SOCHUM

Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee

Agenda:

Combating the Exploitation of Migrants, with Focus on Smuggling Networks, Labor Abuse, and State Responsibility in Protection Mechanisms.

DALY COLLEGE MODEL UNITED NATIONS 2026

Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee

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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is with immense pleasure and great anticipation that we welcome you to the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) at DCMUN 2026. We are truly excited to host each one of you for what promises to be an engaging, thought-provoking, and impactful committee experience. As delegates gather from diverse perspectives and backgrounds, we look forward to witnessing meaningful debate, diplomatic collaboration, and innovative problem-solving throughout the conference.

This year, SOCHUM shall deliberate upon the agenda: "Combating the Exploitation of Migrants, with Focus on Smuggling Networks, Labor Abuse, and State Responsibility in Protection Mechanisms." The relevance of this issue has become increasingly evident in today's global climate. Ongoing wars, political instability, humanitarian crises, economic disparities, and forced displacement across various regions of the world have resulted in unprecedented levels of migration. In such circumstances, vulnerable migrant populations are often subjected to exploitation through trafficking networks, unsafe labor conditions, abuse of rights, and inadequate protection mechanisms.

The issue before this committee is not merely one of border management or migration policy—it is fundamentally a question of human rights, international responsibility, and humanitarian accountability. As conflicts continue to reshape societies and force millions from their homes, the international community faces the challenge of balancing national interests with moral and legal obligations toward migrant protection. Delegates must therefore critically analyze not only the immediate consequences of migrant exploitation, but also the political, economic, and social systems that allow such exploitation to persist.

As members of SOCHUM, delegates are encouraged to actively engage in debate, negotiation, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. This committee seeks individuals who are willing to challenge assumptions, evaluate competing viewpoints, and collaborate toward practical solutions. Diplomacy within this committee should extend beyond rhetoric and idealism; the ultimate goal is to produce realistic, effective, and implementable outcomes capable of addressing the complexities of migrant exploitation on an international scale.

The theme of DCMUN 2026, "Nexus Temporis," serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness between past, present, and future. Many of the migration crises and humanitarian inequalities witnessed today are deeply rooted in historical conflicts, colonial legacies, economic disparities, and longstanding geopolitical tensions. By learning from the mistakes and experiences of the past, delegates have the opportunity to shape policies and solutions that can contribute toward a more secure, just, and humane future.

At DCMUN 2026, success in committee will not be determined solely by eloquence or diplomacy, but also by critical thinking, practicality, cooperation, and the ability to formulate

sustainable solutions. We encourage every delegate to approach this committee with preparation, open-mindedness, and a commitment to constructive dialogue.

We eagerly look forward to the discussions, negotiations, and ideas that you will bring to the committee, and we are confident that SOCHUM will emerge as a space for meaningful debate and impactful resolutions.

If you have any questions or just want to chat about the upcoming sessions, feel free to reach out:

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Looking forward to the incredible discussions and ideas you'll bring to the table!
Warm regards,

The Executive Board of SOCHUM, DCMUN 2026

Introduction to the Agenda

In an increasingly interconnected world, migration has emerged as a defining feature of global development, with millions of individuals crossing borders in search of safety, opportunity, and improved living conditions. However, this movement has simultaneously exposed migrants to severe forms of exploitation, particularly through smuggling networks, labor abuse, and inadequate state protection mechanisms. These challenges raise critical concerns regarding human rights, dignity, and international responsibility, placing the issue at the forefront of global humanitarian discourse.

While migration can contribute positively to economic growth and cross-cultural exchange, the absence of safe and legal pathways often compels migrants to rely on illicit smuggling networks. These networks frequently subject individuals to dangerous journeys, financial extortion, and violence. Upon arrival in destination countries, many migrants encounter exploitative labor conditions, including underpayment, unsafe working environments, and denial of fundamental rights. Such practices disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including women, children, and undocumented migrants, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities and social injustices.

The issue is further compounded by significant gaps in state protection mechanisms. Weak legal frameworks, inadequate enforcement of labor laws, and restrictive migration policies often leave migrants without access to justice, healthcare, or social protection. This not only perpetuates cycles of exploitation but also undermines international commitments to uphold fundamental human rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Moreover, the transnational nature of migrant exploitation necessitates strengthened international cooperation. Persistent disparities in economic development, ongoing conflicts, and limited employment opportunities in countries of origin continue to drive irregular migration, increasing vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

In response, the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee emphasizes a comprehensive, rights-based approach that balances border management with the protection of human dignity. This includes strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing international cooperation to dismantle smuggling networks, ensuring fair labor standards, and expanding access to protection services. By prioritizing these measures, the international community can work toward reducing exploitation and promoting safe, orderly, and dignified migration for all.

Committee Overview

Historical Context:

The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) is the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, established in 1945 under the UN Charter. It serves as a principal forum for the discussion of social, humanitarian, and human rights issues affecting populations worldwide.

Emerging in the aftermath of World War II, SOCHUM reflects the international community's recognition of the need to safeguard human dignity and fundamental freedoms. Over time, the committee has contributed significantly to the development of global human rights norms, including frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today, SOCHUM addresses the advancement of women, protection of children, treatment of refugees, elimination of racism, and promotion of fundamental freedoms, and more, reinforcing its central role in advancing global human rights and social development.

Relevance to migration, law and development:

SOCHUM plays a central role in addressing the exploitation of migrants, particularly in areas such as human trafficking, labor abuse, and protection of vulnerable populations. Migration is deeply connected to human rights, as migrants often face discrimination, unsafe conditions, and lack of access to basic services.

The committee works towards humane treatment, access to justice, and social integration while highlighting the defence of migrant rights regardless of legal status. It draws attention to the risks associated with smuggling networks and the growing likelihood of exploitation, particularly for women and children.

SOCHUM investigates the humanitarian aspects of migration, such as displacement brought on by poverty and conflict. To encourage safe, orderly, and respectable migration, it collaborates closely with organisations such as the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Through its resolutions and debates, SOCHUM encourages member states to adopt rights-based approaches that prioritize human dignity while addressing global migration challenges.

Composition of the Committee:

SOCHUM includes all Member States of the United Nations General Assembly, meaning all 193 UN member states have equal representation within the committee.

Each country has one vote, ensuring inclusivity and equal participation in discussions on global social and humanitarian issues. The committee is led by a Bureau, including a Chair and Vice-Chairs, elected annually to facilitate debate and maintain order.

Governance, Structure and Membership

Voting Procedure:

SOCHUM operates primarily through formal debate, negotiation, and consensus-building. However, when consensus cannot be achieved, decisions are made through formal voting, with each Member State holding one vote.

Decisions are typically adopted by a simple majority of members present and voting, in accordance with Article 18 of the UN Charter. The committee produces draft resolutions and recommendations, which are subsequently submitted to the General Assembly for final adoption.

Although these resolutions are not legally binding, they carry substantial political and moral authority and contribute to the development of international norms and standards.

SOCHUM's work is informed by reports and expertise from key UN bodies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as specialized agencies and Special Rapporteurs.

Relationship with other UN bodies and regional blocs:

SOCHUM collaborates extensively with UN agencies engaged in humanitarian and human rights efforts, including UNICEF, UN Women, and the Human Rights Council, ensuring coordinated and comprehensive policy responses.

It also works alongside regional organizations such as the African Union, European Union, and ASEAN to facilitate the implementation of international commitments at the regional level.

Mandate, functions and powers

The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) operates as a principal committee of the United Nations General Assembly, deriving its authority from the Charter of the United Nations, particularly Article 13, which mandates the promotion of international cooperation in addressing humanitarian issues and advancing human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Within this framework, SOCHUM serves as a key forum for deliberation, policy formulation, and norm-setting on issues related to migration and human rights. In addressing the exploitation of migrants, the committee focuses on strengthening international responses to transnational organized crime, improving labor standards, and enhancing state accountability in protection mechanisms. Rather than enforcing binding measures, SOCHUM influences global governance through dialogue, consensus-building, and the development of recommendations that guide Member State action.

The committee's primary function is to draft and adopt resolutions that are subsequently submitted to the General Assembly for consideration. While these resolutions are not legally binding, they carry significant political weight and contribute to the evolution of international norms, particularly in areas such as migrant protection, fair labor practices, and the prevention of exploitation.

SOCHUM's work is informed by reports, data, and expert analysis from key United Nations bodies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as Special Rapporteurs and independent experts. This ensures that its recommendations remain evidence-based, relevant, and responsive to emerging global challenges.

In addition, SOCHUM operates within a structured system of procedural governance and institutional accountability. Its proceedings are guided by the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, and its outputs are subject to review and adoption at the plenary level. Through this process, the committee contributes to shaping coordinated international responses and reinforcing shared standards of responsibility among Member States.

Legal documents and treaties

1. International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)

This Convention, which was ratified by the UN General Assembly, provides extensive guidelines for the protection of migratory workers and their families. It upholds essential rights like access to justice, fair working conditions, and protection against exploitation, irrespective of immigration status. However, its global enforcement is constrained by the comparatively low ratification of key migrant-receiving jurisdictions.

2. Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000)

It aims to prevent and criminalise migrant smuggling, and is an addition to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime. Stronger border restrictions, international collaboration, and the prosecution of smuggling networks are all encouraged. It has been criticised for putting state security considerations ahead of comprehensive protection systems for impacted persons, even while it recognises the necessity to protect smuggled migrants.

3. ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and Protocol (2014)

The International Labour Organization Forced Labour Convention and its 2014 Protocol require states to prevent forced labor, protect victims, and ensure access to remedies. These instruments are particularly relevant to migrant exploitation in high-risk sectors.

4. Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018)

This non-binding framework provides a comprehensive approach to international migration governance, addressing vulnerabilities, labor conditions, and state responsibilities. It encourages cooperation and policy coherence among states. However, as a voluntary agreement, its implementation depends heavily on political will and national-level commitment.

5. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

All people, including immigrants, are entitled to the fundamental freedoms, equality, and dignity outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although it offers a universal normative framework, its non-binding character means that it must be incorporated into national legal systems in order to be effectively enforced.

Introduction to Key Words:

1. Exploitation of Migrants

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, exploitation is a situation in which somebody unfairly treats somebody else by abusing their vulnerable social, economic or legal position, especially in order to make money from their work. In the context of this agenda, exploitation of migrants is the core issue being addressed which is causing a widespread human rights crisis. This combats the vulnerability of migrants, especially those moving through irregular routes, due to **language barriers**, **lack of legal status** or **economic desperation**. This makes migrants easy targets for forced labour, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, sexual exploitation and much more. This agenda focuses on how such exploitation is enabled and sustained by **smuggling networks**, **weak labour protections** and **inadequate state response**.

Migrants vs Refugees: A migrant is a person who moves across borders or within a country voluntarily for reasons like employment or better opportunities. Their protection comes mainly from general human rights frameworks, and their legal status is determined by the domestic laws of the receiving state. Whereas, a refugee is someone forced to flee due to

persecution, conflict or violence and is entitled to specific international protections, including protection from being returned to unsafe conditions.

2. Smuggling Networks

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Smuggling refers to the illegal movement of goods or people across borders, especially to avoid laws or regulations. In the context of this agenda, smuggling networks are a major enabler of migrant exploitation. These are **organized groups** that facilitate the illegal entry of migrants into countries, often in exchange for high fees. While smuggling may begin as a voluntary transaction, it frequently leads to **debt bondage, dangerous travel conditions, abandonment or coercion**, etc. Smuggling networks often operate transnationally and are closely linked to **organized crime**, making migrants dependent on them and increasing their vulnerability to further exploitation, abuse, and even trafficking. This agenda focuses on how such networks sustain cycles of exploitation and evade weak regulatory systems.

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3. Labour Abuse

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Labour abuse refers to the unfair or improper treatment of workers, especially by violating their rights, underpaying them, or exposing them to unsafe working conditions. In the context of this agenda, labour abuse is one of the most common forms of exploitation faced by migrants. Migrant workers, especially those in low-skilled or informal sectors are often subjected to **wage theft or underpayment, excessive working hours, unsafe or hazardous conditions, denial of basic rights and benefits**, etc. This is worsened by factors such as lack of legal documentation, language barriers, and dependence on employers or intermediaries. As a result, migrants may be unable or unwilling to report abuse, allowing such practices to continue unchecked. The agenda highlights how labour abuse is closely linked to smuggling networks and **weak state enforcement**, making it a key area requiring stronger protection mechanisms and accountability.

Labour Abuse vs Forced Labour: Labour abuse includes a wide range of unfair practices such as underpayment, poor conditions, or denial of rights. Whereas, Forced labour, as defined by the International Labour Organization, refers to work that is performed involuntarily under threat, coercion, or penalty. Overall, while not all labour abuse amounts to forced labour, weak labour protections and poor enforcement often allow abusive conditions to escalate into severe exploitation, particularly for migrant workers in informal sectors.

4. State Responsibility and Protection Mechanisms

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, State responsibility refers to the obligation of a government to ensure the protection, rights, and welfare of individuals within its jurisdiction. Protection mechanisms are the laws, policies, and systems put in place to safeguard

individuals from harm and uphold their rights. In the context of this agenda, state responsibility is crucial in preventing and addressing the exploitation of migrants. Governments are responsible for enforcing labour laws, regulating migration systems, preventing smuggling networks, ensuring access to justice and support services, etc. However, **weak enforcement, corruption,** and **lack of coordination** often result in ineffective protection mechanisms, allowing exploitation, labour abuse, and smuggling activities to persist. This agenda emphasizes the need for stronger legal frameworks, better implementation, and international cooperation to ensure that migrants are protected at all stages of migration.

State Responsibility vs State Sovereignty: State responsibility refers to the duty of a state to protect human rights and uphold international obligations. Whereas, State sovereignty refers to a state's right to govern itself without external interference. Overall, states cannot justify inaction by citing sovereignty, as they remain legally and morally obligated to protect migrants from exploitation, regardless of their legal status.

Smuggling VS Human Trafficking

Smuggling

Migrant smuggling refers to the facilitation of a person's illegal entry into a country in exchange for financial or material benefit. According to the United Nations, it typically involves a **consensual agreement** between the migrant and the smuggler, as individuals often seek these services due to a lack of safe and legal migration pathways. Smuggling is inherently **transnational**, requiring the crossing of international borders, and the relationship between the smuggler and migrant usually ends upon arrival at the destination. However, while it begins as a voluntary arrangement, the process is frequently dangerous and can expose migrants to serious risks, including violence, extortion, and life-threatening conditions during transit.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the illegal act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving people through **force, fraud, or coercion** for the purpose of exploitation. This exploitation can include forced labor, sexual exploitation, slavery-like practices, or even organ removal. **Victims are controlled** through threats, violence, debt bondage, or psychological manipulation, preventing them from leaving their situation. Human trafficking can occur both across borders and within a single country, making it a widespread and complex crime. It disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including women, children, migrants, and individuals facing poverty or instability.

The legal distinction

Under the Palermo Protocols, human trafficking is a crime against a person, while migrant smuggling is primarily a crime against the state.

In cases of human trafficking, the trafficked individual is legally recognized as a **victim** of a human rights violation. States are obligated to **provide protection** measures such as access to shelter, medical care, psychological support, and legal aid, and are also entitled to non-criminalization.

In migrant smuggling, the smuggled individual is not automatically considered a victim under international law. They are often subject to **immigration penalties**, such as detention, fines, or deportation for irregular entry or stay. However, complications arise when migrants are coerced into participating in smuggling activities or when smuggling situations evolve into exploitation. These cases lead to the misidentification of victims as offenders. This is why many international bodies now emphasize the need for **case-by-case assessment.**

What happens to exploited migrants in smuggling?

Exploited migrants who are used as smugglers occupy a legally and morally complex position, as they are often **treated as perpetrators** despite being victims themselves. In many cases, smuggling networks coerce migrants into assisting with operations—such as guiding routes, transporting others, or handling logistics—by using threats, violence, or debt bondage. This means their **involvement is not voluntary** but a direct result of exploitation.

However, in practice, authorities in many countries still arrest, detain, and prosecute these individuals under anti-smuggling laws, as they are seen as part of criminal networks. This can lead to imprisonment, heavy fines, or deportation, often without a thorough investigation into whether their actions were coerced. Legal systems may rely on surface-level evidence—such as a migrant being found driving a vehicle or coordinating movement—without examining the power dynamics or threats involved. Language barriers, lack of legal representation, and fear of authorities further prevent migrants from explaining their situation. In some cases, fast-track judicial processes or strict border policies result in quick convictions, reinforcing a cycle where victims are punished while higher-level smugglers evade accountability.

The Change of Form: Treatment of Exploited migrants the same way as human traffickers

In many states, exploited migrants are often treated similarly to human traffickers, particularly when they are found assisting in smuggling activities. Legal systems tend to categorize anyone involved in facilitating irregular migration as an **offender**, without adequately examining whether their actions were carried out under coercion, threats, or debt bondage. As a result, individuals who are themselves victims of exploitation may face **prosecution, detention, or deportation** under the same frameworks used for organized traffickers.

This approach reflects a failure to differentiate between intentional perpetrators and coerced participants, ignoring the power imbalances that define exploitation. It also contradicts the need for victim identification and protection. Treating exploited migrants as criminals

undermines their rights and also weakens enforcement efforts by targeting low-level actors rather than those who control and profit from exploitation networks.

Example: Organ trafficking and Organ Smuggling

Organ trafficking refers to the illegal trade of human organs through force, fraud, or coercion, making it a form of human trafficking. Victims may be deceived, pressured, or even physically forced into giving up organs, often without proper medical care or compensation. This constitutes a serious human rights violation, as it involves exploitation and abuse of vulnerable individuals for profit. It can occur both within and across borders, and victims often suffer long-term health consequences.

Organ smuggling involves the illegal but more consensual movement or sale of organs, typically across borders, in violation of national laws. While still illegal, it may involve individuals who agree to sell an organ, often due to financial desperation. However, even in these cases, the line between consent and coercion can be blurred, as poverty and lack of alternatives heavily influence such decisions.

Where does Labour exploitation come in?

Labour exploitation is the key link between smuggling and human trafficking. Many migrants who are **smuggled voluntarily** end up working in **abusive conditions** like low or no wages, long hours, unsafe workplaces, or restricted freedom. If this involves force, threats, or deception, it legally becomes human trafficking for forced labour. In such cases, the migrant is treated as a **victim**, not a criminal.

However, not all exploitation meets this legal threshold. Some migrants face harsh but less clearly forced conditions, meaning they **may not be officially recognized** as victims and may still face penalties.

Smuggling Networks

Root Causes of Smuggling Networks

Human smuggling networks emerge primarily due to the imbalance between restrictive migration systems and the increasing global demand for mobility. Millions of individuals attempt to migrate each year in search of safety, economic opportunity, or stability. However, legal migration pathways remain inaccessible, expensive, or heavily restricted, forcing migrants to rely on irregular means of movement.

One of the most significant root causes is poverty and **economic inequality**. Individuals from low-income or conflict-affected regions often view migration as their only pathway toward survival and financial security. Large disparities in wages and living standards between developing and developed countries create strong incentives for irregular migration.

Conflict and **political instability** also contribute heavily to the growth of smuggling networks. Wars, civil unrest, persecution, and state collapse in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, and parts of the Sahel region have displaced millions of people. In the absence of functioning legal systems and safe migration channels, smuggling groups capitalize on desperation.

Restrictive immigration policies and border militarization further strengthen smuggling networks. As borders become more heavily guarded, migrants are forced toward increasingly dangerous and expensive routes. Rather than reducing migration, restrictive policies often increase the profits and influence of smugglers.

Another major factor is the **demand for cheap labor** in destination countries. Informal sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, construction, and manufacturing often depend on undocumented or irregular migrant labor. This economic demand indirectly sustains smuggling operations.

Weak governance, **corruption**, and poor law enforcement also enable the growth of smuggling networks. Corrupt officials, border guards, and local authorities may facilitate illegal crossings in exchange for bribes. In some regions, smuggling has become deeply integrated into local economies.

Climate change and environmental degradation are emerging causes of irregular migration. Droughts, floods, desertification, and food insecurity are displacing populations, particularly in vulnerable developing regions. Since climate migrants are not fully recognized under international refugee law, many are forced into smuggling routes. Ultimately, migrant smuggling is not solely a criminal issue but also a symptom of deeper global inequalities, governance failures, and gaps within international migration systems.

Vulnerable Dimensions of Migrant Smuggling

Certain groups face significantly higher risks within smuggling networks due to social, economic, legal, and political vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities increase the likelihood of exploitation, abuse, trafficking, violence, and death during migration journeys.

Women migrants are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, harassment, forced labor, and **gender-based violence**. Many women traveling through smuggling routes face abuse from smugglers, criminal groups, employers, and even state authorities. Women working in domestic labor sectors are especially vulnerable due to isolation and lack of legal protection.

Children and **unaccompanied minors** represent another highly vulnerable category. Many children migrate without guardians, making them easy targets for trafficking networks, forced labor, child marriage, or illegal adoption schemes. Smuggling networks frequently exploit the lack of documentation and legal protections available to minors.

Refugees and asylum seekers are often exposed to severe risks because they flee conflict or persecution with limited resources and urgent need for movement. Delays in asylum systems

and restrictive refugee policies force many individuals toward dangerous smuggling channels.

Undocumented migrants face constant fear of detention and deportation. Due to their irregular status, they are less likely to report abuse, seek legal assistance, or access public services. This invisibility allows exploitation to continue unchecked.

Stateless persons are particularly vulnerable because they lack recognized citizenship and legal identity. Without documentation or nationality, they are frequently denied access to education, employment, healthcare, and safe migration systems.

Economic vulnerability also plays a significant role. Migrants who borrow large sums of money to finance their journeys may become trapped in **debt bondage**, where they are forced to work under exploitative conditions to repay migration-related debts.Language barriers, discrimination, cultural isolation, and lack of awareness regarding legal rights further increase vulnerability. Many migrants are unable to understand contracts, communicate with authorities, or seek assistance in destination countries. These vulnerabilities highlight the importance of adopting victim-centered and rights-based approaches when addressing migrant smuggling.

Different Modes of Smuggling

Migrant smuggling occurs through various methods depending on geography, border controls, technology, and economic resources available to both smugglers and migrants.

Land-based smuggling is one of the most common forms. Migrants are transported through deserts, forests, mountains, and porous borders using trucks, buses, cars, or by foot. Examples include the US–Mexico border and Sahara Desert routes in Africa. Such journeys often expose migrants to dehydration, abandonment, and violence.

Sea-based smuggling involves transportation through overcrowded boats, fishing vessels, inflatable dinghies, or cargo ships. Mediterranean crossings between North Africa and Europe represent one of the deadliest maritime migration routes globally. Sea-based smuggling carries high risks of drowning, starvation, and abandonment.

Air-route smuggling generally involves forged documents, fake visas, identity fraud, or visa overstays. Smugglers may collaborate with corrupt officials or use sophisticated document fabrication systems. Although less physically dangerous than land or sea routes, air-route smuggling is highly organized and expensive.

Container and concealment smuggling involves hiding migrants in shipping containers, trucks, cargo compartments, or hidden vehicle sections. These methods often result in suffocation, heat exposure, and death due to lack of ventilation.Digital smuggling networks have expanded rapidly in recent years. Smugglers use social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and online forums to advertise routes, communicate with migrants, and coordinate payments.Another emerging form is premium or VIP smuggling, where

wealthier migrants pay large sums for safer travel, forged documents, luxury transportation, or legal cover through fake educational or employment opportunities.Transit smuggling occurs through multi-stage journeys involving several countries and different smuggling groups at each stage. These networks are highly decentralized and difficult for authorities to dismantle. The diversity of smuggling methods demonstrates the adaptability and complexity of transnational smuggling networks.

Role of Technology in Smuggling Operations

Technology has transformed migrant smuggling networks by increasing their efficiency, reach, secrecy, and adaptability. Smugglers increasingly rely on digital tools to recruit migrants, coordinate movement, avoid detection, and transfer funds across borders.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and other encrypted communication services are widely used by smugglers to advertise migration routes and connect with potential clients. Smugglers often present irregular migration as safe and successful, while concealing the associated risks.

Encrypted messaging applications allow smuggling groups to communicate securely and avoid surveillance by law enforcement agencies. Real-time updates regarding border patrols, checkpoints, weather conditions, and route changes are frequently shared digitally.

Technology is also used for document fraud and **identity manipulation**. Advanced software, artificial intelligence, and digital editing tools have made it easier to create forged passports, visas, work permits, and residency documents.

Financial technology has significantly changed payment systems within smuggling operations. Cryptocurrencies, digital transfers, and informal online payment systems allow smugglers to move funds internationally with limited traceability.

GPS systems and navigation tools help smugglers identify less-monitored routes and coordinate movement across deserts, forests, and maritime regions. Some networks even use drones and surveillance technologies to monitor border security activities.

However, technology is also increasingly used by governments and international organizations to combat smuggling. Biometric systems, AI-based border surveillance, facial recognition, and digital databases are being implemented to identify irregular movement and dismantle criminal networks.

The growing role of technology has therefore created a complex environment where innovation benefits both smugglers and enforcement authorities.

Case Study:The Mediterranean Migration Crisis

The Mediterranean Migration Crisis is widely regarded as one of the most severe and politically sensitive migrant smuggling crises in the modern world. The crisis primarily involves migrants and refugees attempting to travel from North Africa and the Middle East toward Europe through dangerous maritime routes across the Mediterranean Sea.

The crisis intensified significantly after the Arab Spring and the collapse of political stability in several countries, particularly Libya and Syria. Armed conflict, civil war, economic instability, persecution, terrorism, and weak governance displaced millions of individuals. In the absence of safe and legal migration pathways, many migrants became dependent on organized smuggling networks.

Libya emerged as one of the most important transit hubs for migrant smuggling operations. Following the collapse of centralized governance after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, criminal groups, militias, and traffickers gained control over major migration routes. Smuggling networks began operating sophisticated systems involving transportation, document fraud, temporary detention camps, bribery, and sea transportation.

Migrants traveling through Libya often experienced severe abuse before even reaching the Mediterranean coast. Reports from international organizations documented physical violence, torture, extortion, sexual exploitation, forced labor, starvation, and arbitrary detention in unofficial migrant camps controlled by militias and smugglers.

Smugglers commonly transported migrants using overcrowded rubber dinghies, fishing boats, or unseaworthy vessels. Many boats lacked sufficient fuel, navigation systems, food supplies, or life-saving equipment. Smugglers frequently abandoned migrants at sea after departure in order to avoid arrest.

The Mediterranean route soon became one of the deadliest migration corridors globally. Thousands of migrants died due to drowning, dehydration, suffocation, hypothermia, and shipwrecks. Humanitarian organizations repeatedly warned that restrictive migration policies were forcing migrants toward increasingly dangerous smuggling routes.

European states responded differently to the crisis. Some countries prioritized humanitarian rescue missions and asylum protections, while others emphasized border security,

anti-smuggling operations, and deterrence policies. This created major divisions within the European Union regarding migration responsibility-sharing.

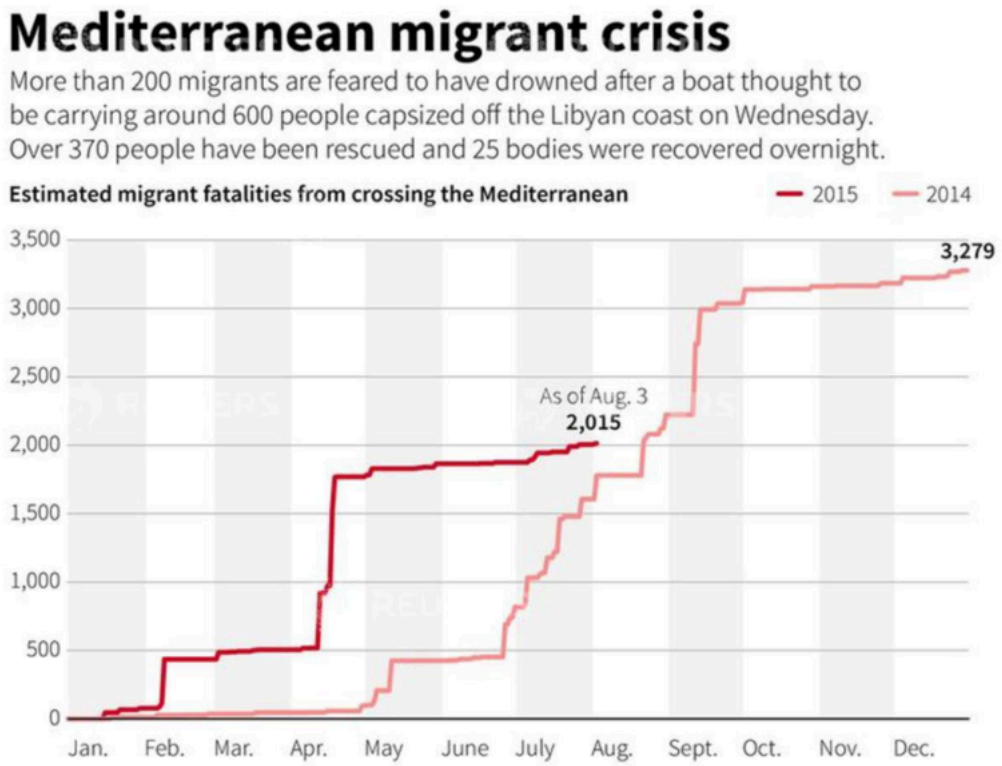
Operations such as maritime patrols and naval surveillance were introduced to intercept smuggling vessels and strengthen border control. However, critics argued that stronger border enforcement alone did not reduce migration demand and instead increased the profits and influence of smuggling networks.

Another controversial issue involved the externalization of migration control. Several European states cooperated with transit countries, particularly Libya, to prevent migrants from reaching European shores. Critics argued that outsourcing border control exposed migrants to severe human rights abuses inside transit states.

The Mediterranean crisis also highlighted the close connection between migrant smuggling and organized crime. Smuggling operations became highly profitable, generating millions of dollars for criminal groups. In several cases, smuggling networks overlapped with trafficking operations, arms smuggling, and money laundering systems.

Women and children were among the most vulnerable populations during the crisis. Many women faced sexual violence and exploitation during transit, while unaccompanied minors were exposed to trafficking, forced labor, and abuse.

The Mediterranean Migration Crisis ultimately demonstrated that migrant smuggling is not merely a border-security issue but also a humanitarian, political, economic, and international governance challenge. It exposed weaknesses in global migration systems, divisions among states, and the difficulty of balancing national sovereignty with international human rights obligations.



Economic Drivers Behind Smuggling Networks

Economic factors play a central role in sustaining migrant smuggling networks across the world. Smuggling networks operate because migration has become economically profitable for both criminal organizations and certain labor sectors.

One of the primary economic drivers is global inequality. Large differences in wages, employment opportunities, and standards of living encourage individuals from developing countries to seek opportunities abroad.

Destination countries often depend on migrant labor in sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, manufacturing, hospitality, and transportation. Employers may prefer undocumented or irregular workers because they can be paid lower wages and are less likely to demand legal protections.

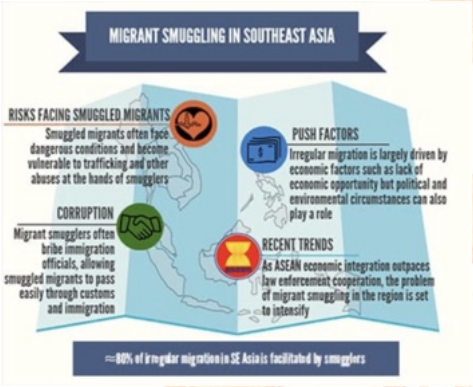
High unemployment, economic instability, inflation, and lack of social mobility in origin countries further increase migration pressures. Families frequently view migration as a long-term investment strategy, even if it involves irregular movement.

Remittances sent by migrants form an essential part of many developing economies. In some countries, national economies heavily depend on money sent by citizens working abroad. This financial dependency indirectly encourages outward migration.

Smuggling itself has become a highly profitable transnational industry. Smugglers charge migrants significant fees depending on route safety, distance, border security, and transportation methods. More restrictive migration policies often increase smuggling prices and profits.

Certain border regions and transit communities have also become economically dependent on smuggling-related activities, including transportation, housing, document forgery, and informal services.

Economic exploitation frequently continues after arrival, where migrants may become trapped in low-paying and abusive labor systems. As a result, economic inequality remains both a cause and consequence of migrant smuggling



Does increased security reduce smuggling or make it more dangerous?

1. **Route Diversification**

Heightened border security often does not eliminate migrant smuggling but instead pushes it into more dangerous and less monitored routes. Smugglers adapt to heightened security by redirecting migrants through remote deserts, dense forests, or perilous sea routes. This process of route diversification significantly increases the physical risks faced by migrants, including dehydration, drowning, exposure to extreme weather, and lack of access to emergency assistance. Migrants are often forced to rely on unfamiliar and hazardous paths where the chances of rescue are minimal.

Additionally, these riskier routes increase migrants' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, as isolation limits their ability to seek help and strengthens the control of smuggling networks. In this way, increased border security may reduce visible crossings but often results in more dangerous migration patterns rather than overall safer or reduced migration.

2. **Strengthening of Organized Smuggling Networks**

As states implement stricter surveillance, physical barriers, and enforcement measures, smaller or informal operators are often pushed out, allowing more sophisticated, well-funded criminal groups to dominate the smuggling market. These networks have the resources to

adapt quickly using advanced technology, forged documentation, and complex routes, in order to bypass the added security.

As a result, smuggling becomes more centralized and professionalized, with networks operating across multiple countries and stages of the migration journey. This consolidation increases their control over migrants, often leading to higher fees, stricter enforcement of debt payments, and greater use of coercion or violence. According to concerns raised by bodies such as the United Nations, such dynamics can deepen migrants' dependence on criminal actors and expand the scale of exploitation.

3. Short Term Reduction VS Long Term Consequences

Increased border security measures can lead to a short-term reduction in visible migrant crossings, as stricter enforcement, surveillance, and physical barriers make immediate entry more difficult. This is often seen by states as a success in controlling irregular migration and demonstrating strong national security.

However, in the long term, these measures often produce unintended consequences. Over time, this can lead to increased fatalities, higher smuggling costs, and more sophisticated criminal operations. Additionally, persistent demand for migration means that restrictive policies rarely address the root causes.

In conclusion, a purely enforcement-based approach may reduce numbers temporarily but can exacerbate risks and exploitation in the long run, making migration more dangerous rather than preventing it altogether.

Exploitation

Migrant labour abuse and its root causes are not separate phenomena — one is the direct product of the other. Forced labour is rooted in poverty, discrimination, and lack of social protection, and it is precisely these conditions that push migrants into labour markets where abuse is structurally guaranteed. A worker who crosses a border in debt, without documentation, in a language they do not speak, bound to an employer who controls their housing and legal status, does not experience abuse as an accident; they experience it as the logical conclusion of every vulnerability they carried with them.

Forms of Labour Abuse

Labor abuse can take multiple forms ranging from economic exploitation to severe violations of human rights. Migrant workers are especially vulnerable because they often depend on employers for housing, legal status, wages, and transportation. Fear of deportation or job loss frequently prevents workers from reporting abuse.

1. Forced Labour

Forced labour is all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.It is a severe violation of human rights affecting 27.6 million of men, women and children in all countries and all economic sectors. It is rooted in poverty, discrimination and lack of social protection, and it disrupts fair competition between businesses. It is defined by two specific criteria:
Involuntariness: The worker did not freely consent to the job
Threat of Penalty: The worker cannot leave because they face a "penalty" if they do—such as physical violence, withholding of wages, or the threat of deportation.

Globally, forced labour affects approximately 27.6 million men, women, and children across all regions and economic sectors, generating nearly 236 billion US dollars in illegal profits annually. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable within this system, as they are nearly 3 times more likely to be subjected to forced labour than local populations

2. Debt Bondage

Debt Bondage is defined as a situation where a worker's labor is pledged as security for a loan, but the employer or recruiter manipulates the debt so it can never be repaid. The International Labour Organization (ILO) identifies debt bondage as the most prevalent method of forced labor in the private sector, affecting over 50% of all forced labor victims globally.
According to ILO and migration corridor studies from 2025–2026, migrants from South Asia and Southeast Asia commonly pay amounts equivalent to 8–10 months of their projected wages before departure. Because most workers cannot afford these payments, they rely on

loans from recruiters, moneylenders, or intermediaries, often with extremely high interest rates. Workers may face wage deductions, delayed salaries, contract substitution, or lower-than-promised pay, preventing repayment of the debt.

Debt bondage is particularly common in sectors heavily dependent on migrant labour, including construction, domestic work, fishing industries, agriculture, mining, and manufacturing.

Over 800,000 Bangladeshis have Malaysian work permits, making them the largest group of documented foreign workers in the country. According to information received by the UN, thousands of workers are stranded in Bangladesh or face exploitation in Malaysia after some paid recruitment fees five times higher than the official rate.

3. Document Seizure

Document seizure is the practice where employers, recruiters, or intermediaries confiscate a migrant worker's identity papers—most commonly their passport, work permit, or residence visa. According to the UNODC (2026), this practice is documented in over 64% of forced labor cases globally.

This loss of identity is weaponized through fear, as 95% of migrants who lose access to their documents fall into irregular status and become terrified of the very authorities meant to protect them.

Despite being illegal in over 170 UN Member States, the conviction rate for this practice remains below 1%, allowing a climate of impunity to flourish. When we allow an employer to hold a passport, we are allowing them to override Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees that every human being has the right to be recognized as a person before the law.

4. Wage Theft

It occurs when workers are denied the wages they have legally earned through underpayment, delayed salaries, unpaid overtime, illegal deductions, or complete non-payment.

Investigations into Gulf construction sectors, including in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have documented migrant workers working 12–14 hour shifts while facing delayed or unpaid wages. Human rights organizations also reported cases where workers were unable to leave employer-provided camps because they lacked money for food, transport, or return travel. In sectors such as domestic work and manufacturing across South and Southeast Asia, migrants are frequently paid below legal wage standards while also facing deductions for accommodation, food, or recruitment fees

5. Hazardous and Substandard Working Conditions

Hazardous and substandard working conditions disproportionately affect migrants. They are overrepresented in what researchers call "3D jobs" — dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work. Construction sites with no safety equipment, chemical-intensive agriculture without protective gear, and confined slaughterhouse environments are emblematic. The 2022 FIFA World Cup construction controversy in Qatar drew international attention to how kafala-style sponsorship systems trap migrants in dangerous labour.

Women in irregular migration

The risks are especially acute for women travelling without documentation, with little or no information about safe migration or limited financial resources – putting them at a greater risk of extortion and exploitation.

One in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, and migrant women face an even higher risk. For women using irregular routes, the risks snowball. Women frequently describe journeys marked by extortion, harassment, and assault by smugglers, traffickers and corrupt officials and other migrants.

Along the South Africa–Zimbabwe corridor for example, Human Rights Watch found that nearly all newly arrived migrant women had either been raped or had witnessed rape during the crossing. Some men interviewed admitted that they raped migrant women as the "price" for allowing them to enter South Africa.

In the Darién Gap, between Colombia and Panama, reports of sexual violence increased sevenfold in 2024, a chilling reminder of the dangers faced by thousands of women crossing Latin America’s most treacherous corridor.

Corporate Responsibility In Labour Abuse

Corporations and private employers play a major role in either preventing or enabling labor exploitation. Many global industries rely on outsourced and low-cost labor systems, creating environments where abuse can occur without sufficient accountability or oversight.

Large companies frequently subcontract work to smaller suppliers and recruitment agencies in order to reduce operational costs and increase profits. This outsourcing structure often makes it difficult to monitor labor conditions effectively across international supply chains involving multiple countries and contractors.

In industries such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and hospitality, companies may indirectly benefit from exploitative labor arrangements involving migrant workers. Workers are often employed through multiple contractors and intermediaries, reducing transparency and making accountability more difficult to enforce.

Corporate negligence may include failure to conduct labor inspections, poor workplace safety standards, tolerance of abusive recruitment practices, and inadequate monitoring of suppliers.

In some cases, companies have been accused of ignoring evidence of forced labor, child labor, and unsafe working conditions.

The garment industry has become a major example of supply-chain labor abuse. International brands sourcing products from factories in developing countries have faced criticism regarding unsafe workplaces, low wages, excessive working hours, and exploitative labor systems linked to fast-fashion production.

Growing international pressure has encouraged corporations to adopt ethical sourcing policies, transparency measures, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Some governments have also introduced laws requiring companies to identify forced labor risks within supply chains. However, critics argue that many reforms remain voluntary and lack strong enforcement mechanisms. Human rights organizations continue to advocate for legally binding corporate accountability measures and stronger protections for workers globally.

Countries Majorly Involved in Labour Abuse Dynamics

Labor abuse involves both origin and destination countries connected through global labor migration systems. While larger economies receive greater international attention, several smaller and developing states are also deeply affected by exploitative labor systems.

South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan remain among the largest labor-exporting states globally. Many workers from these countries migrate abroad for low-skilled employment opportunities in construction, domestic work, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors.

Nepal represents an important example because a significant part of its economy depends on remittances sent by migrant workers abroad. However, many Nepali migrants face

recruitment fraud, unsafe labor conditions, wage theft, and debt bondage in destination countries.

Bangladesh has similarly experienced large-scale migration toward Gulf states and Southeast Asia. Migrant workers often encounter exploitative recruitment systems, delayed wages, poor living conditions, and abusive working environments.

In Southeast Asia, countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia have become major labor-origin states. Migrants from these countries frequently work in fishing industries, factories, plantations, and domestic sectors under highly vulnerable and poorly regulated conditions.

Small African states including Eritrea and Somalia also experience irregular labor migration due to conflict, political instability, economic hardship, and weak governance systems that limit domestic employment opportunities.

Destination countries in the Gulf region, including Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, remain heavily dependent on migrant labor for economic development, infrastructure projects, and service industries.

Malaysia and Thailand have also faced criticism regarding forced labor within fishing industries, plantations, factories, and informal labor sectors employing migrant workers from neighboring countries.

Several European countries rely on seasonal migrant labor within agriculture and food production sectors, where workers may experience underpayment, poor housing, exploitative contracts, and limited labor protections.

Sectors Most Influenced By Migrant Exploitation-Labour Abuse

1. Construction and Infrastructure

The construction sector is one of the industries most heavily dependent on migrant labour and one of the sectors most associated with labour exploitation globally.
The sector is also closely linked to dangerous working conditions. Migrants commonly work long hours in extreme temperatures, with inadequate safety equipment and limited medical access. In countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, sponsorship systems such as kafala have further increased dependency by tying workers' residency permits to employers. International investigations linked to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar documented excessive working hours, heat exposure, delayed wages, unsafe housing, and document confiscation.

The ILO highlights that construction is one of the world's most dangerous industries, with fatal accident rates estimated to be two to four times higher than the average across other sectors. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable because they are often concentrated in

the lowest-paid and least protected jobs within subcontracting chains. Recent global analysis by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre found that construction and engineering accounted for approximately 20% of recorded migrant worker abuse cases globally in 2025.

2. Domestic Work and Care Economies

Nearly half of the world's 304 million international migrants are women and most are employed in domestic and care work - sectors that remain largely unregulated. Of the world's 75.6 million domestic workers, 76 percent are women.

In homes across the globe, millions of migrant women clean, cook and care for others. Working inside private homes often means limited visibility and protection, exposing many to exploitation and abuse by employers or others in the household.
Despite repeated international calls to strengthen migrant domestic workers' rights, women still face long hours, withheld wages, harassment, and, in extreme cases, trafficking and forced labour. In Thailand, a 2023 survey found that six in ten Myanmar migrant domestic workers reported violence.

Under sponsorship systems such as Kafala women's visas are tied to their employers, limiting their freedom to leave abusive situations and cutting off access to justice. In many countries, sexism, xenophobia, and racism add to these risks, shaping how migrant women are seen, heard, and treated when they do seek justice or support.

Some communities are finding ways to respond to this problem. In the Philippines, local governments and women's organisations offer counselling, skills training, and support for returning domestic workers, helping them rebuild their confidence and lives. Many governments have signed on to international agreements, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the ILO Conventions on Domestic Work (No. 189) and on Violence and Harassment (No. 190) for ensuring better protection mechanisms for women.

3. Agriculture and Food supply chains

Agriculture and food supply chains are among the sectors most heavily dependent on migrant labour and are widely recognized by the International Labour Organization as high-risk sectors for exploitation, forced labour, and unsafe working conditions. Migrant workers are heavily employed in crop harvesting, plantations, meat processing, seafood packaging, and food transportation systems across Europe, North America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia.

According to the ILO, agriculture accounts for approximately 14% of all forced labour cases globally, with migrant workers disproportionately represented in seasonal and informal agricultural work. Many of these jobs involve long hours under extreme weather conditions, carrying heavy loads, exposure to chemicals and pesticides, and high risks of injury.

Several international case studies illustrate how exploitation functions within agricultural migration systems: In Italy, investigations into the “caporalato” system exposed networks of illegal labour brokers recruiting undocumented migrants for agricultural work under exploitative conditions. Migrants reportedly worked long hours harvesting tomatoes and fruit while living in informal settlements lacking sanitation, electricity, or healthcare access. Workers were often paid below legal wage standards and subjected to illegal deductions for transport and food.
In Spain, the ILO documented seasonal migration programs involving Moroccan women recruited for agricultural labour. Many workers were tied to temporary contracts lasting between three and six months and depended entirely on employers for housing, transport, and legal status. Human rights groups reported that fear of deportation or exclusion from future work programs discouraged workers from reporting abuse.

The United States H-2A agricultural visa program has also faced criticism. According to ILO case studies, migrant workers under H-2A visas are tied to a single employer, meaning losing employment can also result in loss of legal status. Labour organizations documented cases involving wage theft, unsafe housing, and retaliation against workers attempting to organize or report abuses.

International organizations increasingly warn that climate change, food insecurity, and economic instability will intensify reliance on migrant labour in agriculture. As global demand for cheap food production increases, migrants are expected to remain concentrated in the least protected positions within international food systems, making stronger labour protections and supply-chain accountability increasingly necessary.

4. Fishing and Maritime Industries

The International Labour Organization and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime identify fisheries as one of the sectors at highest risk for forced labour and trafficking.

Southeast Asia is among the world’s top producers and exporters of fish and seafood products, with a significant reliance on migrant workers in fishing processing. While fishing is a lucrative industry for the region, migrant workers are vulnerable to being deceived and coerced to work on board vessels where the work is hazardous, and often accompanied by a range of labour and human rights abuses.
ILO investigations in Southeast Asian fisheries documented cases where migrants from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos were trafficked onto vessels operating from Thailand and surrounding maritime regions.

The most authoritative data comes from the ILO's Towards Fair Seas report (February 2026) — the largest regional survey of its kind, produced under the EU-funded Ship to Shore Rights South-East Asia programme. The survey estimated that one in eight migrant workers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors — 13 percent — were in situations of forced labour. Non-existent or weak standards including in recruitment, labour and safety for migrant

workers in the industry, has led to their increased vulnerability to forced labour and human trafficking.

At the 42nd ASEAN Leaders Summit in May 2023, ASEAN Member States adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Placement and Protection of Migrant Fishers. This is a landmark Declaration recognising that the fisheries industry is particularly prone to exploitation and abuse, a hard-to-reach sector and a hazardous occupation which has many work-related risks. Through this Declaration, ASEAN aims to promote the human rights and fundamental freedoms of migrant fishers.

Case Study: Nour Miyati — Saudi Arabia

Nour Miyati was an Indonesian domestic worker employed in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, under the kafala sponsorship system. In 2005, she was found with severe injuries — gangrene in her fingers and toes caused by being tied up, infected wounds consistent with beatings, and signs of prolonged malnutrition. She was discovered only after managing to escape from her employer's home. Her employer had confiscated her passport, preventing her from leaving or seeking help. Because her legal status under kafala was entirely tied to her employer, she had no independent legal standing to report the abuse.

After three years of criminal proceedings, a Riyadh court dropped the charges against her employer — despite the employer's confession, ample medical evidence, and intense public scrutiny. In a pattern documented by Human Rights Watch as endemic to the Saudi justice system, the burden of proof effectively rested on the victim, while the employer faced no meaningful accountability. Nour Miyati was, at one point during proceedings, herself charged with making false accusations — a legal reversal that her advocates described as characteristic of how the kafala system shields employers from consequence.

What This Case Illustrates

Nour Miyati's case is not limited to herself but millions of other migrant workers who suffer from the same problem. Under kafala, a migrant worker's legal residency, right to work, and ability to leave the country are tied entirely to a single employer or sponsor. The worker cannot change jobs, terminate a contract, or exit the country without the sponsor's explicit permission.This governance framework is operative across the Gulf Cooperation Council states According to UN statistics, there were 35 million international migrants across GCC countries, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2019, representing nearly half the combined total population of those countries

Human Rights Watch stated that the combination of high recruitment fees and the power granted by kafala to control whether a worker can change employers or exit the country made some employers feel entitled to exert "ownership" over domestic workers — and that this

sense of ownership creates slavery-like conditions incompatible with Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.ILO assessments confirm that wage theft, passport confiscation, and limited access to complaint mechanisms remain common across GCC states despite successive rounds of declared reform

Key Takeaways:

1. **The system criminalises victims** — workers escaping abuse are often treated as offenders because leaving employment without employer consent violates the kafala system.
2. **Confessions alone do not ensure justice** — even admitted abuse can go unpunished
3. **Domestic workers face double exclusion** — they are isolated inside private homes and frequently excluded from formal labour law protections.
4. **The failure is systemic, not individual** — states that maintain kafala-style systems bear responsibility when those systems enable slavery-like conditions and forced labour.

Regional Case Studies:

Gulf Countries – The Kafala Sponsorship System

The kafala system in Gulf countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates is one of the clearest examples of structural migrant labour exploitation. Under this sponsorship system, a migrant worker's legal status is directly tied to their employer or kafeel, meaning workers often cannot change jobs, leave the country, or report abuse without employer consent. Millions of workers from countries such as India, Nepal, and Bangladesh migrate to the Gulf through recruitment agencies that frequently misrepresent wages and working conditions.

Reports by the International Labour Organization documented practices such as passport confiscation, debt bondage, unpaid wages, excessive working hours, and unsafe living conditions. International attention intensified during preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, where migrant workers in construction sectors faced allegations of forced labour and exploitation. Although several Gulf states introduced labour reforms, critics argue that weak enforcement and employer dominance continue to leave workers vulnerable.

Gulf states maintain that the Kafala system is a sovereign labour regulation mechanism and have pointed to reform efforts, including Qatar's abolition of the exit permit requirement in 2020 and the UAE's introduction of labour mobility reforms, as evidence of progress. Critics, however, argue that enforcement remains weak and that structural power imbalances persist.

United States – Mexico Border and Smuggling Networks

The United States–Mexico border is one of the most significant migration corridors globally and highlights the relationship between restrictive migration policies and smuggling networks. Since the 1990s, stricter border enforcement policies pushed migrants from countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador into dangerous desert and remote crossing routes. As legal migration pathways became increasingly limited, migrants became heavily dependent on criminal smuggling networks, commonly known as coyotes.

Human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported cases of kidnapping, extortion, trafficking, family separation, and poor detention conditions at the border. Policies such as “Remain in Mexico” and large-scale detention of asylum seekers generated criticism for allegedly violating international refugee protections. Smuggling organizations also profited significantly from migrants’ vulnerability and lack of safe legal alternatives.

This case study demonstrates how restrictive border policies, weak regional cooperation, and organized smuggling networks collectively increase migrant exploitation and human rights abuses, making state responsibility and protection mechanisms central to the issue.

Rohingya Crisis – Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Smuggling Networks

The Rohingya crisis involving Myanmar and Bangladesh is one of the most severe examples of forced displacement and migrant vulnerability. Following military crackdowns in Myanmar in 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh after facing violence, persecution, and denial of citizenship. As a result, massive refugee settlements such as Cox’s Bazar emerged, where overcrowding, poverty, and limited legal protections created conditions for exploitation.

Smuggling and trafficking networks began targeting Rohingya refugees by promising jobs, relocation, or transport to countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Reports by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Amnesty International documented forced labour, sexual exploitation, child trafficking, ransom demands, and dangerous sea journeys organized by criminal groups operating across the Bay of Bengal. Statelessness and lack of legal recognition made Rohingya refugees especially vulnerable because they lacked formal protection under national legal systems.

The displacement crisis has directly fuelled transnational smuggling networks operating across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Desperate Rohingya unable to work legally,

move freely, or access education in Bangladesh, and with no prospect of safe return to Myanmar have become highly vulnerable targets for trafficking networks that promise passage to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. These networks, which operate through a chain of intermediaries spanning Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia, have been documented subjecting passengers to kidnapping, ransom demands, physical abuse, forced labour at sea, and abandonment on open water.

Myanmar denies the characterisation of its operations as genocidal and frames the crisis as a counter-terrorism response. Bangladesh, while hosting a massive refugee population, refuses to integrate the Rohingya and has periodically attempted to facilitate their return to Myanmar under conditions that human rights groups have described as unsafe and involuntary.

State Responsibility in Protection Mechanisms

Non-criminalization of exploited migrants:

1. **How are migrants exploited?**

Migrants are often subjected to multiple, overlapping forms of exploitation across their journey. Smuggling networks frequently deceive migrants with false promises of safe passage, after which they expose them to extortion, dangerous transit conditions, and debt bondage. In destination countries, many migrants face labour abuse, including underpayment or non-payment of wages, excessive working hours, unsafe environments, and restrictions on movement. Employers or intermediaries may confiscate identity documents, making it nearly impossible for migrants to leave abusive situations. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and forced labour. These exploitative conditions are sustained by migrants' limited legal protections and their fear of authorities.

2. **Root causes of migrant exploitation**

The lack of safe and legal migration pathways pushes migrants toward irregular routes that are controlled by smuggling networks. Poverty, unemployment, conflict, and instability in home countries increase migrants' vulnerability and willingness to take risks. At the same time, restrictive immigration policies in destination states often limit migrants' access to legal work and protection systems. Weak enforcement of labour laws, combined with demand for cheap and flexible labour, allows exploitation to persist. Lack of awareness, language barriers, and social isolation further reduce migrants' ability to seek help or assert their rights.

3. **Non-criminalization of exploited migrants**

Migrants who are smuggled or subjected to labour abuse frequently violate laws; not out of criminal intent, but as a direct consequence of coercion, deception, or structural necessity.

Penalizing them for these acts effectively criminalizes their vulnerability and shifts the focus away from the true perpetrators: traffickers, smugglers, and abusive employers.

International standards promoted by the United Nations, along with operational guidance from the International Organization for Migration, emphasize a victim-centred and rights-based approach. This approach requires states to ensure that exploited migrants are not subjected to detention, prosecution, or deportation for offences directly linked to their exploitation. However, implementation remains inconsistent.

Criminalization of exploited migrants discourages them from reporting abuse or cooperating with authorities. This allows exploitation networks to operate with relative impunity. It also leads to secondary victimization, where individuals who have already endured abuse face detention in poor conditions, legal penalties, or forced return to environments where they may be re-exploited. Additionally, it weakens the credibility and effectiveness of justice systems, as key witnesses are removed or unwilling to testify.

To operationalize non-criminalization, states must implement key safeguards such as early identification of exploited migrants and training authorities to apply non-punishment provisions. Migrants should also be granted temporary protection to access justice and essential services without fear of deportation. Migration policies must shift toward human rights based approaches, with stronger oversight of employers and cooperation with organizations like the International Organization for Migration.

Countries involved

The issue of migrant exploitation, labour abuse, and inadequate protection mechanisms affects countries across multiple regions, particularly those serving as countries of origin, transit, and destination for migrants.

Countries experiencing conflict, poverty, or political instability such as Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Sudan are major countries of origin, where people are often forced to migrate due to violence, economic collapse, or humanitarian crises.

1. Countries of Origin (Source States)

A source state's responsibility does not end when a citizen crosses its physical border. Origin states bear the foundational duty of pre-departure protection and structural prevention. If a country fails to regulate the systems sending its people abroad, it inadvertently feeds the networks that exploit them.

- **Tackling Predatory Recruitment Infrastructure:** The journey towards forced labor almost always begins at home. In accordance with the ILO Forced Labour Convention No. 29, origin states have a legal duty to monitor, license, and strictly regulate local private sub-contractors and recruitment agencies. When states allow local brokers to charge extortionate, illegal recruitment fees, they allow their own citizens to be locked into debt bondage before they even pack a bag.

- **Proactive Consular Protection:** Under Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, embassies and consulates are not just bureaucratic offices; they are a migrant's ultimate legal lifeline abroad. Source states are responsible for establishing active migrant resource centers within their embassies in high-risk destination zones, funding emergency legal representation, and tracking citizens lost inside foreign detention networks.
- **Addressing Economic and Social Vulnerability:** Under the framework of SDG 8, origin states are structurally obligated to address the domestic economic desperation—such as youth unemployment and lack of social safety nets—that forces vulnerable populations to turn to irregular, high-risk smuggling networks in the first place.

2. Countries of Transit

Transit states are the geographical corridors connecting origin and destination countries. Because these states often feature porous borders, weaker law enforcement, or political instability, they frequently become territory where informal smuggling operations harden into violent, exploitative networks.

- **The Mandate of Non-Criminalization:** The cornerstone of transit state responsibility is found in Article 5 of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. Transit states are legally barred from criminalizing or prosecuting smuggled migrants simply for the act of irregular entry or transit. Treating a person fleeing desperation as a border criminal shifts focus away from the actual organized crime syndicates running the networks.
- **The Uncompromising Duty of Non-Refoulement:** Under customary international law and the 1951 Refugee Convention, transit states cannot forcibly return or deport individuals to territories where they face torture, persecution, or imminent threats to their life. This applies universally, regardless of whether a migrant arrived via a regular pathway or an overcrowded smuggling vessel.
- **Humanitarian Interception Over Kinetic Deterrence:** When border forces intercept irregular migration movements across land or sea, transit states are legally required to prioritize immediate search-and-rescue (SAR) operations and basic human needs over military deterrence. This means providing immediate access to clean water, medical triage, and safe shelter, ensuring that state interception does not lead to secondary human rights abuses or lawless, militia-run arbitrary detention.

3. Countries of Destination (Host States)

Destination states—frequently wealthier, high-demand economies—carry the ultimate legal and moral burden for protecting migrants once they arrive. The concentration of migrant exploitation, wage theft, and underground labor abuse happens within their jurisdictions, meaning their domestic enforcement choices dictate the safety of millions.

- **Decoupling Labor Enforcement from Immigration Status:** The most critical failure of host states is allowing labor laws to be weaponized by abusive employers. Destination states are obligated to ensure uniform labor protections for *all* workers, regardless of documentation status. If an undocumented migrant experiences wage theft or hazardous working conditions, they must have a firewalled, non-punitive legal channel to report the abuse without the fear that contacting the labor ministry will result in immediate deportation.
- **The Duty to Dismantle Predatory Sponsorship Frameworks:** Host states that maintain restrictive legal regimes—such as the Kafala system—which structurally tie a migrant worker's legal residency and visa status to a single employer, are directly violating international standards. By legally preventing a worker from changing jobs, leaving an abusive home, or exiting the country without their employer's permission, states create the exact systemic vulnerabilities that enable modern slavery.
- **Universal, Independent Victim Screening:** Host states must establish mandatory, standardized victim screening procedures at all borders, processing centers, and immigration detention facilities. Frontline border agents must be systematically trained to look past surface-level immigration violations and identify indicators of coercion, psychological manipulation, or forced labor to ensure victims are protected rather than penalized.

4. Corporate and Public-Private Accountability

Because migrant labor abuse is heavily concentrated in low-cost, heavily outsourced private sectors—such as construction, agriculture, fast-fashion manufacturing, and maritime fishing—the state's responsibility extends to regulating the corporate entities operating on its soil.

- **Mandating Supply Chain Due Diligence:** States are responsible for transforming voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) into legally binding accountability laws. Governments must pass legislation requiring multi-national corporations to map and audit their global supply chains. A destination state cannot look the other way when a corporate entity headquartered in its territory profits from migrant exploitation, child labor, or debt bondage carried out by sub-contractors overseas.
- **Enforcing the Criminalization of Identity Document Seizure:** While passport confiscation is illegal in the vast majority of UN Member States, real-world conviction rates remain negligible. Destination states bear the responsibility to bridge this gap, actively prosecuting employers and agencies that seize identity papers, effectively stripping migrants of their legal identity and trapping them in forced labor.

Emergency and crisis response:

Migrants become significantly more vulnerable during armed conflicts, natural disasters, pandemics, and economic instability. In such situations, protection systems often weaken or

collapse, exposing migrants to more risks of exploitation, trafficking, and labour abuse. Displacement, lack of documentation, and restricted access to basic services further increase their dependence on illegal networks.

Ongoing conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine War, have displaced millions, many of which face exploitation while crossing borders or seeking work in unfamiliar environments. Instability in parts of the Middle East and Africa has increased reliance on smuggling networks, where migrants are frequently subjected to abuse. Climate-related disasters are also forcing large-scale migration, often without adequate state protection systems in place. In many of these crises, states have prioritized border security, leading to overcrowded camps, unsafe transit routes, and limited humanitarian access, all of which increase the likelihood of exploitation.

States therefore have a responsibility to ensure that migrant protection is fully integrated into emergency preparedness and response frameworks. This includes guaranteeing non-discriminatory access to humanitarian aid such as food, shelter, healthcare, and legal assistance, regardless of migration status, and establishing rapid-response systems to identify and protect victims of exploitation. Vulnerable groups, including women, children, and previously trafficked individuals, who face heightened risks during crises should be given attention.

International coordination with bodies such as the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration supporting evacuation efforts, relief operations, and protection planning is essential. However, many states continue to prioritize border security over protection, resulting in restrictive policies that trap migrants in unsafe environments or push them toward irregular and exploitative pathways. Addressing this requires a shift toward rights-based crisis governance, including the introduction of temporary protection statuses, suspension of deportations to unsafe regions, and the establishment of safe and legal humanitarian corridors.

Effective crisis response must go beyond immediate relief and include long-term resilience and accountability mechanisms. States should invest in data collection and early warning systems to anticipate displacement trends, strengthen oversight of detention centres and camps, and ensure transparency in emergency decision-making. Partnerships with civil society organizations can enhance outreach and trust-building with migrant communities, enabling more effective identification of exploitation cases.

Integrating migrant protection into all stages of crisis response fulfils international obligations, while also reducing the space for smuggling networks and abusive actors to operate, contributing to a more coordinated, humane, and sustainable global response to migration crises.

Funding and resource allocation:

1.Root causes of funding disparities

Funding gaps in migrant protection stem from both structural inequalities and political priorities. A major cause is the economic disparity between states, where developing and transit countries, hosting large migrant populations, lack the fiscal capacity to build strong protection systems. At the same time, many governments prioritize border security and migration control over humanitarian protection, diverting resources away from shelters, legal aid, and labour enforcement. The voluntary nature of international funding further contributes to instability, as support from donors and multilateral institutions is often inconsistent and influenced by political interests. Additionally, weak governance, lack of transparency, and limited institutional capacity can result in inefficient use or misallocation of available resources.

2.Current situation

Frontline states in regions such as North Africa, Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia continue to face overwhelming migration flows without proportional financial support, leading to overcrowded shelters, understaffed protection services, and weak monitoring of labour conditions. At the same time, wealthier destination countries frequently invest heavily in enforcement mechanisms such as surveillance and detention, while underfunding protection frameworks. International organizations like the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration provide critical assistance, but their resources depend on voluntary contributions, making long-term planning and sustainability difficult. As migration increases due to conflict, economic instability, and climate change, these funding gaps continue to widen, leaving many migrants without adequate protection.

3. Policy approaches

Addressing funding disparities requires both increased investment and more effective allocation of resources. States must commit to dedicated national budgets for migrant protection, ensuring consistent funding for shelters, legal aid, healthcare, and labour inspections. At the international level, there is a need for more predictable and equitable funding mechanisms, including burden-sharing frameworks that distribute financial responsibility more fairly among states. Redirecting a portion of resources from enforcement toward prevention and protection measures can significantly reduce long-term exploitation risks.

Furthermore, improving transparency and accountability in how funds are used is essential to ensure efficiency and build trust among stakeholders. Partnerships with civil society organizations can enhance outreach and service delivery, particularly in hard-to-reach communities. Investing in capacity-building, such as training officials and strengthening institutions, also ensures that resources are used effectively. A balanced approach that prioritizes both funding adequacy and strategic allocation will enable states to better combat exploitation networks while fulfilling their human rights obligations.

Arbitrary detention and human rights violation:

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘arbitrary’ refers to something based on personal choice or random decision rather than fairness or law, while ‘detention’ means the act of officially keeping someone in a controlled place such as a prison or detention centre. Therefore, arbitrary detention refers to the unjustified or unlawful detention of individuals without proper legal procedures, fair trial guarantees, or sufficient justification.

In the context of migration, arbitrary detention commonly affects undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Many migrants are detained solely because of their immigration status, often without access to legal aid, translators, or proper judicial review. Such detention may occur in overcrowded facilities with poor sanitation, limited healthcare, and restricted communication with families. These conditions can lead to severe physical and psychological harm.

Human rights violations occur when the basic rights and freedoms guaranteed to all individuals are denied or abused. Migrants are especially vulnerable because language barriers, fear of deportation, lack of legal documentation, and economic dependence often prevent them from reporting abuse. These violations may include discrimination, unlawful detention, forced labour, denial of healthcare, family separation, and physical or emotional abuse.

This issue is highly relevant to the agenda because weak protection mechanisms and poor migration governance often allow exploitation and abuse to continue unchecked. While states have the sovereign right to control their borders, international law requires them to ensure that migration policies respect human dignity and fundamental human rights. Organizations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have repeatedly stressed that immigration detention should only be used as a last resort and must comply with international human rights standards.

Case Study: Migrant detention and abuse in Libya

A major case study highlighting failures in state responsibility and protection mechanisms is the migrant crisis in Libya. Over the past decade, Libya became a key transit route for migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. Many migrants from countries such as Sudan, Eritrea, and Syria relied on smuggling networks to facilitate their journey due to conflict, poverty, and instability in their home countries.

However, instead of safety, many migrants faced severe exploitation and abuse. Following political instability in Libya after 2011, weak governance allowed armed groups and smuggling networks to gain control over migration routes and detention centres. Migrants intercepted during transit were often placed in overcrowded detention facilities where reports by Amnesty International and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya documented torture, forced labour, food shortages, physical violence, sexual abuse, and denial of medical care.

Many detainees were also subjected to extortion, where smugglers or guards forced them to contact families for ransom payments. Since most migrants lacked legal documentation or protection, they had limited access to justice and were highly vulnerable to exploitation.

This case study is highly relevant to the agenda because it demonstrates how weak state institutions and ineffective protection mechanisms can directly contribute to migrant abuse. It also highlights how smuggling networks thrive in unstable regions where governments fail to enforce human rights standards and protect vulnerable populations.

The Need of The Hour

The current global response to migration is heavily centered around border enforcement and criminalization. However, the reality is far more complex. Many migrants are not simply "illegal entrants" or "criminals"; they are people escaping conflict, poverty, exploitation, or situations where survival leaves them with few real choices.

Policies focused only on deterrence often increase migrant vulnerability while strengthening criminal networks. What is needed is a balanced approach that combines security with protection, law enforcement with labour rights, and migration management with human dignity.

States already possess the legal authority and institutional capacity to implement many of these measures. What is often missing is political will, coordination, and long-term commitment to protecting migrants not only as economic actors, but as human beings entitled to dignity, safety, and justice.

Recognizing the Difference Between Smuggling and Human Trafficking

1. **The Problem**

The distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking is becoming increasingly blurred. Many migrants initially consent to smuggling because of the absence of legal

migration pathways, but during transit they may become victims of coercion, forced labour, sexual exploitation, or debt bondage. Despite this, authorities frequently treat all irregular migrants as offenders without properly identifying victims of trafficking or exploitation.

2. **Steps Already Taken**

➢ Adoption of the UN Palermo Protocols:
➢ Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000)
➢ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000)
➢ Victim-identification frameworks developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and International Organization for Migration.
➢ Border screening mechanisms and anti-trafficking task forces in several countries.

3 . Practical Solutions Within State Capacity

➢ Introduce mandatory victim-screening procedures at borders and detention centres.
➢ Train immigration officers, judges, and police to identify coercion indicators rather than relying solely on immigration status.
➢ Create specialized anti-trafficking units involving labour ministries, social workers, and law enforcement agencies.
➢ Provide temporary humanitarian visas for suspected trafficking victims during investigations.
➢ Strengthen international intelligence-sharing systems to track trafficking routes and criminal networks.

3. **Supported By**

This approach is strongly aligned with SDG 8.7, which calls for the eradication of forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking. It also supports SDG 16.2, which focuses on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children. Additionally, it reflects the UN Charter Article 1(3), which promotes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Stopping the Criminalization of Exploited Migrants

1. **The Problem**

Migrants who are forced into assisting smuggling operations are frequently prosecuted as criminals despite acting under coercion, threats, or debt bondage. This leads to victims being punished while larger criminal networks remain operational.

2. **Steps Already Taken**

➢ Recognition of the “non-punishment principle” in anti-trafficking frameworks.
➢ Temporary protection systems for trafficking victims in certain countries.
➢ UN recommendations emphasizing victim-centered approaches.

Practical Solutions Within State Capacity

- ➢ Incorporate non-criminalization clauses into national anti-trafficking legislation.
- ➢ Require courts to assess coercion and exploitation before prosecution.
- ➢ Expand access to interpreters, legal aid, and fair trial protections.
- ➢ Establish witness-protection programmes for migrants testifying against trafficking networks.
- ➢ Shift enforcement priorities toward organized criminal leaders rather than low-level migrants.

3. Supported By

This reform aligns with SDG 16.3, which promotes the rule of law and equal access to justice. It is also grounded in Article 8 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ensuring the right to an effective remedy, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees fair trial protections.

Stronger Borders Without Making Migration More Dangerous

1. The Problem

Heightened border security often redirects migrants toward more dangerous routes instead of reducing migration itself. This increases deaths, disappearances, violence, and dependence on organized smuggling networks.

2. Steps Already Taken

- ➢ Expansion of border surveillance and maritime patrols.
- ➢ Joint anti-smuggling operations between states.
- ➢ Search-and-rescue missions in regions such as the Mediterranean.

3. Practical Solutions Within State Capacity

- ➢ Combine border management with humanitarian protection systems.
- ➢ Establish migrant reception and screening centres near major migration routes.
- ➢ Expand search-and-rescue operations in dangerous sea corridors.
- ➢ Use intelligence-led policing to target smuggling networks rather than migrants themselves.
- ➢ Strengthen regional cooperation on missing migrants and migrant identification systems.

4. Supported By

These measures reflect SDG 10.7 on safe, orderly, and responsible migration. They also support SDG 16.1 on reducing violence and related deaths, and align with Article 55 of the UN Charter, which promotes universal respect for human rights and social progress.

Safe and Legal Migration Pathways

1. The Problem

Restrictive immigration systems and lack of legal migration opportunities force migrants to rely on smugglers and informal networks, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

2. Steps Already Taken

- Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018).
- Bilateral labour agreements between labour-origin and destination countries.
- Temporary protection and humanitarian visa systems in some regions.

3. Practical Solutions Within State Capacity

- Expand legal labour migration programmes, especially for low-skilled sectors.
- Simplify and reduce the cost of visa procedures.
- Create digital employment contracts in migrants' native languages before departure.
- Establish migrant resource centres providing legal migration information.
- Develop regional labour mobility agreements guaranteeing wages and labour protections.

4.Supported By

These reforms align with SDG 10.7 on safe and orderly migration and SDG 8.8 on protecting labour rights and safe working environments. They also reflect the UN Charter Article 1(3), which calls for international cooperation on social and humanitarian issues.

Corporate Responsibility, Labour Abuse, And Supply Chains

1.The Problem

Global supply chains often depend on migrant labour while enabling exploitation through debt bondage, wage theft, passport confiscation, unsafe working conditions, and subcontracting systems that avoid accountability.

2.Steps Already Taken

- Corporate due diligence frameworks in parts of the European Union.
- ILO conventions on forced labour and worker protections.
- Ethical sourcing standards introduced by some multinational corporations.

1. Practical Solutions Within State Capacity

- Mandate human-rights due diligence laws for corporations.
- Increase labour inspections in high-risk sectors such as construction, agriculture, fishing, and domestic work.

- ➢ Criminalize passport confiscation, wage theft, and illegal recruitment fees.
- ➢ Regulate and license recruitment agencies through strict monitoring systems.

4.Supported By

These measures are aligned with SDG 8.7 and SDG 8.8, which focus on eliminating forced labour and protecting labour rights. They are also supported by the ILO Forced Labour Convention No. 29 and Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees just and favourable working conditions.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

- ➢ Do most states actually have the financial, institutional, and human capacity to implement victim-screening, legal aid, and monitoring systems effectively?
- ➢ If smuggling and trafficking networks continuously adapt, what ensures that enforcement mechanisms will not become obsolete or simply displace the problem geographically?
- ➢ How do you ensure that non-criminalization of exploited migrants is not misused by traffickers who use them as operational shields?
- ➢ If humanitarian reforms reduce deaths but increase migration flows, what trade-offs are states willing to accept?
- ➢ Given domestic opposition, what realistic incentives make expanded legal migration pathways viable at scale?
- ➢ To what extent can migration policy alone address drivers like poverty, conflict, and climate displacement?
- ➢ What safeguards prevent humanitarian visas or legal migration routes from being exploited by intermediaries or criminal networks?
- ➢ How can origin, transit, and destination countries cooperate effectively despite conflicting national interests?
- ➢ If consent is partial or coerced, who determines when a migrant is a victim versus an offender?
- ➢ How can states use data-sharing, biometric systems, and surveillance to track smuggling networks without violating migrants' right to privacy and risking misuse of personal data?
- ➢ What responsibility should private actors bear in preventing migrant exploitation, and how can states enforce this across borders?
- ➢ What indicators should be used to measure whether anti-smuggling and protection policies are actually reducing exploitation, rather than just reducing visible migration?

Things Delegates Should Keep in Mind

As delegates of the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), participants are expected to approach the agenda with a strong understanding of the committee's mandate within the United Nations system. SOCHUM primarily addresses issues relating to human rights, humanitarian affairs, social development, refugee protection, and the promotion of fundamental freedoms. Discussions within the committee should therefore remain centered around humanitarian protection, international cooperation, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Delegates must recognize that SOCHUM functions under the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and therefore possesses primarily recommendatory powers under the United Nations Charter. Unlike the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), SOCHUM cannot impose sanctions, authorize military intervention, deploy peacekeeping forces, or implement legally binding enforcement mechanisms. Resolutions passed within the committee serve as recommendations intended to encourage cooperation among member states, strengthen international norms, and guide global humanitarian action.

While proposing solutions, delegates are advised to remain realistic regarding the scope and authority of the committee. Measures involving direct military action, compulsory intervention, economic sanctions, or violations of state sovereignty fall outside the mandate of SOCHUM. Delegates should instead focus on policy recommendations, international collaboration, humanitarian assistance, institutional reform, awareness mechanisms, protection frameworks, labor regulations, and capacity-building initiatives.

Delegates are also expected to accurately represent the foreign policy, diplomatic priorities, and geopolitical stance of their assigned country. National interests, regional alliances, migration policies, labor systems, border security concerns, and existing treaty obligations should remain central throughout debate. Delegates should avoid making statements or proposing solutions that directly contradict the official policies of their respective states.

Given the humanitarian nature of the agenda, delegates are encouraged to maintain sensitivity while discussing issues related to migrant exploitation, smuggling networks, labor abuse, refugee displacement, and human rights violations. Discussions should remain diplomatic, respectful, and factually accurate at all times.

The Executive Board strongly encourages delegates to engage in constructive diplomacy, collaborative negotiation, and practical solution-building. Proposed resolutions should remain feasible, internationally cooperative, and aligned with existing international legal frameworks, including the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter.

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Guide to Research and Sources:

While the study guide provides an in-depth understanding of the agenda, it is only the starting point of the delegates' research, hence no one is to confine their knowledge to just the pages we provide.
While national newspapers may be acceptable sources of factual information, we recommend that delegates only use globally recognised organisations and their reports for statistical purposes. This is due to the fact that during a prolonged era of an intense conflict and struggles as great as the one you have to address, statistical information such as death tolls, casualties and even simple facts may be dramatised by certain states due to national bias and jingoistic motives.
While we do not expect you to scrutinise every piece of information that comes your way, we highly recommend you double check important facts and figures.
Additionally, here is a list of resources we accept in our committee to aid your research journey:

- Reuters
- Al-Jazeera
- UN organisations or UN affiliated organisations' reports
- Strategic Organisations' Reports such as NATO, The EU, ASEAN and so forth
- Humanitarian Organisations and Political Think Tanks
- Government Statements, Press Releases and Reports

Certain sources which are often a source of contention in MUN include Wikipedia and information gained from unsophisticated sources such as social media, blogs, unofficial journals. While these are great sources to gain understanding and information for personal use, please note that statements in the committee made solely on the backing of such sources will not be acceptable unless the very same facts are supported by another viable source