ESSENTIAL BUT INVISIBLE AND EXPLOITED

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF MIGRANT WORKERS’ EXPERIENCES IN EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover photo: Migrant workers picking strawberries in Spain. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam Intermon.

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The EU’s agricultural sector depends on migrant labour from more recently acceded member states, non-EU European countries, and non-European countries. A study of literature covering Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden shows the broad range of problems faced by millions of migrant workers who keep Europe fed. The work is hard, days often long – and employers and intermediaries can be exploitative.

Migrants can either be hired after they arrive or in their country of origin. For the latter, in order to pay lower wages and/or maintain deliberate demographic selection criteria (based on gender, origin, migration status, etc.), some employers work through intermediaries to hire ‘posted workers’. Not only do these migrants often pay to be hired, but they may also find their pay reduced further to cover private health insurance when they begin working, because they are not covered by social insurance in the country they work in.

In terms of spontaneous arrivals of migrants, although a large proportion of labour is from the newest EU members, such as Romania and Bulgaria, there is a large range of nationalities represented, among which there is also a significant part of irregular migrants who do not come from the EU, i.e., those without valid paperwork to be in the country. For the latter, a work contract, even with unfair/unethical/exploitative conditions, is one of the only ways to regularize their status in Europe and obtain authorized residence in most European countries. This gives some employers greater leverage over them, and thus more opportunity to exploit them. Additionally, those holding short-term seasonal work permits face substantial challenges due to the conditions and terms of their permits and recruitment processes. Similarly, undocumented migrants find themselves in an even more precarious position, heavily dependent on their employers due to limited opportunities to regularize their status and access decent work.

Wages for staff are low, in some cases below the local minimum wage. A common tactic for underpaying migrants is to deduct the cost of basic needs such as accommodation, food and mandatory protective equipment from wages, often at inflated prices. Migrants also face delayed payments, the denial of payment, or unpaid overtime. However, workers are unlikely to complain due to fear of reprisals, ranging from being further denied work or pay, to dismissal. For those undertaking piecework, the incentive to self-exploit has serious health consequences.

**PIECEWORK** is a system of payment based on the amount of work performed or units of production completed, rather than a fixed or hourly wage. Under this system, workers receive a specific amount of money for each piece produced, task completed or project finished.
Housing arrangements vary. For those living on-site, provisions tend to be very basic: migrants often lodge inside cramped containers. Those who do not live on site often live in makeshift shantytowns nearby, without access to electricity, running water or other basic infrastructure. Those without an official address, cannot register with a clinic, and thus cannot access healthcare services. The remoteness of farms can make access to shops and other services difficult, and transport can be prohibitively expensive.

Without appropriate translation of safety instructions and, in many cases, the provision of legally required safety equipment, migrants are put at risk. For example, 20 workers were poisoned by phytosanitary products in Italy; and a Nicaraguan worker in Murcia, Spain, died after working 11 hours in 44°C heat without being provided water.

In some cases, employers use violence against their staff, including forcing them to remain silent about workplace abuses, confiscation of personal documents and sexual assault. In some cases, migrants’ frustrations with their exploitation have led to acts of resistance. However, in most cases, employers have tended to simply replace their workforces for subsequent seasons, as a form of ‘union busting’ in the face of such resistance.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused the plight of migrant agricultural workers to enter the news in some countries, their ‘essential worker’ status did not result in any actual improvement in their treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Migrant workers in the agricultural sector face multiple challenges in their daily lives, especially in Europe, where the situation is both severe and structural. Critical aspects include labour and wage insecurities, limited access to essential services, and insufficient protection against occupational hazards. These issues are exacerbated by the instability of their legal status and systemic discrimination, making their integration and well-being in host countries more difficult. Additionally, migrant women workers face additional challenges related to their sexual and reproductive health that can significantly impact their personal and work lives.

To address these difficulties, it is crucial to implement significant changes through effective policies and commitments both in the short and long term. Organizations like Oxfam have been actively involved in combating these inequities and human rights abuses. Based on years of experience and collaboration with various entities, we propose a comprehensive approach that includes:

- **Strengthening the scope and effectiveness of the social conditionality of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):** improving the application of policies that ensure compliance with higher labour and social standards across all agricultural programs and payments. This includes special attention to the protecting workers in sectors particularly prone to exploitation.

- **Focus on Human Rights:** Emphasizing the need to integrate human rights principles and ethical practices into the agri-food value chains, ensuring that agricultural policies are not only effective but also respect the fundamental rights of workers, with special consideration towards the needs of women and other vulnerable groups.
- **Representation and Advocacy for Workers:** Promoting greater inclusion and representation of migrant workers and other vulnerable groups in union structures and political decisions, to ensure that the measures implemented reflect and address their specific needs and challenges.

- **Improvement of Living and Working Conditions:** Proposing the allocation of specific resources to improve the housing and transportation conditions of migrant agricultural workers, in addition to strengthening training in occupational safety and health adapted to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the workforce.

These actions aim to create a fairer and safer working environment for migrant agricultural workers in Europe, focusing on policies that not only improve labour conditions but also promote a comprehensive respect for human rights.

These policy recommendations are detailed in the final part of this report.
Oxfam

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SafeHabitus

SafeHabitus is a four year (2023 – 2026) Horizon Europe funded project that aims to improve working conditions for farmers and farm workers by reducing occupational injuries and fatalities and thereby enhancing the social sustainability of EU food systems.

This report summarises existing research related to the role of seasonal, mobile and migrant workers in agriculture and the challenges they face, including workplace hazards and housing and transport issues.

Find out more about the project here: https://www.safehabitus.eu/ and sign up to our newsletter to keep informed of new reports and future activities: https://dashboard.mailerlite.com/forms/337217/80737265502914041/share

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