



RESTORING DIGNITY TO MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers constitute a considerable portion of the workforce that contributes to local development in many countries. They are generally concentrated in sectors such as agriculture and domestic work, where they often endure precarious, informal, unprotected and even inhuman labour conditions. Many receive low wages and have little or no access to social protection. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has exacerbated the difficult situation of many migrant workers worldwide. In addition, discrimination in the assistance provided by local authorities has also added to the threats posed to their human dignity.

In response to the wish of Pope Francis that the current “crisis may give us the opportunity to make the dignity of the person and of work the centre of our concern,”¹ the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development calls for the implementation of effective measures aimed at upholding the dignity of all migrant workers. This includes respecting the principle of non-discrimination as detailed, for example, in the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination.²

The Reasons

The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” The application of this principle to migrant workers is also explicitly affirmed in art. 17 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.³

Migrant employment should respect the international labour standards on labour migration adopted over the years by the International Labour Conference. Such standards have been codified in the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and are found in other instruments containing specific provisions on migrant workers, including in the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97), the Migration for Employment Recommendation (Revised), 1949 (No. 86), the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143), and the Migrant Workers Recommendation, 1975 (No. 151).

The social teaching of the Catholic Church affirms unreservedly that “the rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity.”⁴ As Pope Francis has stated, “It is man’s first vocation: to work. And this gives dignity to man.

¹ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, May 1 2020.

² UN General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX) of 21 December 1965.

³ UN General Assembly resolution 45/158 of 18 December 1990.

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 301.

The dignity that makes him resemble God. The dignity of work”⁵; but unfortunately “[t]here are jobs that humiliate people’s dignity [...] precarious work is an open wound for many workers, who live in fear of losing their occupation. [...] Total precarity. It is immoral: it kills dignity, it kills their health, it kills the family and it kills society. Undeclared work and precarious work kill.”⁶

The Methods

The first step to effectively restore and reaffirm the dignity of all migrant workers is to prevent and eradicate their exploitation, ensuring fair wages, respect for their rights, and decent working conditions, particularly in agriculture and domestic work. Stricter control mechanisms to this end should include the establishment of *ad hoc* investigative units, frequent inspections of workplaces, and meticulous review of labour contracts. Such mechanisms should not penalize migrant workers, who are the victims of exploitation; on the contrary, equal access to justice should be guaranteed to all migrant workers.

During the COVID-19 crisis, migrant workers should be always included in responses to the pandemic, assuring them the same rights and equal treatment as nationals in the areas of social security coverage, access to benefits, social protection measures and wage subsidies.

Migrant workers should be empowered to be the primary advocates for their dignity. Such empowerment needs to start in the countries of origin through the offer of pre-departure orientation seminars, focusing on labour rights and standards. In the countries of arrival and deployment, massive information campaigns should be organized to inform migrant workers about their rights and duties, and encourage them to denounce abuses and exploitation. In addition, countries should increase access to legal pathways for migration, including both regular and circular migration channels for migrant workers.

In order to foster a ‘culture of legality,’ specific programs aimed at sensitizing employers and migrant workers about the negative consequences of informal and unprotected labour and the advantages of regular and decent employment should be developed and implemented, particularly in the agricultural and domestic work sectors.

Migrants & Refugee Section

Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

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⁵ Pope Francis, *Homely “Work is the vocation of man”*, 1 May 2020.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Videomessage to the 48th Italian Social Week*, 26-29 October 2017.