



▶ Work in Freedom programme (2013–2023)

June 2023

Innovative approaches to protect the rights of women migrant workers and tackle forced labour

Lessons from the Work in Freedom programme (2013–2023)

Key features

- ▶ *After 10 years of operation, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)-funded Work in Freedom programme has amassed a rich set of lessons that can help guide future efforts on key global priorities such as promoting women and girls' rights, conducting responsible business and tackling forced labour and human trafficking.*
- ▶ *This publication provides a short summary of the programme, its activities and the key lessons it generated.*

The issue

There are an estimated 27.6 million people living in forced labour, and women and girls are particularly vulnerable. Many women from poorer communities migrate to seek short-term work, but find themselves trafficked or in situations of exploitation, such as being denied wages, working long hours, being trapped indoors with their passports or phones taken away, or suffering physical, mental or sexual abuse.

The Work in Freedom programme

Delivered by the ILO, the Work in Freedom (WIF) programme has sought to prevent the trafficking of women and girls from South Asia into exploitative jobs as domestic workers or in garment manufacturing and to support women's economic empowerment by helping them migrate safely to decent work. The programme took a unique approach, working across the "whole trafficking chain" in countries of origin on recruitment and in countries of destination. It operated in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Jordan, Lebanon and some Gulf countries



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Activities

The programme engaged directly with migrants, trade unions, civil society, businesses and regulators. Its interventions included:

- Pre-decision training and skills development for women in their communities;
- Improving standards for recruitment agents and employers;
- Supporting women at their destinations, for example, through local unions and support groups;
- Working with governments to improve laws and policies; and
- Research and evaluation to build stronger evidence in this field.

Results

The WIF programme has:

- Reached over **770,000 women and girls** in local communities;
- Helped **113,000 migrant women** join local unions and support groups in their destinations;

- Worked with governments on over **27 laws and policies** to help better protect vulnerable migrant workers (for example, legislation on domestic work or the recruitment industry regulation); and
- Published more than **30 studies and research papers** providing new evidence to policymakers.

An independent evaluation of the programme highlighted the following achievements.

- **Advancing women migrant workers' empowerment and choices.** WIF moved away from conventional approaches against forced labour towards a "pro-choice" orientation and is "a prime example of what a well-led, adaptive 'learning' programme can achieve".
- **WIF's commitment to analysis and investigation** of "knotty" problems, such as kafala system reform or improved rights and protections for migrant workers, has been remarkable and laudable.
- **A focus on building solid and valued relationships** across origin and destination contexts. This improves the likelihood of progress and approaches being sustained in countries of origin through alliances of local partners with local government or other funding agencies.



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- **Facilitation of effective advocacy at different levels.** WIF has worked well with district and state governments in South Asia, but the national advocacy work that WIF has often led or facilitated has been of particular importance. This includes changes to the law allowing women domestic workers to migrate in Nepal, the WIF's leadership role in the kafala reform working group in Lebanon and SEWA's advocacy work for domestic workers with opposition and ruling members of parliament in India.

Key lessons learned

- **Policy responses need to address the main drivers of forced labour**, which are the scarcity of decent jobs and absence of adequate social protection. Focusing only on targeting the perpetrators of abuse or on rescuing victims, which while very important, is less likely to yield a long-term and sustained reduction in forced labour and trafficking.
- **A focus on improving working conditions** must be maintained, for example, through stronger laws, regulations, policy guidance and effective monitoring and transparency. This is more important than educating workers about potential risks they face in their destinations because migrant workers often have little power and few avenues to address abuses directly with their employer or through local authorities.
- **Ensure anti-trafficking measures do not inadvertently increase harm.** Some anti-trafficking measures can infringe on women's social, economic and political rights, especially the right to work and freedom of movement. For example, if governments, families or communities prevent women from migrating in an effort to protect them, this limits their freedom and choices and can mean that they take more dangerous migration routes or break all contact with their families, who are then less able to help if needed. Similarly, criminalizing all informal recruitment agents (who play a vital business role) can leave women navigating a highly complex migration journey alone.
- **Legal channels into formal work can also lead into abusive labour situations.** Programmes and policies should be careful not to promise migrant workers that they will avoid abusive situations if they follow formal migration channels into formal workplaces. It is important to neither stop women from migrating nor encourage them to migrate as both can result in harmful outcomes.
- **Freedom of association and collective bargaining for migrant workers are critical.** If migrants can't access guidance and support in their destinations, reducing their vulnerability to forced labour will be unsustainable in the long run.

International organizations must be willing to stand by international labour standards, even if this is politically difficult in certain countries.

- The more women's mobility and work is restricted and socially stigmatized, the more the threats to their safety and agency increase. For example, women either simply don't migrate or, if they are desperate to leave, migrate suddenly or secretly to avoid stigma, thus increasing potential harms.



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The way forward

- Tackle macro policies to make a lasting difference. This will be more effective and sustainable than prioritizing more direct measures to tackle trafficking, such as promoting safe migration, fair recruitment or undertaking labour audits.
- Position productive employment and decent work for women and men at the centre of long- and short-term national development strategies, including macro-economic policies.
- Bring all excluded occupations or types of workers under the fold of general labour law protections. Vulnerable workers such as migrant or domestic workers are often excluded from full labour protections that guarantee fundamental principles and rights at work.

- Remove mobility and employment restrictions for women. The WIF programme closely reviewed mobility restrictions in several countries. Bans on women’s mobility and employment are a violation of their human rights and should be removed.

For more information, see WIF’s Summary of Lessons Learned from Work in Freedom or more detailed lessons on: Outreach to migrant women in areas of origin; on Recruitment; and on Interventions in destination countries.

For all research papers supported by WIF, please see the WIF blog and the WIF programme page on the ILO website.



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