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NAVIGATING IM/MOBILITY

How to effectively assist non-European workers in the Netherlands?

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“Behind every immigrant, there is a dream and we aspire to make it come true” – Laura (pseudonym)

Introduction

About a year ago I was introduced to FairWork, a Dutch anti-labor exploitation organization that analyzed an increasing trend of Indonesian workers entering the Netherlands ‘illegally’, after having worked on a single permit in Poland. This ‘migration flow’ is not an exceptional case, it is part of an increasing trend of an Asian workforce being recruited for low-paid jobs in Poland (La Strada International 2022). Because of a perceived impression of precarity, FairWork expressed an interest in research into this particular group. As a response to this expressed interest, I have researched the (work) experiences of non-European illegalized workers in the Netherlands. To this group, I have thus added others: people who came to the Netherlands in other ways but also now find themselves working here as illegalized persons.

In this report, I present the findings of this research. In doing so I focus specifically on the first group (ex-single permit holders) while also naming the latter one. I will give an overview of the experiences of these workers to portray the complexities and challenges they faced in their trajectories to and in Europe, to subsequently give a practical understanding (including recommendations) of how to improve their vulnerable position.

A Single Permit is a combined residence and work permit. Obtaining such a permit is a way to be able to legally work in the EU as a non-European citizen. Countries like the Netherlands almost exclusively hand out such permits only to ‘highly skilled’ labor migrants (also known as knowledge migration).

In other countries, like Poland, they are also used to recruit practically skilled labor.

Another used method of entering Europe among my participants is through tourist visa overstaying. This ‘overstaying’ renders a worker immediately illegalized.

This research is a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam and FairWork.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To research the (work) experiences of non-European movers in the Netherlands I have conducted three months of fieldwork using mixed (anthropological) methods:

- In-depth interviewing (12)¹
- Participant observation²
- Creative focus group (1)

THEORETICAL APPROACH

I have researched this theme by looking at the geographical routes people take when they move to and in Europe, and zooming in on moments of decision-making that take place when they are immobilized (brought to a standstill), either physically or in terms of personal growth. I looked at what they do in response to this and what factors assist them in opening new routes and possibilities.

“All of them look for their own safe place” - Jomar

Racial Capitalism

An important theme in my research is the topic of ‘racial capitalism’. Racial capitalism is a concept that points to the acknowledgment of racism and capitalism as interdependent systems. This means that the global capitalist system is dependent on a racialization of labor: a division of work and income based on where people come from. This forces a lot of people to sell their labor for a fraction of what they can get for it in a country like The Netherlands and results in “migrant laborers” being treated differently than others.

Furthermore, the concept also points to how Europe is dependent on a migrant and undocumented workforce to ensure the capitalist lifestyles of its inhabitants.

This political and economic context is important to understand the experiences of people who migrate in search of work and must deal with these structures.

¹ These interviews were held with people from Indonesia (6), The Philippines (3) and Colombia (3).

² Participant observation is an anthropological method in which the researcher accompanies their participants in activities or daily life. These observations are used as empirical data.

Data and Findings

On route to Europe in search of labor, my participants experienced several moments of difficulties and opportunities. In this section, I will divide per theme the most present factors that either made them more vulnerable or functioned as tools for empowerment.

To illustrate these findings, I have added (parts) of the stories of my participants in separate text boxes.

(1) DREAMS AND IMAGINATIONS

People migrate in search of labor, but they do so with accompanying dreams and aspirations. Being in a worker scheme might not be a person's end goal. Some people had dreams of traveling, instead of working (in Poland or the Netherlands).

Furthermore, people imagine the place they move to: they construct an image of it. If reality does not live up to these expectations, they might want to move on. This image is fuelled by colonial and historical relationships.

Together these concepts can explain a mismatch between a single permit contract and a worker's personal needs, which can be a reason to end the contract.

Basuki went to Poland but dreamed of studying in Europe. He wants to get access to the Leiden University library to read books on social sciences he is interested in.

Vikal went to Poland but actually he always wanted to go to the Netherlands. He had imagined building a life there. Vikal is from Indonesia and the Netherlands and Indonesia have a shared colonial history.

(2) AGENCIES

The opportunity to go is often realized through recruitment agencies. These agencies are illegal according to the ILO conventions, as workers cannot be charged for recruitment. Even so, they are widespread.

This results in debts and false promises. Namely, the agencies charge high fees for their services, indebting workers before they are able to go.

Additionally, they often make (false) promises of monthly wages based on a certain amount of work that is not in correspondence with reality. Consequently, people are not able to make what they expected to make in a month (to pay off their debts).

In conclusion, they make use of the position of these workers who really want to go and feel they are dependent on the agencies to do so.

Vikal did “some bargaining” with his agency and navigated his way out of paying them. This portrays the illicitness of the agency business.

Manu

Manu registered with an agency in Indonesia and was made to pay twice for his visa to go to Poland. This was, according to the agency, because of the pandemic. It resulted in him going with a huge debt (as well as borrowing money, he also sold his land for rice farming). In Poland, Manu learned that he got paid less than expected and was not paid overtime. He was told that the salary in the Netherlands was 5 to 6 times higher so decided to move. A friend connected him with an agent who promised him money and accommodation, but this agent was a fraud. He had already paid this agent when he found out. He is now staying in the Netherlands because he still hasn't paid off his debt and needs to send money to his family.

(3) WORKING CONDITIONS POLAND

In general my participants expressed either being dissatisfied with the amount of money they could make (and were promised to make) because of not being able to work enough hours. Or, they expressed having to work 12 hours a day, which was too much for them. This was a racialized division in the workforce: only the international laborers had to work such hours, the Polish worked only 8.

Most also reported that the labor was very heavy, one reported that he had to walk 5km to his job, which was too long for him, and a few reported they thought the wages were too low.

Additionally, next to some of these conditions being unlawful, my participants also spoke of changing employers (which is still impossible under the current single permit directive). This was however sometimes legalized by Polish law (they were given a new permit) and sometimes not. Other times, people moved to the Netherlands and started working there. What this portrays is how people move in and out of (il)legality.

THE CASE OF JOMAR

A specific exploitative situation was experienced by Jomar, a Filipino man who worked on a Single Permit in Poland. Jomar was made to do a different job than he applied for or was qualified for. He was expected to do this dangerous job without protection while being close to radiation, was not paid the minimum wage, and had his passport taken from him.

Namely, Jomar was a graduate in industrial engineering, but in a system of racial capitalism all his other credentials did not matter anymore, and he was treated as just that, a migrant worker who could be exploited. This shows the workings of racial capitalism and how it can reduce an identity to 'migrant laborer'.

(4) UNDOCUMENTED LABOR IN THE NETHERLANDS

In my exploration of the lives and trajectories of these workers (and others), once they become illegalized persons in the Netherlands I found them to not necessarily be more vulnerable than in Poland.

This was specifically due to one important factor: their network. Most people (Indonesian/Colombian/Filipino) I spoke to were able to establish a network of relations that assisted them in finding housing and a stable income. These networks also provided skills that they could use to navigate this new terrain.

Nevertheless, according to my informant, in general most of the Indonesians move back to Poland or back to Indonesia after a while. This points to flexible mobilities and is important to acknowledge: people do not necessarily intend to stay.

Furthermore, my participants expressed that in the Netherlands what they need most is perspectives on growth, even though they do not have citizenship. This is where their dreams become very important once again. A few expressed wanting to fulfill their dreams, which are unrelated to labor or citizenship. If FairWork could assist in this, it would be very valuable.

Importantly, focusing on illegalized labor in the Netherlands again shows how legality and illegality are in flux. People who travel through legal labor pathways move through the same spaces as people who travel to semi or illegal routes. They might even end up in the same work environment. This shows how people navigate the European labor migration system in their own ways, not conform the structures set out for them.

Irene moved to the Netherlands because there were no more opportunities for her in Colombia. She wants to get citizenship to be able to grow in life and contribute to the country she is living and working in.

Rosa dreams of becoming a painter. She wants to be present at every art gallery possible, so that she can practice. She calls herself La Artista Emigrante and has her work hanging in many parts of Europe already.

What can we do?

Recommendations

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

- Government-to-government structure
 - Advocate for a government-to-government structure that limits the power of agencies. In doing so, reconsider the limitations (like language skills) that only make it possible for some, and impossible for others to move. Instead, make available courses so that people can learn these skills before moving.
- Single Permit Directive
 - Advocate for the possibility of changing employers because in my research I found people already doing this but losing their permits. I want to argue for making this easier by at the very start giving an option B, C, D, etc.
- Pathways to citizenship
 - Advocate for pathways to regularization and citizenship that enable migrant workers to fully participate in their host societies. The Netherlands is dependent on their labor and should recognize this. It would also be an economic advantage as the people already working now would start paying taxes, at the same time making them less vulnerable to exploitation.
 - A good example is Spain; citizens can get long-term residence after three years of residing in the country.
- Intranational justice
 - Advocate for a connected EU labor migration responsibility and justice. Currently, a victim of human trafficking cannot get assistance or citizenship if they leave this harmful situation in a certain country and go to another. A person victim of human trafficking in Poland can currently not be protected in the Netherlands. This is wrongful as fleeing such a situation should be recognized and praised.

EMPOWERMENT, GROWTH AND DREAM-BUILDING

- Offer legal assistance to address the challenges posed by the labor migration system and issues related to permits and legal status.
- Provide opportunities for skill development and capacity building to enhance their self-reliance and employability.
 - Give access to courses that assist in this like language courses, cultural orientations, etc.
- Recognize migrants in their entire identities (not just as migrant laborers) and engage in the realization of dreams. This can be done through workshops that encourage migrants to give shape to their goals and dreams so that they do not have to “leave their dreams aside”.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING

- Develop programs that provide opportunities for migrant workers to connect with local communities, so they develop a sense of belonging and to limit feelings of isolation.
- Offer support services that address the emotional and psychological well-being of migrant workers.
- Provide opportunities for migrant workers to connect and form support groups.