rights, fully consult with affected and receiving communities, and provide for the maintenance of cultural ties and access to sites of origin.

Although the Framework contains an implementation section, it largely kicks the can down the road, in foreshadowing the development of a "comprehensive implementation and monitoring plan". Without clear enforcement or funding, the Framework risks stalling. However, there are promising signs in the development of a Pacific Regional Guidance on Planned Relocations, and the expected release of an implementation plan later in 2025.

As seen in this pilot year, demand far outpaces supply for the visas

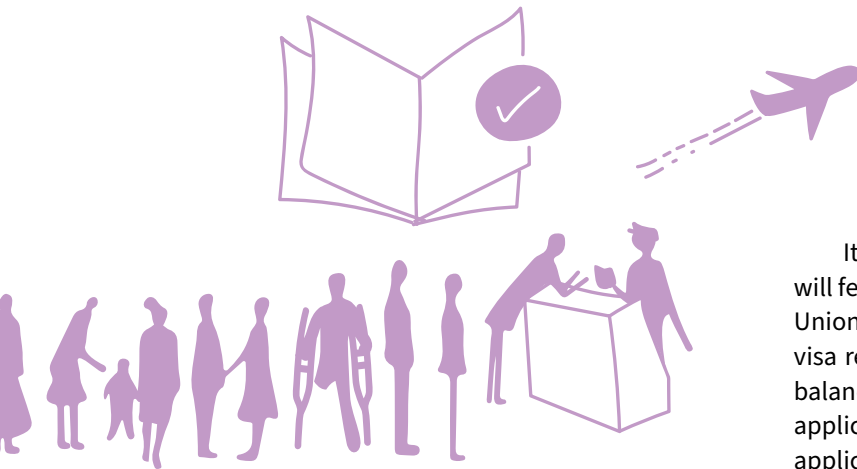
As in other arenas of climate action, the Pacific is leading the way. In a political environment where many countries are mistreating migrants and retreating to isolationism, it is heartening to see countries come together to re-embrace rights-based principles and lay the groundwork for dignified mobility.

Gendered burden of climate displacement

Looking ahead, the impacts of both these agreements must be examined to ensure that people with intersecting marginalized identities are centered and prioritized in migration pathways. Social norms frame women and girls as primary caregivers, while limiting their control over resources and excluding them from decision-making spaces. This unequal positioning heightens their exposure to physical harm and economic insecurity during crises and displacement. Racialized, pregnant, elderly, queer and disabled women face compounded vulnerabilities due to intersecting systems of oppression.



Human mobility with dignity is a critical part of climate justice, but cannot meet the challenge alone. Power-dominant nations must also fulfill their responsibilities to reduce emissions and invest in adaptation



In a political environment where many countries are mistreating migrants and retreating to isolationism, it is heartening to see countries come together to re-embrace rights-based principles and lay the groundwork for dignified mobility

It remains to be seen how differentiated impacts will feature in the implementation of both the Falepili Union and the Framework. Because Falepili Union visa recipients will be selected by ballot, the gender balance of accepted applicants may simply mirror the applicant pool. Spouses and children of the primary applicant can be included in applications, which should support family unity.

Within the Framework, gender is addressed implicitly. The Framework states that its “rights-based and people-centred approach will reflect and address differing impacts of climate change on different groups”. Women and gender are mentioned in the glossary under “vulnerable or marginalised groups” and “migrants in vulnerable situations,” yet these terms are not used elsewhere in the document, suggesting that past drafts used different terminology or the glossary is intended for broader use. How Pacific countries engage women in consultations as the Framework is implemented will be critical to ensuring their needs are addressed.

Looking ahead

As Pacific nations lead on new frameworks for climate mobility, there is an opportunity to model care and collective sovereignty for communities who migrate and those who remain. The development of the Falepili Union and the Pacific Framework marks a pivotal shift in how climate-induced displacement is addressed globally. Yet, the equity and effectiveness of these policies will depend on engagement with impacted communities, especially those who are often excluded from decision-making spaces, including women.

Human mobility with dignity is a critical part of climate justice, but cannot meet the challenge alone. Power-dominant nations must also fulfill their responsibilities to reduce emissions and invest in adaptation. Opportunities exist to link migration policies to climate finance mechanisms to strengthen adaptation and ensure comprehensive protection. Policymakers would do well to learn from the Pacific's example.

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Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 2 on minimizing adverse drivers, and GCM Objective 5 on regular migration pathways, states must:

- 1 Develop regional frameworks on climate mobility.
- 2 Develop inclusive permanent residence visas for those who face climate-induced displacement, with rights to employment, study, healthcare, and family reunification.
- 3 Ensure that action on climate mobility is paired with deep commitments to emissions reduction and investment in adaptation, given communities' desire to stay in place.
- 4 Ensure that action on climate mobility is based on deep consultations with impacted communities, with particular attention to marginalized groups.

Regularization

RETHINKING REGULARIZATION: A MIGRANT-CENTRIC APPROACH

Glenda Belen Huerto Vizcarra

Activist with Regularización Ya
and Red de Migradas y
Racializadas de Euskal Herria

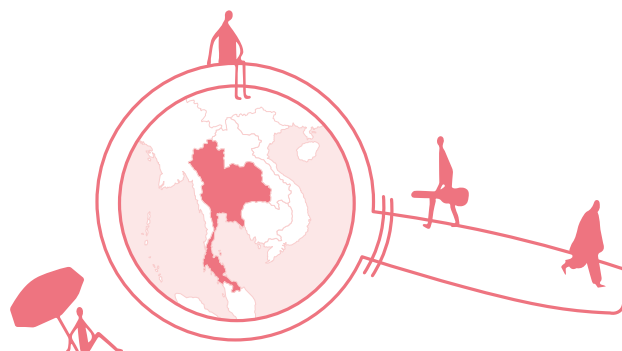
With contributions from Lina Arroyave of Dejusticia, Eve Sin of the Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association, and Dome Sooktawee and Mic Chawaratt of the International Detention Coalition and the Thailand Migration Consortium.

Over the past five years, migrant communities worldwide have been impacted by the erosion of migrant rights and adverse trends in border management regimes. Despite this, people continue to migrate, but in great precarity and in a state of limbo, with restricted access to pathways for legal status. This situation perpetuates structural inequalities, with a disproportionately detrimental effect on migrant communities, particularly on women, gender-diverse people and children, due to the intersection of factors such as race, gender, class, religion, and geopolitics.

Regularization is therefore a pressing concern. It enables access to rights; recognizes migrants as an integral part of society, contributing to economic and social growth with dignity; and facilitates the design of more efficient public policies. For the migrant grassroots movement Regularización Ya, based in Spain, regularization is an ethical act that shows a commitment to social justice, decolonization and respect for human rights. Hence, regularization is a starting point to promote a new migration policy with the lives and rights of migrant people at its core.

For the migrant grassroots movement Regularización Ya, based in Spain, regularization is an ethical act that shows a commitment to social justice, decolonization and respect for human rights

This article examines and compares three different practices of regularization mechanisms and formulates recommendations based on these: the cabinet resolutions to regularize migrant workers in Thailand, the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) in Colombia, and the migrant-led Popular Legislative Initiative (ILP) for the extraordinary regularization of migrant people in Spain.



Thailand: Regularization with limitations

Due to its geopolitical stability and growth, Thailand is a prime destination for migrants within the Southeast Asian region, but despite a migration history dating back to the mid-1950s, its migration management remains complex and fragmented. Despite some efforts to adopt a human rights approach, notably birth registration and a non-Thai ID for migrant children, which grant access to healthcare and education, the system still prioritizes national security and economic interests. Different mechanisms regulate migrants based on their origins, entry points, and reasons for migration, favouring so-called “skilled” workers over manual workers, who face temporary stays and restrictions. These complex

and costly processes push many of the latter toward irregular pathways,¹ exposing them to exploitation, trafficking, and forced labor.

Cabinet resolutions address this by allowing migrants in irregular conditions, and their dependents, to temporarily regularize their situation, provided they meet criteria such as nationality verification and employer registration. Eligible individuals have 15 days to register for the first time and obtain documents: a non-Thai ID card, valid for ten years or until the work permit expires; a certificate of identity for those without passports, valid for two years and renewable thereafter; and a work permit, valid for one year, also renewable. The time-limited and temporary nature of registration hinders migrants' inclusion as full citizens.

Due to their design, registration and renewals can be challenging for individuals and businesses, leaving those in the informal economy less protected, and subjecting those who are regularized to restrictions on employment and movement,² since employers retain their documents, which leaves them vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Issues involving misinformation, rural and technological gaps, and language barriers also force migrants to use brokers, increasing costs that affect their livelihood. Cabinet resolutions offer security and stability for migrant workers and their dependents, but this mechanism is also unpredictable, limited, and expensive.

Due to their design, registration and renewals can be challenging for individuals and businesses, leaving those in the informal economy less protected

Colombia: Nationality-specific regularization

Until recent years, Colombia was more a country of emigration than a destination, due to its internal armed conflict and role as a migrant transit corridor. The presence of migrant communities there became more apparent only after the crisis in Venezuela. Since Venezuelan nationals arrived in 2015, the government was urged to create mechanisms to regularize their status. Due to the temporary nature and limited reach in terms of socioeconomic integration, a new regularization policy was adopted in 2021: the ETPV, which included a Unified Registry



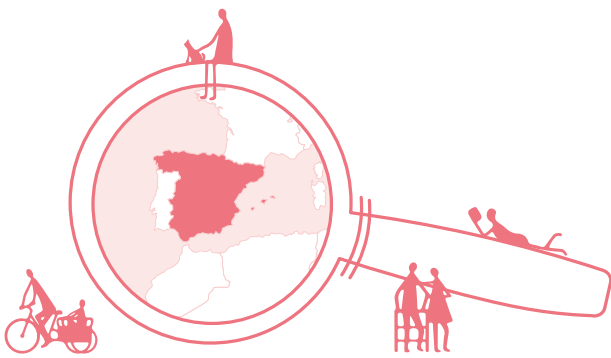
(RUMV) and a Temporary Protection Permit (PPT) as an identification document. Although beneficial, this policy focused only on Venezuelan nationals, excluding other migrant populations in transit or residing in the country.

The ETPV was restricted to Venezuelan migrants who had entered before 31 January 2021, or within the first two years of the mechanism's validity. Although the process closed in 2023, it remains open to Venezuelan children, who can register until 2031.³ The mechanism's objective was twofold: to identify and characterize the Venezuelan population through RUMV, and to regularize their migratory status in order to promote the country's economic growth and development.⁴ Those meeting the criteria have ten years to transition to regular pathways and can benefit, not without difficulties, from the rights associated with the PPT, such as access to healthcare, education, work permits, and banking services.

The ETPV is a significant step toward a human rights model, especially as Colombia had never had a migration policy before. It shows a commitment, enforced by the Constitutional Court,⁵ to adapt to migrants' needs, such as exemption from fees, acceptance of expired passports, elimination of the Hague Apostille, permanent regularization for children and an extension for women survivors of gender-based violence. Civil society organizations have however raised concerns over the Statute's temporality and short timeframe, and the

The ETPV is a significant step toward a human rights model, especially as Colombia had never had a migration policy before

RUMV's biometric data collection. The former ignores the reality of migrant influx, leaving newly arrived migrants unprotected; the latter singles out migrants, forcing them to surrender their privacy rights without transparency or guarantees. This "voluntary" requirement was flawed from the start and could potentially expose migrants to security breaches, ethnic profiling, and discrimination. Hence, further changes are required to move from a humanitarian to a human rights model.



Spain: Opportunity for a migrant-led mechanism

Spain has had a migration management system for over four decades, unified after several amendments under the current Organic Law 4/2000. The legislation was shaped by political shifts and economic interests aligned with EU policy, rather than migrant populations' needs. Due to the law's restricted and exclusionary nature, as well as its intricate residence regulations, several extraordinary regularizations were implemented following pressure from migrant communities and civil society.

When the pandemic struck, the gap between citizens and migrants in irregular situations became critical. Street vendors, sex workers, agricultural workers and women in domestic and care work were the most affected, facing increased exploitation and layoffs, while experiencing racist law enforcement actions and exclusion from healthcare and public policies. This context propelled collective action and Regularización Ya was formed to demand rights and social justice. In 2022, Regularización Ya promoted the ILP Regularización, a bottom-up initiative designed to benefit approximately 500,000 people essential to Spain's society and economy.

Embodying a human rights and intersectional approach, this extraordinary regularization advocates for structural changes to migration policy, moving away from instrumentalization of migrant

communities and market-driven regularization towards recognizing the centrality of migrants' humanity. This initiative therefore aims for an open regularization without requirements or restrictions, and to reach those excluded by other regularization mechanisms, such as those without work contracts or city registration, and asylum seekers negatively impacted by the latest migration reform in May 2025. However, since the ILP's 2023 admission into Parliament, other domestic issues have overshadowed it. Despite being a direct participation mechanism, proposed by a coalition of migrant collectives, achieving its aim remains a challenge due to the government's lack of political will.

Conclusion

These examples of regularization share some similarities and present gaps that must be considered. Highlighting the barriers faced by migrant groups in accessing regular pathways to residency and citizenship, the ILP Regularización aims to make regularization more inclusive and migrant-centric, unlike previous state-led initiatives. Similarly, Colombia's state-led regularization mechanism has tailored the procedure to the realities of the migrant community, demonstrating that it is possible to have flexible requirements on identity, residency or point of entry. Thailand's and Colombia's regularization processes also provide special protection to arriving or newborn children, to reduce numbers of stateless children.

Nonetheless, when regularization is a state-led procedure, the diversity and heterogeneity of migrant communities is often overlooked, putting their populations at risk of exclusion. For example, Colombia's ETPV mechanism, in the absence of differential approaches, excludes other nationalities, ethnic groups, and people in transit. It has also created biometric databases, which endanger migrants' right to privacy and can lead to discriminatory practices. In Thailand, migrant workers' prospects to regularize their status depend on criteria often

When regularization is a state-led procedure, the diversity and heterogeneity of migrant communities is often overlooked

Migration policies reflect a systemic approach that fails to recognize migration as a human right, and considers irregular migration as a personal decision rather than a consequence of structural barriers

beyond their control, showing no concern for their needs, just as in the Spanish context. Even the ongoing ILP Regularización is at risk, as it relies on parliamentary representatives and could fall victim to racist, restrictive, and instrumentalized regulations. A lack of attention to gender and racial disparities, rural and technological gaps, and language barriers undermines every state-led regularization. As a result, structural violence is perpetuated.

These three contexts share an absence of permanent regularization mechanisms and a lack of political interest in making the existing instruments accessible to the broader migrant population. This situation reflects a systemic approach that fails to recognize migration as a human right, and considers irregular migration as a personal decision rather than a consequence of structural barriers at the origin and destination. A new migrant-centric paradigm is required, built upon freedom of movement, human rights, inclusion and social justice.

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Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 5 on regular pathways, states must:

- 1 Establish permanent and accessible pathways to residency and citizenship, taking a holistic approach that guarantees real inclusion.
- 2 Improve regularization processes, making them affordable, simple, and adapted to migrants' realities: extend deadlines, consider bureaucratic delays, accept expired passports, remove requirements such as proof of employment, etc.
- 3 Remove biometric requirements.
- 4 Promote the unity of families in all their diversity, ensuring children are registered and granted citizenship regardless of their parents' migratory status, and extending children's secure administrative status to parents.
- 5 Guarantee access to healthcare and education.

Criminalization

PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM CRIMINALIZATION TO RIGHTS IN MIGRATION

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Introduction

Global migration governance has shifted toward punitive, securitized approaches, treating migrants as threats rather than rights-bearing individuals. Policy is dominated by dehumanizing and ineffective measures such as externalization of borders, detention, and mass deportations, undermining migrants' rights, liberty, and safety.

The criminalization of migration is fueled by xenophobia, racism, profit, and political gain. Private companies profit from detention and surveillance. Anti-migrant narratives are exploited for votes while migrants, unable to vote, are scapegoated. Consequences include deteriorating health, family separation, loss of livelihoods, and weakened cohesion, disproportionately harming women, children, LGBTQI+ persons, and people with insecure migration status.

International law, and non-binding agreements such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), provide safeguards and promote rights-based and gender-responsive migration governance. Yet implementation is weak, with punitive measures expanding, driven by politics instead of evidence.

Private companies profit from detention and surveillance. Anti-migrant narratives are exploited for votes while migrants, unable to vote, are scapegoated

Wealthy states outsource border control to avoid international legal obligations. Australia's "Pacific Solution" sent asylum seekers offshore, causing years of suffering

This paper explores forms of criminalization and highlights alternative practices that prioritize rights, protection, and regularization.

Issue analysis

Fortified borders and militarization

Borders are increasingly militarized, as seen on the US-Mexico frontier, where deterrence strategies like Title 42 and [Remain in Mexico](#) subordinate humanitarian needs. Harsha Walia describes this "border imperialism"¹ as reinforcing inequality and criminalizing mobility of racialized, impoverished groups.

Externalization of borders

Wealthy states outsource border control to avoid international legal obligations. Australia's "Pacific Solution" sent asylum seekers offshore, causing years of suffering. The EU Migration Pact enables fast-track expulsions and containment at the periphery, with Frontex playing a central role. Italy's deal with Albania extends EU externalization, replicating harmful detention models with little oversight. In the US, the Trump administration has also expanded "third-country deportations", accelerating removals.

Prolonged detention and enforced disappearances

The expansion of immigration detention has become normalized, with indefinite and prolonged detention featuring across multiple contexts. Migrants, including children, face prison-like conditions with minimal safeguards. [Significant research](#) shows that

The expansion of immigration detention has become normalized, with indefinite and prolonged detention featuring across multiple contexts

detention does not deter migration, harms physical and mental health, and is ineffective and costly. In contexts such as [Libya](#) and the US – including deportations from the latter to El Salvador in 2025 – enforced disappearances occur, contravening non-refoulement.

Surveillance and digital policing

Governments increasingly deploy drones, biometrics, and facial recognition to police mobility, often without oversight. These technologies enable “digital detention” and indiscriminate use of algorithms, and reinforce racialized and automated control, with little data protection. Information is often shared with non-state actors for profit, deepening risks.

Xenophobia, nationalism, and criminalizing solidarity

Politicians scapegoat migrants for social, political and economic issues, while solidarity – like rescue at sea or providing shelter – is criminalized, evidenced in the prosecution of the [Luventa crew in Italy](#) for saving lives in the Mediterranean. In India, nationalist laws such as

the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and National Register of Citizens create systems which may render minorities stateless and subject them to immigration detention.

Hostile narratives fuel raids and deportations. In the US, ICE raids, workplace arrests, and family separations have intensified, violating due process and inflicting trauma. Similar practices in France, the UK, and Malaysia are justified as maintaining public order, further marginalizing already vulnerable groups. Rising nationalism links migrants to crime or invasion, encouraging vigilantism and hostility.

Promising practices and alternatives

Migration governance does not have to rely on detention, surveillance or militarized borders. Evidence shows community-based non-detention programs are more humane and cost-effective, and support compliance and case resolution. A different paradigm based on rights, protection, and regularization offers a win-win for migrants and governments in terms of reaching case resolution and protecting rights.

Rights-based systems

Several South American countries illustrate migration governance models based on rights and dignity. Ecuador’s Human Mobility Law closed detention centers and operationalized the right to migrate, enabling access to work, health, and services. Similarly, Uruguay also avoids detention, ensuring universal access to services.

Regularization over criminalization

Colombia, Portugal and Thailand have regularized thousands, granting access to services and employment, and thereby strengthening inclusion and stability. Regularization is further explored in “Rethinking Regularization: A Migrant-centric Approach”, [page 24](#).

Migration governance does not have to rely on detention, surveillance or militarized borders. Evidence shows community-based non-detention programs are more humane and cost-effective

Criminalization of migration is a policy choice, not an inevitability. Migration must be treated as a natural human reality

Ending child detention

Some countries have advanced with laws and policies that prohibit child immigration detention, in line with international law. Mexico banned child detention in 2021, creating a Child Protection Route. Belgium ended child detention in 2024, introducing individual case management, while Malawi prohibits child detention, integrating all children into its National Child Protection system.

Gender-responsive measures

Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Kazakhstan prohibit detention of pregnant women, considering the gender-specific harms of detention. Australia, New Zealand, and the UK grant residence permits to migrant women survivors of domestic violence, enabling protection and stability.

Community-based non-detention initiatives

Where detention policies are reinforced, community-based, non-detention alternative programs offer a more humane and effective approach to migration governance. Case management and community placement promote case resolution without deprivation of liberty. In the Philippines, migrant

children are referred to social services rather than detained. Thailand's 2019 alternatives to detention (ATD) memorandum of understanding (MOU) released more than 2000 children to community settings. Zambia and Zimbabwe strengthen referrals for asylum seekers and children, preventing detention. Türkiye's 2019 reforms introduced seven ATD types in law, embedding alternatives in governance.

Enabling factors for change

Several emerging elements can be identified as enabling factors for developing and implementing rights-based migration policies that shift focus away from securitization.

Choosing rights and pragmatism

Colombia, hosting nearly 3 million Venezuelans by 2022, chose regularization over criminalization. Driven by economic considerations, Colombia extended rights to its Venezuelan population by enabling access to legal pathways and services, recognizing that criminalization policies were ineffective and costly.

Whole-of-government

Effective reform requires coordination across ministries and levels of government, "to ensure horizontal and vertical policy coherence" (GCM, para. 15 (i)). Examples of this in action include Thailand's ATD MOU involving seven departments, and Belgium's coordination of immigration, asylum reception, and local authorities on ATD.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration and whole-of-society

The GCM also promotes whole-of-society governance, to ensure informed and comprehensive policy development. Belgium, Mexico and Thailand involve civil society in ATD design and case management, improving sustainability and outcomes for migrant children and families.



Connecting advocacy across levels

Linking local, regional, and global advocacy builds momentum and coherence, as it situates issues faced at a national level within larger migration trends. An example is the UN Network on Migration's ATD Workstream which connects national reforms with global pledges, ensuring commitments translate into action.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the narrative

Criminalization of migration is a policy choice, not an inevitability. Migration must be treated as a natural human reality. A just paradigm demands replacing deterrence with dignity, surveillance with safeguards, and exclusion with inclusion. And to ensure that systems reflect realities, not just political agendas, migrant voices must inform policy. Governance grounded in rights, inclusion, and social justice affirms our shared humanity and collective future.

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Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 5 on regular pathways and GCM Objective 11 on managing borders, states must:

- 1** End detention and replace it with rights-based, community alternatives.
- 2** Expand safe, regular pathways for all, with fair access to rights, status and legal safeguards.
- 3** End militarization and externalization of borders.
- 4** Uphold non-refoulement and asylum rights.
- 5** Repeal laws that criminalize humanitarian assistance.

TECHNOLOGY IN MIGRATION: FROM SURVEILLANCE TO SUPPORT

Antonella Napolitano
Independent researcher

The author would like to acknowledge Alejandra Elizalde Trinidad from CoLibres, Irem Arf from the International Trade Union Confederation and Sadikshya Maharjan from AMKAS Nepal for their contributions to this piece.

There is a striking contrast in the use of technology in the migration context: on one hand, borders are being shaped as a network of surveillance that stretches across time and space, and that migrants experience as a continuous presence. On the other hand, people on the move are using, repurposing, and building tools to create counter-networks of resistance and care.

Where regular migration pathways are denied, migrants are forced to adapt and forge their own – increasingly aided by technology. Digital systems (such as messaging apps, social media, and GPS tools) are used to organize, coordinate routes and avoid detection, advertise services, and collect money through digital payment systems.

Rather than tackling trafficking by addressing their own policies which drive migrants toward dangerous routes, law enforcement agencies, especially in the Global North, have raised concerns about secure systems features like encryption, and argued for expanded surveillance powers to conduct investigations. They advocate for measures like backdoors in encryption and broader data access. However, critics including civil society and even tech companies warn that such measures undermine overall safety, exposing all users to surveillance abuse and loss of human rights, especially for marginalized communities and solidarity networks, already disproportionately targeted.

Complicating the issue is the presence in this space of private companies as key actors: technology and security companies provide border technology to governments, digital platforms are used to facilitate smuggling and trafficking of migrants, airline companies deny boarding. As they are private, for-profit actors, with policies not rooted in human rights standards, abuses are less accountable, while state responsibilities are eroded.

The “everywhere border”, powered by technology

A vast infrastructure of digital surveillance and algorithmic control, financed and implemented by states in the Global North, is used to manage, deter, and discipline mobility. Technology is making borders ubiquitous, with digital tools heralded as a solution by governments and companies. This has been described as the “everywhere border” to indicate its all-encompassing nature.

Though these tools are justified in the name of “security” or “efficiency”, they deepen racialized inequalities. Gender inequalities are also exacerbated by the lack of information and services for needs such as access to reproductive health and psychological wellbeing.

Since the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration, Global North countries have increased their spending on border technology. In the USA, the Biden and Trump administrations financed expansion of surveillance infrastructure at the US-Mexico border. In the European Union, civil society studies point to a trend of increasing resources for border management throughout the period 2021-2027, with technology in the form of infrastructure, equipment and creation of IT databases, as well as border externalization funding for non-EU countries.¹

**Though these tools are justified
in the name of “security” or
“efficiency”, they deepen
racialized inequalities**

We can observe the mission creep from regular law enforcement investigations to include asylum applications

Before the border: Externalization and risk profiling

Surveillance technologies are provided to origin and transit countries in an attempt to curb migration flows, a core tenet of US and EU strategies. Examples include equipping and training of security forces; financing of operations and procurement; facilitating exports of surveillance equipment by industry; and promoting legislation which enables surveillance. As noted in this report's articles on criminalization and regularization, the creation of biometric identity systems also poses a concern: these endanger privacy rights, can lead to discriminatory practices, and in particular can be used to share people's data and assist in deportations.

The deployment of these tools threatens the rights to asylum, the right to leave one's country, and the principle of non-refoulement, as well as the rights to privacy and liberty. It also actively contributes to instability in origin and transit countries: these tools have reportedly been used to quash popular movements and spy on journalists and human rights defenders.

Border technologies include databases that collect vast amounts of personal data to assess risk profiling in visa applications, processed by opaque algorithms. Risk scores, influenced by nationality, age, gender, and economic status, can preemptively deny entry to individuals who have never even left their home countries, embedding inequality into the very first step of mobility. In 2019, civil society revealed that the UK Home Office had been using an automated system to process visa applications, allegedly resulting in visa denials based on country of origin.

Additionally, forecasting tech tools are created to predict largescale forced displacement. While humanitarian actors can use them to prepare assistance to displaced people, these same systems can lead to pushbacks:² in 2022, a coalition of civil society organizations and researchers asked for the withdrawal of a tool developed with EU research funds, flagging how predictive systems could lead governments to interdict border crossing and further criminalize people on the move.

Technology at the border: The digitized front line

The border has become a zone of intensive digital scrutiny. Governments deploy extensive sets of surveillance tools, including:

- **Mobile phone extraction and social media monitoring:** Upon arrival, migrants may be forced to surrender mobile phones for data extraction. Software provided by surveillance companies can retrieve call logs, GPS history, photos, and even deleted content. This is used to "verify" asylum claims and charge individuals with smuggling. Civil society groups, including Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte in Germany and Privacy International in the UK, have challenged the practice, arguing that it invades privacy and lacks safeguards (its use in the UK was deemed unlawful). We can observe the mission creep from regular law enforcement investigations to include asylum applications. More recently, social media monitoring has been expanded in the USA to demand access to social media in visa applications.
- **Facial recognition and biometric registration:** Facial recognition cameras are deployed in airports, at land borders, and in public spaces. Biometric data is collected and stored in centralized databases such as the EU's Eurodac in Europe or the US' IDENT. These systems are often interoperable with law enforcement and counterterrorism databases, turning migrants – and everyone else traveling, for that matter – into perpetual suspects.
- **Surveillance towers and satellites:** In border zones like the US-Mexico frontier, surveillance towers equipped with radar, thermal imaging, and long-range cameras track human movement. Drones and satellites complement this ground-based monitoring. These tools direct patrols and enforcement operations.

The “everywhere border” extends to people with legal status: discrimination against migrants is widespread and normalized, in some contexts enshrined in law and aided by algorithms

Across borders, migrants are repurposing the very technologies that monitor them to build solidarity, expose abuses, and push for rights

After the border: Surveillance in daily life

For many migrants, especially asylum seekers and undocumented individuals, surveillance continues after the border.

In countries like the US, the UK and Australia, “risk-assessing” algorithms and electronic monitoring tools like GPS-enabled ankle bracelets track every movement of migrants released from immigration detention, with severe effects on their mental health.

But the “everywhere border” extends to people with legal status: discrimination against migrants – in welfare, housing, healthcare, labor and more – is widespread and normalized, in some contexts enshrined in law and aided by algorithms.

Tight labor regulations are the result of a pre-occupation with “entitlements” based on immigration status rather than a human rights-based approach. Some national policies exclude migrants from labor protections. Digital platforms use algorithmic management to monitor productivity and control access to safety conditions: from delivery workers terminated with little recourse to domestic workers being subjected to abuse, these digital systems are further marginalizing migrant laborers, effectively turning people into products rather than service providers. Concerns have been raised that some tools could allow employers³ to track the movements of their employees (for example with automatic location-tracking technology) or gain access to data stored.

It is hard to estimate the presence of migrant workers in the gig economy: figures vary significantly by country, and undocumented migrants are not represented. Recent research shows that about 18.5 percent of migrant workers participated in the gig economy in the US as their primary or secondary job. Analysis of representative EU data shows that foreign-born people are about 13 percent more likely to resort to platform work to make a living.⁴

How apps and platforms are designed, owned and managed is crucial to ensure the safety of their users – and of their migrant staff: even those with lucrative jobs in the US tech industry are more vulnerable to exploitation and layoffs as their immigration status and healthcare are connected to their jobs.

Digital resistance:

How migrants use technology to self-organize

The surveillance regime of the “everywhere border” is expanding, but is not uncontested. Across borders, migrants are repurposing the very technologies that monitor them to build solidarity, expose abuses, and push for rights.

In 2021, following a violent raid by authorities, the collective Refugees in Libya created a shared account on Twitter to get their stories out. Today, they also operate a free, multilingual WhatsApp hotline for refugees, providing support in emergency cases, advocating for migrant rights in Libya and beyond, and reclaiming the narrative about who migrants are.

Feminist organizations like Colibres in Mexico work with women and girls in vulnerable situations and train them on the use of open-source technologies, connecting them with relevant services. Through cooperatives, they are also providing phone and internet services, emphasizing the importance of communications for people on the move.



***New forms of empowerment:
Tech-driven labor organizing***

While platforms have become tools of surveillance and exploitation, they have also created new avenues for workers' self-organizing. Social media is used to expose unsafe conditions, while digital tools have enabled the creation of informal networks to coordinate collective action and influence policy, with examples from the USA to Brazil to China.

The app Golden Dreams, designed by and for workers in Southeast Asia, crowdsources and shares information that is critical for their labor migration.⁵ Workers use it to rate ethical recruitment agencies that don't take fees from workers, addressing an issue of great concern which has not been properly tackled by governments.

In Peru, the Organización Sindical de Conductores Profesionales y Autoempleados (OSCPA), a union created and mainly led by migrant gig economy workers, supports migrant workers in overcoming obstacles for the recognition of documents and against the lack of protection on platforms.

Conclusion

To align migration governance with the principles of dignity, safety, and cooperation enshrined in the Global Compact for Migration, there must be transparent governance, strong safeguards, and inclusive policymaking rooted in human rights.

Governments' use of technology has been funded and developed with a focus on security and control, resulting in people's criminalization. But these tools can be a force for protection when deployed centering the rights and welfare of migrants, in the service of fair and efficient migration.

The challenge for policymakers, migrants' rights advocates, and tech workers is to meaningfully support these efforts: creating legal frameworks that protect the dignity of people on the move, redirecting funds to support digital infrastructure for organizing, and pushing for transparent and accountable tech.

Author information

Antonella Napolitano is an independent researcher specializing in the impact of technology on human rights, particularly on migration.

Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 7 on addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration, states must:

- 1** Limit the scope and use of surveillance technologies at borders and conduct human rights impact assessments before deploying such systems.
- 2** Ban the use of predictive analytics or AI-based risk-scoring systems, recognizing their biases.
- 3** Encourage local, low-tech, migrant-led solutions that respect privacy and trust over automated surveillance.
- 4** Encourage data minimization and prohibit the misuse of migrants' personal data. Strictly limit data collection to only what is necessary, anonymized where possible.
- 5** Store data securely. Give migrants clear access rights and data control as well as the right to erasure and ability to opt out of data collection.

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ISBN 979-8-218-86600-6



9 798218 866006



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