The Issue of the Exploitation of Migrant Workers

A migrant worker is a person who has moved to another country or area to find employment. According to the International Labour Organisation, there were 169 million migrant workers as of 2019 (equating to 4.9% of the global labour force), two- thirds of whom are concentrated in high-income countries. Migrant workers not only contribute to the economies of the countries they are working in, but through the remittances they send home, boost the economies of their countries of origin. However, they are at higher risk of exploitation due their immigration status.

Migrant workers are vulnerable to financial exploitation, physical harm and various forms of coercion, which is often exacerbated by the limited access to support networks in countries they are residing in. As well as this, gaps in government policies lead to a lack of social protection, for instance limited access to healthcare or paid sick days. While most efforts to eradicate migrant worker exploitation have been focused on reducing cases of human trafficking, such as the 2003 UN Trafficking Protocol, much of the issue still lies within more acute forms of abuse that have been normalised. For example, migrant workers often earn lower wages and work in poorer conditions due to pressure on business to function with the lowest labour costs possible. Employers often use irregular migrants (people who cross international borders without official authorisation) to undercut other workers and drive down working conditions. However, through the legalisation and regulation of migrant workers, employment rights can be enforced, minimising exploitation.

Official figures show that approximately 40% of migrant workers are female. However, this figure underrepresents the true number of female migrant workers, who are likely to be in more vulnerable positions and unrecorded in official statistics. Their work is often devalued and concentrated in gendered labour sectors such as domestic, cleaning or catering industries, where there are fewer opportunities for worker solidarity. Due to this isolation, they are extremely susceptible to sexual violence and psychological abuse.

It is crucial that migrant workers, therefore, have freedom of association and can choose to belong to a trade union. Trade unions protect workers and their inherent rights, ensuring that worker-wellbeing is maintained. The International Labour Organisation sets the standard that all workers, regardless of immigration status, should have the same trade union rights, however, in some countries, migrant workers are denied this. There are also many barriers to joining unions for migrant workers, for instance being employed informally, being unable to afford the cost of membership, gender discrimination and language barriers. Without this advocacy and support, they are at an increased risk of exploitation.

Points to Consider:

* What steps can be taken to regulate migrant workers to ensure that all are recorded and protected through government schemes?
* How can member states reduce acute forms of exploitation, such as low wages?
* What steps can be taken to ensure that all migrant workers are granted trade union support?

Useful Links:

<https://bhr-navigator.unglobalcompact.org/issues/migrant-workers/>

<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cmw>