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Surveillance to Solidarity: Peacebuilding for Economic Migrant Protection Through Mobile Platforms Ulviya Narmin Hoque Chisty

Executive Summary

- Economic migrants contributed an estimated \$840 billion USD in remittances in 2023, yet face significant violence and exploitation.
- Mobile platforms can reduce these risks by improving access to support, legal aid, and reporting mechanisms.
- Challenges such as unequal access, offline vulnerabilities, and data security risks limit the effectiveness of these platforms.
- Recommendations include expanding affordable mobile access for migrant workers, building public-private support systems, enforcing data protection, and updating platforms for multilingual accessibility.

Introduction

164 million international economic migrants contribute significantly to global supply chains. Yet, between December 2022 and November 2023, 613 human rights abuse allegations were recorded against them.¹ These abuses, spanning sectors like renewable energy, hospitality, and agriculture, expose workers to exploitation and discrimination. As François Crépeau, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, notes, many are forced into dangerous, low-wage jobs due to precarious residence status.² This brief explores how mobile platforms can empower workers, provide resources, improve solidarity, and mitigate these vulnerabilities, with actionable recommendations for improvement.³

Note: Throughout this brief, the terms “economic migrant” and “migrant worker” are used interchangeably.

Economic Migration

According to the UN OHCHR, a “migrant worker” is defined as “a person who is to be engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.” Economic migration refers to the movement of people primarily motivated by the pursuit of better economic opportunities.⁴ Migrants often seek employment in low-wage, labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. Despite their contributions to host economies, economic migrants frequently face precarious working conditions, exploitation, low wages, and minimal legal protections.⁵ Social stigmas and xenophobia further compound their vulnerability, leading to marginalisation and exclusion from social support systems.⁶

Mobile Platforms in Economic Migration

Given these vulnerabilities, mobile platforms have emerged as a promising tool for improving mi-

1 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, Migrant Workers' Rights: Global Analysis 2023, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/migrant-workers-2023/migrant-workers-rights-global-analysis-2023/>.

2 François Crépeau, The Human Rights of Migrants, OHCHR, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CMW/Discussions/2014/FrancoisCrepeau.pdf>.

3 Anni Alexander and Sophie Otiende, “Social Media & Rescuing Trafficked Migrants: A Case Study,” Mixed Migration Centre, March 30, 2015, <https://mixedmigration.org/social-media-rescuing-trafficked-migrants/>.

4 European Commission. “Migration.” European Migration Network Asylum and Migration Glossary. Accessed February 24, 2025. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/migration_en.

5 Amarjit Kaur, “Malaysia: Labour Migration, Irregular Movements and Regional Policies,” in *Migration and Integration in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia*, ed. Juliet Pietsch and Marshall Clark (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 75–98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16f986x.9>.

6 Ibid.

Ulviya Narmin Hoque Chisty, MPA Candidate, Brown University.

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grant worker protections. Digital infrastructures such as *LabourLink* and *Ulula* allow economic migrants to access legal information, report abuse anonymously, and connect to peer support networks. Mobile platforms offer a means of empowerment, helping to reduce isolation and foster solidarity among migrants. By facilitating early intervention and enhancing transparency, mobile technologies play a critical role in peacebuilding efforts aimed at reducing the risk of violence and exploitation against migrant workers.

Economic Migrants and Violence

Economic migration exposes workers to systemic and direct forms of violence through legal precarity, social exclusion, and barriers to protection. Structural factors, including restrictive labour policies, economic dependency on employers, and sexism create environments where violence becomes probable, while direct abuse at worksites and along migration routes remains a persistent threat.

Structural Vulnerability and Legal Precarity: Migrant workers are frequently trapped in precarious legal statuses that deepen their exposure to violence. Many migration systems tie workers' visas to their employers, limiting their freedom and discouraging them from reporting abuse. Mullally (2017) highlights how dejuridification—the creation of legal exceptions that exclude migrant workers from standard protections—intensifies their vulnerability.¹⁷ Case studies from Singapore show that economic migrants, particularly those in the construction industry, often remain silent about abuse to avoid retaliation or deportation.² Similar patterns appear in Malaysia, where temporary migration schemes reinforce dependency and suppress worker rights.^{3,4}

The academic evidence in this area is detailed and consistent across different contexts, though it relies heavily on qualitative research. Broader quantitative studies would further strengthen claims about how systemic legal precarity drives violence against economic migrants.

Labour Exclusion and Social Hostility: Restrictive employment laws not only make migrant workers vulnerable to employer abuse but also contribute to their

social marginalisation. It is argued that exclusionary labour policies fuel resentment among local workers, who perceive migrants as competitors for scarce jobs and services.⁵ In environments of economic strain, migrant workers are cast as outsiders and economic threats, increasing their exposure to hostility and discrimination. Migrant workers often face daily racism and xenophobia, shaped by political narratives that frame them as destabilising forces.⁶ While much of this evidence is qualitative and policy-oriented, its consistency across diverse national settings reinforces the link between exclusionary policies, social mistrust, and increased violence.

rodrigoandrade3880. *Hand Worker Constructions*. Photograph. Published August 1, 2015. Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/hand-worker-constructions-869322/>.



Barriers to Reporting and Access to Protection: Migrant workers who face abuse are often unable or unwilling to seek help. Fear of deportation, language barriers, and a lack of trust in official systems silence many workers. Cases have highlighted how Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore internalise silence as a necessary survival strategy under a punitive migration regime.⁷ Even where legal aid services exist, they are frequently inaccessible due to limited outreach, language incompatibility, or employer surveillance.⁸

These barriers are even more severe for women and girls working as domestic migrant workers. In many countries, domestic workers are not legally recognised as “workers” and are therefore excluded from basic labour protections. Without enforceable

1 Siobhán Mullally, “Migrant Domestic Workers and Continuums of Exploitation: Beyond the Limits of Antitrafficking Laws,” *AJIL Unbound* 111 (2017): 498–503, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2018.24>

2 Chuanfei Chin, “Precarious Work and Its Complicit Network: Migrant Labour in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 4 (2019): 533–535, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1572209>.

3 Chuanfei Chin, “Precarious Work and Its Complicit Network: Migrant Labour in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 4 (2019): 533–535, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1572209>.

4 Amarjit Kaur, “Malaysia: Labour Migration, Irregular Movements and Regional Policies,” in *Migration and Integration in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia*, ed. Juliet Pietsch and Marshall Clark (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 75–98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16f986x.9>.

5 Kalleberg and Hewison (2013) and the International Labour Organization (2011)

6 Jorge A. Bustamante, “Extreme Vulnerability of Migrants: The Cases of the United States and Mexico,” *Migraciones Internacionales* 6, no. 1 (2011): 97–118.

7 G. Baey and B. Yeoh, “Migration and Precarious Work: Negotiating Debt, Employment, and Livelihood Strategies amongst Bangladeshi Migrant Men Working in Singapore’s Construction Industry” (Brighton: Migrating Out of Poverty Consortium, University of Sussex, 2015), Working Paper 26.

8 International Labour Organization (ILO), “COVID-19 Has Made Life Even More Precarious for Migrant Workers,” International Labour Organization, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/covid-19-has-made-life-even-more-precarious-migrant-workers>.

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rights to minimum wage, annual leave, or regulated working hours, domestic workers face heightened risks of violence and abuse. The absence of formal protections not only increases their vulnerability but also instils a deeper fear of reporting exploitation, as legal systems often fail to recognise or defend their rights.

Direct Experiences of Violence: Beyond structural precarity, migrant workers often experience direct violence. Abuse at worksites, including physical mistreatment, withheld wages, and hazardous conditions, remains widespread.¹ Research in sectors

Conditions That Exacerbate Violence:

Certain conditions increase migrant workers' exposure to violence. Economic downturns heighten competition for low-wage jobs, deepening resentment toward migrant labourers.^{3,4} Political polarisation and exclusionary narratives worsen social divisions, increasing the likelihood of both institutional neglect and interpersonal violence against workers.⁵ Women and LGBTQI migrant workers face disproportionate risks of gender-based violence, especially when legal protections are weak.⁶

“Applications and platforms available on mobile devices can help women migrant workers organize, access information on their rights, and access support services, including in response to violence.”

Strengths and Gaps in the Evidence

The evidence linking economic migration to violence is robust, particularly regarding legal precarity and social exclusion, with case studies from Singapore and Malaysia and ILO investigations offering valuable in-

Case Study: LaborLink- Enhancing Protection through Phone-Based Communication

LaborLink, a mobile platform by ELEVATE, has reached over 3 million workers in 20 countries, integrating a phone-based Worker Sentiment Survey to facilitate two-way communication between workers, employers, and community organizations. In Bangladesh's informal garment sector, LaborLink is customized to collect data on child and forced labor. This anonymous tool allows workers in informal factories, particularly in Keraniganj and Narayanganj, to report abuses like verbal mistreatment and wage theft. Despite challenges such as limited access to phones and complex survey methods, over 1,200 workers received educational messages via IVR. The project also saw factory owners showing a willingness to improve conditions but noted that more education and guidance were needed to foster systemic change. The initiative highlights the potential of mobile platforms to provide vulnerable workers with a voice, though broader efforts are needed to ensure accessibility and overcome barriers like phone access.

Source: ELEVATE. “Worker Engagement.” <https://www.elevatelimited.com/services/advisory/worker-engagement/>

such as fisheries documents migrant workers facing psychological, physical, and even sexual abuse linked directly to their economic vulnerability.²

These findings, grounded in qualitative case studies and sector-specific investigations, offer compelling evidence that economic migrants' work status exposes them to systemic violence. However, the research often focuses on particular industries or migration corridors, suggesting a need for broader comparative studies.

sights. However, the reliance on small sample sizes and qualitative data limits generalisability. Additionally, fear of reporting and lack of accessible channels for grievances contribute to gaps in research. Mobile platforms could help bridge this gap by providing safer, more accessible reporting options.

Despite these gaps, the scholarship clearly shows that economic migrants face heightened risks of violence due to legal vulnerabilities, social exclusion, and barriers to protection, making addressing these structural

1 International Labour Organization (ILO), “COVID-19 Has Made Life Even More Precarious for Migrant Workers,” International Labour Organization, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/covid-19-has-made-life-even-more-precarious-migrant-workers>.

2 Ibid.

3 Uri Dadush and Mona Niebuhr, “The Economic Impact of Forced Migration,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 22, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2016/04/the-economic-impact-of-forced-migration?lang=en>.

4 Paolo Verme, “Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Refugees on Host Communities,” World Bank Blogs, March 28, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/theory-and-evidence-impact-refugees-host-communities>

5 Kars de Bruijne, Minke Meijnders, and Lauriane Héau, “Migration,” New Dots on the Security Horizon: Results from the Clingendael Expert Survey (Clingendael Institute, 2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17335.5>

6 International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Addressing Gender-Based Violence,” Migrant Protection Platform, <https://migrantprotection.iom.int/en/about/addressing-gender-based-violence>.

Mobile Platforms as Peacebuilding Tools for Economic Migrant Protection

Digital platforms are online systems that connect users, facilitate information exchange, and build trust.⁷ A subset, mobile platforms, are designed specifically for smartphones and tablets.⁸ They include mobile operating systems and application environments that support the development of mobile apps.⁹ Tools such as LabourLink and Ulula deliver information to workers and collect feedback through mobile phones, offering rapid, accessible communication even in restrictive environments.



shouravsheikh, *They See My Disability, I See My Ability*, photograph, published November 2, 2020, Pixabay, <https://pixabay.com/photos/person-disabled-wheel-chair-posing-5660429/>.

Mobile platforms help migrant workers overcome barriers such as lack of union access, social isolation, and exploitation. They allow workers to assert their rights and seek better working conditions where traditional support systems are weak.¹⁰ In peacebuilding, mobile platforms contribute to social cohesion by addressing inequality, empowering vulnerable workers, and fostering solidarity. By improving the safety and agency of migrant workers, these platforms can reduce violence and promote more stable, integrated societies in both host and origin communities.

Positive Contributions to Peacebuilding

Real-Time Reporting and Feedback: Mobile platforms enable migrant workers to report violations and provide feedback in real-time and anonymously, enhancing their protection against violence, particularly in contexts where social security and healthcare systems are weak.¹¹ Applications like LabourLink integrate phone-based Worker Sentiment Surveys, facilitating two-way communication between workers, employers, and community organisations to improve responses to early signs of abuse.¹²

Access to Labour Laws and Compliance Information: Mobile platforms provide workers with access to information about labour rights, grievance procedures, and legal aid.¹³ This access helps workers identify and address misconduct early, reducing the risk of exploitation. However, in-person legal aid clinics remain crucial for workers facing language barriers or lacking digital access.

Social Connectivity and Grievance Mechanisms: Mobile technology also strengthens emotional resilience by enabling communication with family members and peer support groups.¹⁴ These grievance mechanisms help workers take preventive action against abusive conditions and reduce feelings of isolation that can escalate conflict.

Transparency and Worker Empowerment: Worker reporting platforms like LabourLink offer comprehensive feedback to participants on survey results.¹⁵ This transparency encourages worker agency and collec-

7 Awais Asadullah, Miguel Angel Malo, and Fernando L. F. Ribeiro, "Digital Platforms: Definitions and Economic and Legal Challenges in the European Union," *European Journal of Privacy Law & Technologies* 7, no. 1 (2018), <https://universitypress.unisob.na.it/ojs/index.php/ejplt/article/view/1264>.

8 National University of Singapore, *Mobile Platform* (Singapore: School of Computing, National University of Singapore, 2017), <https://www.comp.nus.edu.sg/~seer/book/2e/Ch09.%20Mobile%20Platform.pdf>.

9 Kars de Bruijne, Minke Meijnders, and Lauriane Héau, "Migration," *New Dots on the Security Horizon: Results from the Clingendael Expert Survey* (Clingendael Institute, 2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17335.5>.

10 World Bank, "Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Refugees on Host Communities," *World Bank Blogs*, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/theory-and-evidence-impact-refugees-host-communities>.

11 International Organization for Migration, "Addressing Gender-Based Violence," *Migrant Protection Platform*, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://migrantprotection.iom.int/en/about/addressing-gender-based-violence>.

12 Ibid.

13 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, "Example in Action: Technology to Engage Migrant Workers," *Steps to a Social Compliance System*, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/comply-chain/steps-to-a-social-compliance-system/step-2-assess-risks-and-impacts/example-in-action-technology-to-engage-migrant-workers>.

14 International Labour Organization (ILO), "COVID-19 Has Made Life Even More Precarious for Migrant Workers," *International Labour Organization*, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/covid-19-has-made-life-even-more-precarious-migrant-workers>.

15 Bassina Farbenblum, Laurie Berg, and Angela Kintominas, *Transformative Technology for Migrant Workers: Opportunities, Challenges, and Risks* (New York: Open Society Foundations, 2018).

tive action to address workplace challenges, contributing to broader peacebuilding efforts.

Limitations and Challenges

Inequitable Access and the Digital Divide: Many migrant workers are digitally excluded due to low technological literacy, expensive devices, or lack of multilingual support.¹⁶ Migrants using mobile platforms face challenges with poor internet connectivity, device incompatibility, and complex app navigation.¹⁷ Additionally, employers may confiscate workers' phones, further restricting their ability to access digital tools.¹⁸

Digital Security and Privacy Risks: Data breaches, employer surveillance, and biometric data collection expose workers to heightened risks of retaliation, discrimination, and exploitation.^{19,20} Ethical concerns regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and worker participation in technology design underscore the need for stronger data protection measures.²¹



Chiec_Dep. Man, Nature, Worker. Photograph. Published September 10, 2020. Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/man-worker-buckets-salt-sunset-5557864/>

Misinformation and Skewed Perceptions: Crowdsourced platforms like Transafe can sometimes produce misleading representations of workplace or community safety if reports are based on emotional or isolated experiences rather than verified patterns.²² Inaccurate data can fuel unnecessary fear among workers and hinder employment opportunities.

Unknowns and Future Challenges

16 UNHCR, Regional Information and Communication Needs Assessment: Understanding the Information and Communication Needs of Refugees and Migrants in the Venezuela Situation (November 2019)

17 Associated Press, "UN Shared Rohingya Data Without Informed Consent: Bangladesh Provided Myanmar Information That Refugee Agency Collected," AP News, November 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com>

18 Stephen A. Matlin et al., "Digital Solutions for Migrant and Refugee Health: A Framework for Analysis and Action," *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe* 50 (2024): 101190, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2024.101190>.

19 DHS Overhauls Asylum Phone App for Self-Deportation," *Border Report*, March 2025, <https://www.borderreport.com/immigration/dhs-overhauls-asylum-phone-app-for-self-deportation/>

20 Amnesty International, *CBP One – A Blessing or a Trap?* (2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/7985/2024/en/>

21 Stephen A. Matlin et al., "Digital Solutions for Migrant and Refugee Health: A Framework for Analysis and Action," *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe* 50 (2024): 101190, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2024.101190>.

22 M. Hamilton et al., "Transafe: A Crowdsourced Mobile Platform for Crime and Safety Perception Management," *SIGCAS Computers and Society* 41, no. 2 (December 2011): 32–37, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2095272.2095275>.

23 Ibid.

Case Study: Ulula's Customizable Worker Feedback Platform

Ulula's customizable platform enables real-time communication with workers across 100 countries, deploying surveys, alerts, and grievance mechanisms. Gildan, a major apparel manufacturer, partnered with Ulula to strengthen its grievance processes by enabling workers to report issues anonymously in their preferred languages. The mobile platform fostered better communication, with 962 cases opened and an 83.16% resolution rate. This case underscores the role of mobile technology in improving workplace conditions by enhancing transparency and trust between workers and management. By enabling workers to report concerns without fear of retaliation, Ulula empowered them to raise issues such as unsafe working conditions, contributing to stronger labour rights protections and better employer accountability.

Source: Ulula, "Gildan: Building Effective Grievance Mechanisms," <https://ulula.com/resources/case-studies/gildan-effective-grievance-mechanisms/>.

While mobile platforms show strong promise for supporting migrant workers, significant gaps remain in understanding their long-term impacts. Few longitudinal studies exist to measure whether platforms sustainably reduce violence or improve economic outcomes over time.²³ Further research is needed to evaluate how mobile tools interact with broader social and legal structures in peacebuilding contexts.

Recommendations:

Mobile platforms can play a vital role in preventing extreme situations by providing a means for migrant workers to file complaints, access legal resources, and build a sense of community, particularly in isolated environments. However, these platforms should complement, not replace, in-person inspections and

support. Ensuring that grievances are properly addressed, without fear of exposure or limited access, requires a hybrid approach that includes both digital and offline solutions. To maximise the potential of mobile platforms for peacebuilding and protection, several actions should be prioritised:

Expand access to affordable mobile technology and the internet for migrants: Governments should offer subsidized mobile plans for migrant workers, similar to the U.S. “Lifeline” program, and increase internet access in migrant-heavy areas through public Wi-Fi or community center partnerships.²⁴ Public-private collaborations could also provide affordable smartphones preloaded with essential legal, grievance, and social services apps, similar to the RefugeeMobile program.²⁵

Create public-private partnerships to support workers without reliable mobile access: Government agencies, telecom providers, and NGOs should develop multi-channel communication strategies (e.g., SMS and call centers) for migrant workers. Increasing workplace inspections can ensure access to mobile devices, or provide in-person grievance opportunities and anonymous surveys in areas with limited connectivity, supported by community liaison officers.²⁶

“Lack of familiarity with local law and language difficulties frequently prevent migrants from being aware of specific hazards in their work.”

Enforce data protection laws to safeguard migrant identities: Mobile platforms should implement secure data privacy protocols (authentication, encryption, anonymization) to protect migrant workers’ information from misuse.²⁷ Regular audits and collaboration with privacy advocacy groups will ensure compliance. Governments should enforce regulations that hold companies accountable for migrant data protection.²⁸

Update mobile platforms to include multiple languages: Current mobile platforms should be updated to support multiple languages to ensure they are accessible to migrant workers who may not speak English or the host country’s language, improving their ability to access resources and report grievances effectively.²⁹

24 Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), “Get Started,” Lifeline Support, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/get-started/>.

25 Vodafone Americas Foundation, “Backed by Data, the RefugeeMobile Smartphone Program Helps Refugees Assimilate,” accessed April 28, 2025, <https://vodafone-us.com/news-items/backed-by-data-the-refugeemobile-smartphone-program-helps-refugees-assimilate/>.

26 François Crépeau, The Human Rights of Migrants, OHCHR, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CMW/Discussions/2014/FrancoisCrepeau.pdf>.

27 United Nations Network on Migration, “Reclaiming Digital Spaces to Counter Human Trafficking and Protect Its Victims,” UN Migration Network, 2021, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/statements/reclaiming-digital-spaces-counter-human-trafficking-and-protect-its-victims>

28 Ben Wolford, “What is GDPR?” GDPR.eu, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/>

29 Ibid.