

Research Article

The Social Costs of Working Abroad as a Non-Professional — An Examination of Semi-Skilled and Unskilled Migrant Labourers in Low-Paid Jobs

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the profound social costs borne by semi-skilled and unskilled migrant laborers, a demographic often reduced to economic units in mainstream discourse. Moving beyond a narrow economic perspective that prioritizes remittance flows, this study synthesizes sociological theory and empirical evidence to examine the human consequences of labor migration. It argues that the prevailing neoliberal migration regime is structured to create a disposable workforce, systematically externalizing social costs onto the workers, their families, and their communities of origin. The analysis dissects the multifaceted nature of these costs, including the disintegration of transnational family structures and the associated psychological impacts on children and spouses. It further explores the erosion of cultural identity and the experience of systemic exploitation, framed through theoretical lenses of precarity, structural violence, and social death. The paper details the severe physical and mental health toll exacerbated by legal precarity and lack of access to care, and it critiques the paradox of remittances, which often undermine long-term development in sending countries. Finally, the challenges of reverse culture shock and failed reintegration are examined. The paper concludes by advocating for a fundamental paradigm shift towards a more equitable and humane migration governance, outlining multi-scalar policy recommendations targeting international frameworks, host and sending country legislation, and grassroots empowerment to uphold migrant rights and dignity.

Keywords

Labour Migration, Social Costs, Exploitation, Mental Health, Remittances, Transnational Families, Precarity, Structural Violence

1. Introduction

The global landscape of the 21st century is profoundly shaped by the movement of people, with the International Labour Organization estimating over 169 million international migrant workers worldwide [1]. A significant portion of this flow consists of semi-skilled and unskilled labourers from the Global South seeking employment in the industries of the

Global North and emerging economies. The dominant narrative surrounding this migration is often narrowly economic, focusing on remittance flows and GDP contributions [2]. This framing obscures a darker, more complex reality: the immense social costs that are systematically offloaded onto the migrants themselves.

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This paper moves beyond the economic perspective to conduct a critical, human-centric examination of the social costs borne by non-professional migrant workers. Building on foundational theories that frame migration as a social process and conceptualize migrant labour as a "buffer" for industrial economies, as well as more recent critiques of neoliberal migration governance [3, 4], we argue that the very structure of temporary labour migration programs is designed to create a disposable workforce. These workers are welcomed for their labour but excluded from the social and political fabric of the host society, leading to a state of perpetual marginality.

The following sections will dissect these costs in detail. We begin by exploring the rupture of familial and social bonds, introducing the concept of the "transnational family." We then delve into the psychological warfare of cultural displacement and identity loss. The analysis then turns to the structures of exploitation and vulnerability, framed by concepts of precarity and structural violence. The paradox of financial pressure amidst the pursuit of wealth is examined, followed by a detailed account of the physical and mental health consequences. Finally, we assess the broader impacts on sending countries and the often-traumatic process of return and reintegration. Throughout the analysis, we integrate discussions of potential policy interventions and acknowledge ongoing reforms in some regions to provide a balanced and solution-oriented perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework-Precarity, Structural Violence, and Social Death

To truly decipher the profound social costs inflicted upon semi-skilled and unskilled migrant workers, one must move beyond cataloging their hardships and instead interrogate the very architectures that produce them. Their suffering is not a series of isolated incidents but the logical outcome of a global system engineered to extract labor while disavowing human responsibility. This analysis is grounded in a theoretical triad that reveals the layered nature of their exploitation: precarity as their condition of existence, structural violence as the mechanism that imposes this condition and what can be understood as a form of social death as a profound consequence.

The concept of precarity, as developed by Guy Standing [5], provides a powerful lens through which to view the migrant's existential state. Standing's "precariat" is a nascent class, distinct from the traditional proletariat, defined by its relationship to chronic insecurity. Lacking occupational identity, stable futures, and social protections, the precariat lives in a state of perpetual temporariness. Migrant workers are the quintessential precariat. Their legal presence in a host country is almost universally contingent upon their employment status, often tethered to a single employer through systems like the Middle East's *kafala* (sponsorship) or similar temporary work visa programs in North America and in the Far-East Asia. This legal bind transforms the worker from a citizen with rights into a

contingent resource. Their work is frequently informal or segregated into specific, low-status sectors—construction, domestic work, agriculture—where labor protections are weakest. Their rights are not merely limited; they are conditional, revocable at the whim of an employer or the state. This manufactured instability is not an oversight but a feature, designed to create a workforce that is productive yet powerless, present yet disposable.

This systemic production of precarity is a manifest form of structural violence, a term powerfully articulated by medical anthropologist Paul Farmer [6]. Structural violence refers to the harm inflicted upon vulnerable populations by social, political, and economic institutions. It is violence that is built into the structure of society, operating without a direct, individual perpetrator, and is often normalized as simply "the way things are." The suffering of the migrant worker is not caused by a singular "evil" employer, though individual acts of cruelty abound, but by a network of policies and power relations that make such exploitation inevitable. Immigration policies that create conditions of bonded labor, where a worker cannot leave an abusive employer without facing deportation, are structural violence. International trade agreements, such as NAFTA in the 1990s, which decimated Mexican subsistence agriculture and forced millions to seek survival through migration, are instruments of structural violence. The vast global economic inequality that renders migration from the Global South to the Global North not a choice but a necessity for survival is the very bedrock of this violence. These structures systematically prevent people from meeting their basic needs for safety, dignity, and community, channeling them into a system designed for their exploitation.

The synergistic effect of precarity and structural violence often culminates in a state that social theorist Orlando Patterson [7], in the context of slavery, termed social death—a concept that finds a disturbing resonance in the modern migrant experience. Social death refers to the condition of being physically present yet denied social legitimacy, symbolic value, and membership in the community. For the migrant worker, this manifests in multiple ways. They are often physically segregated in labor camps or isolated in private households, cut off from the host society. They are rendered culturally invisible, their languages, traditions, and personhood erased in favor of their utility as laborers. Legally, they exist in a liminal state, denied the pathways to citizenship, political participation, or even basic legal recourse that would affirm their social existence. The constant threat of deportation acts as a powerful tool enforcing this social death, reminding them that their presence is conditional and revocable. This systematic denial of social belonging inflicts a deep psychological wound, fracturing identity and severing the meaningful connections that constitute a full human life.

Viewing the migrant experience through this theoretical prism of precarity, structural violence, and social death is essential. It shifts the analytical focus from the individual pathologies of "unfortunate" workers to the pathological structures of

the global economy. Precarity is the cage, structural violence is the architect who built it, and social death is the experience of those trapped inside. This framework reveals that the family separation, cultural erosion, exploitation, and mental anguish detailed in this paper are not accidental byproducts of migration but are, in fact, its calculated outcomes within a system that values disposable labor over human life. Understanding this is the first step toward dismantling these structures and envisioning a migration paradigm founded on justice, rather than mere utility.

3. The Fractured Fabric of Family and Social Life

The disruption wrought by migration extends far beyond the physical absence of a family member; it constitutes a fundamental and often painful reorganization of the very pillars of kinship and community. While the economic logic of migration prioritizes remittances, the social costs are paid in the currency of strained relationships, reconfigured roles, and a pervasive sense of dislocation that echoes across generations and continents. The migrant family becomes a transnational family [8], a unit stretched across borders, whose survival depends on sustaining connection across vast distances, often at the expense of its internal cohesion and emotional well-being.

Within this transnational space, the experience of children, often termed "left-behind children" or "children of the migration," reveals one of the most profound social costs. While digital communication platforms like video calls create an illusion of presence, they are a poor substitute for the daily, embodied practices of parenting—the shared meals, the casual touch, the consistent enforcement of boundaries. This digital tethering can, paradoxically, heighten the sense of loss, making absence feel more acute during the silence between calls. The psychological impact is significant and well-documented. Research from major sending countries like the Philippines and Ecuador indicates that children of overseas workers exhibit higher rates of anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues [9]. For instance, a study by the Scalabrini Migration Center in the Philippines in 2019 found that 40% of children of migrant workers reported symptoms of moderate to severe depression [10]. They grapple with what feels like a conditional love, where the parent's sacrifice is a constant, looming presence, and their own academic performance or conduct becomes entangled with a sense of obligation to justify that sacrifice. The absent parent is transformed into an abstract figure—a provider, a photograph, a voice from a speaker—rather than a stable emotional anchor, potentially impairing the child's attachment security and long-term emotional development.

This reorganization of family life is intensely gendered, reflecting and reinforcing global inequalities. The migration of mothers, particularly those employed in the global care chain as domestic workers, nannies, and nurses, triggers a deep care drain within the household. This is not merely a logistical shift

but a profound emotional transfer. The intimate, nurturing labor traditionally performed by the mother is often delegated to female relatives, older daughters, or underpaid caregivers from poorer local families, creating what Hochschild [11] identifies as a "global care chain"—a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. This transfer is rarely seamless; it often generates resentment, jealousy, and a deep sense of maternal guilt for the migrant mother, who is caring for another family's children while her own grow up without her. The societal judgment she faces is often harsher than that directed at migrant fathers, underscoring the entrenched expectation that motherhood is incompatible with long-distance economic provision.

Conversely, male migrants confront a different gendered crisis. Their migration is often framed as the ultimate fulfillment of the masculine provider role. Yet, this very success comes at the cost of their daily presence and involvement in family life. They become what Parreñas [9] calls "remote fathers," whose authority and connection are mediated through remittances and periodic calls. This can lead to a crisis of masculinity, as their paternal role is hollowed out, reduced to a financial function. They may return home as strangers to their own children, who have formed deeper bonds with the caregivers who remained. The emotional distance that emerges can be as vast as the geographical one they crossed, leaving fathers feeling alienated and impotent within the very family structure they sacrificed to support.

The fracturing caused by migration is not confined to the nuclear family; it radiates outward, eroding the social and communal fabric of the sending communities. The prolonged exodus of working-age adults systematically depletes social capital—the networks of trust, reciprocity, and collective action that bind a community together. Traditional practices, from collective farming and neighborhood watch groups to participatory local governance, begin to atrophy. The social energy required to sustain community festivals, religious observances, or even casual socializing diminishes as the population becomes physically and emotionally dispersed. The community itself becomes transnational, its center of gravity shifting partly abroad, weakening local institutions and collective identity.

This erosion has a devastating corollary upon the migrant's return. The dream of homecoming is often met with the reality of a community that has moved on. The social networks that once provided support and a sense of belonging have frayed or dissolved. Friendships have cooled, community hierarchies have shifted, and the migrant returns as a semi-stranger, no longer fully integrated into the daily rhythms of the village or town they left. Their hard-earned savings and new worldviews can sometimes breed resentment or suspicion among those who never left, further compounding their isolation. The social capital they spent years building is not waiting for them; it has been dissipated by their absence, leaving them without the crucial support system needed for successful reintegration. Thus, the social cost of migration is a double loss: the initial rupture of departure and the subsequent alienation of return, framing the

entire migratory cycle within a context of perpetual social dislocation.

The migrant's journey is not merely a geographical traversal but a profound internal migration of the self, a continuous and often painful negotiation of identity played out on a stage of stark cultural difference. This process involves more than learning new customs; it is a deep, psychological unraveling and re-weaving of one's place in the world. The semi-skilled migrant worker exists in a state of perpetual liminality, suspended between a receding homeland and an unattainable host society, a condition that exacts a heavy toll on their psychological and social well-being. This section argues that the cultural displacement experienced is a form of systemic violence that creates a fractured, "in-between" identity, characterized by acculturative stress, social isolation, and a profound sense of cultural guilt.

The initial confrontation with the host culture plunges the migrant worker into a state of acculturative stress, a concept formalized by Berry [12] to describe the psychological challenge of adapting to a new cultural context. The pressure to assimilate is immense and pragmatic; their employment, safety, and very right to remain often depend on a superficial compliance with host-country norms. A Nepalese worker in Qatar must swiftly learn to decipher commands in Arabic or English, a Filipino domestic worker in Singapore must master the unspoken rules of a Chinese household, and a Mexican agricultural worker in Canada must endure the harsh climate while navigating an alien work culture. However, this demanded assimilation is a one-way street. They are simultaneously subjected to systemic exclusion through discrimination, language barriers, and physical segregation in labor camps or cramped boarding houses. This creates a debilitating double-bind: they are compelled to integrate into a society that structurally rejects their full participation. The result is a specific and corrosive form of alienation, where the migrant is rendered invisible as a person and hyper-visible as a foreign body, leading to what can be described as a form of cultural dissonance—a persistent, unsettling conflict between internal values and external demands.

This sustained dissonance prevents healthy psychological adaptation and fosters severe social isolation. Unlike skilled expatriates who may find community in diverse social circles, the non-professional migrant is often confined to a socio-ethnic enclave dictated by their employer and labor compound. Their social world contracts, becoming limited to others who share their precarious status. This isolation is not merely a matter of loneliness but an active process of de-socialization from the wider world, exacerbating feelings of anxiety, depression, and powerlessness. The workplace, rather than a site of social integration, becomes a daily reminder of their marginality. They may develop a functional, transactional persona for survival—a "work self" that operates within the host culture—while their private, authentic self retreats inward, starved of the cultural nutrients that once sustained it. This schism between the public and private self is a direct consequence of an acculturation process that demands change but offers no belonging.

The inevitable outcome of this protracted struggle is the formation of a liminal identity, a state of "in-betweenness" where the individual feels neither fully at home in the host country nor entirely at ease upon return. They become cultural hybrids in the most disorienting sense, belonging wholly to neither world. The migrant who returns to their village in Indonesia after years in Saudi Arabia may find the pace of life stifling, the social norms constricting. The new habits and perspectives they absorbed abroad—perhaps a different understanding of time, gender roles, or authority—are now viewed with suspicion by their family and former neighbors, who may label them as "aloof" or "having changed." The migrant's hard-earned worldly experience, rather than being a source of prestige, becomes a marker of difference, further alienating them from the very community they sought to support. This liminality is not a position of creative power, as some postmodern theories might suggest, but one of profound rootlessness and social friction.

Compounding this disorientation is a pervasive sense of cultural guilt, a psychological burden uniquely borne by the migrant. This guilt is multifaceted. As Portes and Rumbaut [13] observed, migrants often experience guilt for "failing" to integrate successfully, internalizing the host society's rejection as a personal shortcoming. Simultaneously, they feel a deep-seated guilt toward their home culture for perceived acts of betrayal. The inability to observe religious festivals, adhere to dietary laws like Halal or Kosher, or maintain traditional dress codes can feel like a moral failure. Every pragmatic compromise for survival—eating forbidden food, working on a sacred day—can be internally registered as a surrender of their cultural integrity. This is especially acute for women, whose bodies and behaviors are often seen as repositories of cultural honor. A migrant mother working as a domestic helper may be consumed by guilt not only for leaving her children but for performing intimate care for another family, a role she feels should be reserved for her own kin.

This internal conflict represents what sociologists call a role strain, where the competing expectations of the host society and the home community become impossible to reconcile. The migrant is tasked with being a successful "global" worker while remaining an "authentic" local community member—two roles that, under the conditions of precarious labor, are fundamentally incompatible. The resulting identity is not a cohesive synthesis but a fractured one, laden with anxiety and self-doubt. The cultural symbols and practices that once provided a stable sense of self become sites of conflict and ambivalence. In the most extreme cases, this can lead to a form of cultural anomie, a normative confusion where the old rules no longer apply, and new ones are inaccessible, leaving the individual in a moral and existential vacuum.

In conclusion, the cultural displacement of the non-professional migrant is far more than homesickness. It is an active, systemic process that dismantles the worker's cultural framework while offering nothing stable in its place. Trapped in a cycle of acculturative stress and social isolation, they develop

a liminal identity that leaves them perpetually off-balance, haunted by a sense of guilt toward both the world they left and the world that rejects them. This fragmentation of the self is a direct social cost of a migration system that imports labor but disdains the complex human beings who provide it, creating a population of ghosts suspended between two worlds, fully at home in neither.

4. Systemic Exploitation and Institutionalized Vulnerability

The pervasive vulnerability of non-professional migrant workers is frequently misdiagnosed as a series of isolated abuses or regulatory oversights. In reality, it is a calculated and engineered outcome of a global labor regime that systematically produces a disposable workforce. Their precarity is not a malfunction but a core design feature of a system that maximizes economic utility by minimizing human rights. This architecture of exploitation is built upon three interconnected pillars: legal frameworks that institutionalize bonded labor, economic sectors that thrive on informality and hazard, and state policies that enforce a condition of legal and social exclusion. Together, these elements create a cage of constraints that normalizes exploitation as an inevitable cost of doing business, rendering the migrant worker simultaneously essential and expendable.

The most explicit manifestation of this design is the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, prevalent in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The *kafala* is not merely a visa policy; it is a neo-feudal legal structure that formally tethers a migrant worker's immigration status to their individual employer, or *kafeel*. This creates a relationship of profound and legally sanctioned dependency, transforming the worker from a rights-bearing individual into a sponsored asset. The consequences are predictable and devastating: the widespread confiscation of passports, severe restrictions on movement, and the effective prohibition of changing employers without the *kafeel's* consent. This system, as documented extensively by Human Rights Watch [14] and Amnesty International [15], creates conditions indistinguishable from indentured servitude, facilitating forced labor, chronic wage theft, and physical and sexual abuse with near-total impunity. For example, a 2022 report by Amnesty International documented that in Saudi Arabia, despite announced reforms, migrant workers still faced significant barriers to changing jobs without employer consent and were highly vulnerable to wage theft [16]. The *kafala* system is a prime example of what political theorist Ayelet Shachar [17] terms the "shifting border," where the legal boundary of the state is projected inward to create a permanent condition of conditional belonging for non-citizens, ensuring their availability for labor while denying them the protections of citizenship.

Beyond the stark model of the *kafala*, exploitation is finely tuned to the logic of specific industries, embedding danger and precarity into the very nature of the work. In the construction

sector, which scaffolds the skylines of global cities and the stadiums of international spectacles, migrant workers are routinely subjected to wage theft and lethal working conditions. The rush to meet deadlines, coupled with a lack of training and safety enforcement, leads to catastrophically high rates of injury and death, with bodies often repatriated silently to home villages. In Qatar, official data reported over 15,000 non-resident worker deaths between 2010 and 2019, though the government attributes only a small fraction directly to work [27]. Their lives off-site are equally precarious, spent in overcrowded and unsanitary labor camps that physically and symbolically segregate them from the society they are building.

In agriculture, the bucolic imagery of rural work belies a reality of systemic exposure. Migrant farmworkers, as Hovey [18] has documented, face a toxic triad of pesticide exposure, extreme weather, and profound social isolation. The piece-rate payment system, far from rewarding hard work, functions as a mechanism to push laborers to physical exhaustion, as they must work inhumanely long hours to earn a subsistence wage. Their remote locations make them invisible and limit their access to any form of external support or advocacy.

Perhaps the most acutely vulnerable are domestic workers, who are almost exclusively women. Their workplace is the private home, a sphere traditionally beyond the reach of labor inspectors and legal oversight. This isolation, combined with their frequent exclusion from national labor laws, creates a petri dish for exploitation. Denied basic rights such as limits on working hours, a guaranteed day of rest, or freedom of movement, they are uniquely susceptible to situations of forced labor, psychological torment, and physical and sexual violence. Their plight underscores how the devaluation of "women's work" and the sanctity of the private sphere conspire to render their abuse invisible.

Underpinning these sector-specific abuses is a foundation of legal exclusion and state-sanctioned discrimination. In many host countries, migrant workers are explicitly carved out of the very labor protections that citizens take for granted. They are often denied coverage under minimum wage laws, occupational health and safety standards, and social security schemes, including unemployment and pension benefits. Their access to public healthcare is frequently restricted or conditional, turning treatable illnesses into chronic crises. This institutionalized second-class status is more than neglect; it is an active form of structural violence [6] that systematically harms a population by design. The constant threat of deportation, inherent in their temporary status, acts as the ultimate enforcement mechanism. It instills a deep-seated fear that silences dissent, ensuring that workers endure abuse rather than risk reporting it to authorities and facing termination, detention, or expulsion. This state of "deportability" [19] is a powerful tool of discipline, keeping the precariat in a state of compliant subjugation.

It is important to note that some host countries, under pressure from civil society and international bodies, have begun to implement reforms. For instance, certain GCC countries have

introduced new labor laws that allow for contract switching under specific conditions, and the Philippines has established a standard employment contract for its overseas domestic workers. However, the enforcement of these reforms remains inconsistent, and the fundamental power imbalance often persists.

In conclusion, the exploitation of non-professional migrant workers is not an anomaly. It is the predictable output of a sophisticated system that combines legally embedded dependency, economically incentivized hazard, and state-enforced exclusion. From the overt bondage of the kafala system to the hidden brutalities of the private household, and reinforced by laws that codify their inequality, these workers are trapped in a cycle of institutionalized vulnerability. Their bodies build economies, their hands harvest food, and their care sustains households, yet they are systematically denied the basic rights and dignities afforded to the members of the societies they serve. This is not a failure of the global migration system—it is its intended function.

5. The Psychological and Physical Health Toll—The Body as the Final Frontier of Exploitation

The myriad social costs levied against non-professional migrant workers—the familial rupture, the cultural displacement, the systemic exploitation—are not abstract concepts. They manifest with brutal finality in the most intimate of domains: the human body and mind. The cumulative, synergistic effect of these stressors precipitates a severe and often silent public health crisis, where the migrant body becomes the ultimate ledger upon which the account of structural violence is written. This health burden is characterized by a mental health epidemic of profound proportions and a parallel physical health crisis, both exacerbated by systemic barriers that ensure suffering remains unaddressed and invisible. To understand the full cost of this labor migration regime is to recognize that it produces not just goods and services, but also injury, illness, and profound psychological despair.

The mental health landscape for migrant workers is not merely one of elevated stress, but of a full-blown, clinically significant mental health epidemic. The constant, corrosive insecurity of precarity, the profound isolation from social and familial networks, the daily reality of exploitation, and the gnawing guilt of separation create a perfect storm for psychological distress. Research consistently demonstrates that the prevalence of major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is significantly higher among migrant worker populations than in the general public [20]. This is not simply homesickness; it is a pathological response to unbearable and chronic conditions. The psychological impact can be so severe that it leads to catastrophic outcomes, including alarmingly high rates of suicide among migrant workers in regions like the Gulf States and East Asia, as reported by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and

public health researchers. A study published in the *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* (2021) found that Nepalese migrant workers in Malaysia had a depression prevalence of 39%, significantly linked to debt, poor working conditions, and exploitation [21]. These deaths are not isolated personal tragedies but are, in essence, casualties of a system that extolls their labor while disregarding their humanity.

Compounding this crisis is a formidable dual barrier to care. First, within many of the workers' cultures of origin, significant stigma surrounds mental illness, which is often perceived as a weakness of character or a spiritual failing rather than a medical condition. This internalized stigma prevents individuals from acknowledging their own suffering, even to themselves. Second, and more critically, host countries almost universally fail to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate mental health services. The result is a devastating treatment gap: a population with exceptionally high need has virtually no access to care. When services do exist, workers are often deterred by the fear that seeking help will be seen as a liability by their employers, potentially costing them their job and their legal status. This confluence of factors means that the overwhelming majority of this psychological suffering remains unaddressed, a silent scream within the crowded labor camps and isolated dormitories.

Simultaneously, the physical health of migrant workers is systematically jeopardized, a direct consequence of their economic function and legal exclusion. Workplace injuries are endemic, particularly in high-risk sectors like construction and agriculture. The drive for productivity, coupled with inadequate safety training and enforcement, turns worksites into zones of perpetual hazard. The ILO [22] consistently reports that migrant workers face a disproportionately high risk of fatal and non-fatal occupational accidents. However, the injury itself is often only the beginning of the crisis. In many host countries, access to healthcare is legally tethered to employment. This creates a perverse incentive for workers to conceal injuries, as reporting a workplace accident could lead to termination of their contract, which would simultaneously terminate their health insurance and legal residency, plunging them into a chasm of destitution and medical need. This policy architecture actively discourages the reporting of accidents, allowing dangerous practices to continue unchecked and leaving workers with chronic pain and disability.

Beyond acute injury, migrant workers suffer from the silent erosion of their health by neglected chronic conditions. Manageable illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and treatable infections spiral into severe health crises due to a combination of financial constraints, lack of access to primary care, and the sheer physical exhaustion of their work schedules. Regular, preventative healthcare is a luxury they cannot afford and for which they have no time. In the agricultural sector, this physical neglect takes on a more sinister dimension through chronic exposure to environmental toxins. Workers are routinely exposed to pesticides and herbicides without adequate protective equipment, leading to elevated risks of cancer, neurological

disorders, and respiratory disease [18]. Furthermore, as climate change intensifies, prolonged exposure to extreme heat in fields and on construction sites is leading to a rising incidence of chronic kidney disease of non-traditional causes (CKDu), a debilitating and often fatal condition now recognized as a major occupational health threat to outdoor laborers globally [23].

In conclusion, the psychological and physical health of non-professional migrant workers is not an ancillary concern but a core metric of the system's human cost. The mental health epidemic, characterized by untreated depression, anxiety, and trauma, and the physical health crisis, marked by preventable injury and neglected chronic disease, are direct symptoms of their structural position. They are rendered vulnerable to harm by the conditions of their work and then systematically denied the care required to heal. This creates a vicious cycle where poor health further entrenches their poverty and precarity. Their bodies and minds thus become the final site of accumulation and disposal, absorbing the true cost of a global economic model that profits from their vulnerability.

6. The Paradox of Remittances and the Erosion of Social Fabric

The prevailing narrative in migration discourse often celebrates the outflow of labor as an unmitigated boon for sending countries, a development strategy fueled by the steady flow of remittances. While these financial injections are undeniably critical for household survival and national balance of payments, this narrow economic focus obscures a far more complex and often detrimental reality. The mass migration of semi-skilled and unskilled workers triggers a series of profound, long-term social, economic, and demographic shifts that can paradoxically undermine the very development it is meant to foster. The sending nation grapples with a multifaceted paradox: it gains foreign currency but loses human capital, stabilizes households while destabilizing communities, and secures short-term economic relief at the potential cost of long-term sustainable growth. This dynamic creates a dependency that is difficult to reverse, reconfiguring the nation's social and economic future in ways that are often irrevocable.

One of the most significant yet under-analyzed consequences is the systemic depletion of vital labor sectors, a form of "brain drain" affecting the non-elite. While the exodus of doctors and engineers from developing nations is well-documented, the mass departure of young, able-bodied workers from agriculture, construction, and small-scale manufacturing is equally devastating. This constitutes a "muscle drain" that cripples foundational sectors of the local economy. In rural regions, the exodus of farmers leads to the abandonment of arable land, threatening national food security and increasing reliance on imported food. For example, in Nepal, the outmigration of young men has led to the phenomenon of "feminization of agriculture," where women are left to manage farms with limited

resources and training, impacting productivity [28]. Local construction industries face crippling labor shortages, slowing infrastructure development and driving up the cost of building homes and schools. This depletion of the productive workforce creates a vacuum, stifling local entrepreneurial initiatives and leaving key industries reliant on an aging population. The resulting labor shortages can become so acute that some countries, like those in Southeast Asia, begin to import workers from neighboring, poorer nations to fill the gaps left by their own emigrants, creating a complex chain of labor dependency that further complicates local wage structures and economic autonomy.

Simultaneously, the social fabric of sending communities is fundamentally reweaved by a pervasive care deficit with deeply gendered repercussions. The migration of women, who constitute a large portion of workers in the global care and domestic service sectors, initiates a profound redistribution of caregiving responsibilities within their home countries. This phenomenon, articulated by Hochschild [11] as the "global care chain," describes a transnational pipeline of care where emotional and nurturing labor is transferred from poorer nations to wealthier ones. The migrant mother's absence creates a vacuum in the household, forcing a recalibration of familial roles that most often burdens other women and girls. The responsibility for childcare and domestic management typically falls onto older daughters, grandmothers, or other female relatives, often at the expense of the daughters' own education and personal development. In some cases, the family may hire an even poorer woman from a neighboring village to provide care, perpetuating a cycle of gendered labor exploitation and emotional displacement down the socioeconomic ladder. This chain represents a silent subsidy from the Global South to the Global North, where the emotional and developmental costs of raised children and managed households in sending countries are rarely factored into the economic calculus of migration.

Perhaps the most insidious long-term impact is the creation of a remittance-dependent economy that stifles structural development. The steady influx of foreign currency can create a dangerous complacency among policymakers, serving as a political sedative that alleviates pressure for essential reforms. Governments may come to rely on remittances as a stable source of foreign exchange, using them to prop up national currencies and finance imports, thereby neglecting the harder task of building a robust, diversified, and productive domestic economy. This can lead to a form of economic "Dutch disease," where the remittance influx inflates the local currency, making other exports less competitive on the global market. Furthermore, as Kapur [24] argues, remittances can weaken government accountability; when a state does not need to tax its citizens broadly to raise revenue (because foreign earnings fill the gap), the social contract between citizen and state frays. The populace becomes less likely to demand efficient public services and good governance, as their survival is secured not by state provision but by individual migration.

This creates a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle of migration.

The very act of migration, undertaken to escape a lack of opportunity, can inadvertently reinforce the conditions that created that lack. The departure of the most ambitious and able-bodied segments of the population diminishes the domestic pressure for job creation and institutional reform. The next generation, witnessing the concrete benefits of remittances in their community—the new houses, the consumer goods—comes to see migration not as a desperate last resort, but as the most rational and expected career path. The dream shifts from becoming a teacher or an entrepreneur in one's own country to becoming a construction worker or a domestic helper abroad. Thus, the economy becomes structurally oriented toward producing migrants rather than producing goods and services for sustainable internal development. In this light, remittances are not just a solution to underdevelopment; they can also be a significant cause of its perpetuation, creating a façade of prosperity that masks a deepening structural dependency and the slow erosion of the nation's capacity for self-sustaining growth.

7. Reverse Culture Shock and the Myth of Homecoming

The final stage of the migrant worker's journey is often envisioned as a triumphant return, a homecoming where years of sacrifice culminate in financial security and social reintegration. This narrative, however, is frequently a cruel illusion. For many semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, the end of their contract marks the beginning of a new, and often more disorienting, struggle defined not by celebration but by a profound sense of alienation. The return is not a simple geographical relocation but a complex psychosocial process of navigating a homeland that has become unfamiliar and a self that has been irrevocably transformed. This phase, conceptualized by scholars as reverse culture shock or re-entry shock [25], represents the final, ironic social cost of migration: the discovery that one can no longer go home again. This experience is characterized by a collision between transformed personal identities and stagnant local economies, leading to a painful and often unsuccessful struggle for re-belonging.

The initial euphoria of return quickly fades, giving way to the stark reality of reintegration challenges that are as formidable as those faced during initial migration. The returning worker must confront a dual transformation: their home community has evolved in their absence, and they themselves are fundamentally altered. The skills they acquired abroad—operating sophisticated machinery on a Qatari construction site, managing complex household technologies in a Singaporean home, or learning specific agricultural techniques on a Spanish farm—are often non-transferable and lack formal certification, rendering them worthless in the local labor market. While the claim that these skills are "worthless" is perhaps overly stark—as they may foster adaptability and problem-solving—the critical point is that they frequently lack formal recognition, hindering official employment prospects. This de-skilling forces them into unemployment

or a frustrating step backward into low-paying, unskilled work, shattering their dream of upward mobility.

Economically, the fruits of their labor often prove ephemeral. Savings, painstakingly accumulated over years of austerity, can be rapidly depleted by the twin pressures of familial expectation and entrepreneurial misfortune. Returning migrants are often seen as walking bank accounts, expected to finance home repairs, pay for siblings' educations, or cover medical bills. Many invest their remaining capital in small businesses—a grocery store, a motorized rickshaw, a small farm—ventures for which they may have passion but no formal training. High failure rates for these small enterprises are common, wiping out a lifetime of savings and leaving the individual and their family in a worse financial position than when they first departed. This economic vulnerability is compounded by social friction. The returning migrant, who may have adopted different mannerisms, attitudes, or even a different pace of life, can be perceived by those who never left as arrogant, alien, or "too good" for their old community. This resentment, born of envy and misunderstanding, creates a social barrier, isolating the returnee at the very moment they most need support.

This confluence of factors culminates in a profound crisis of re-belonging; an existential struggle to find a place in a society that now feels foreign. The migrant's identity has become liminal; they are caught betwixt and between the culture of the host country and that of their homeland, fully integrated into neither. They may find the social norms of their village restrictive after years of relative anonymity in a large city, or they may feel frustrated by bureaucratic inefficiencies they once accepted as normal. This internal dissonance is what scholars of migration call "acculturative stress in reverse," a psychological whiplash that occurs when the process of adapting back to one's original culture is as stressful as the initial adaptation to a foreign one [26].

The dream of returning as a "success"—a hero who has conquered adversity abroad—crumbles against the reality of a stagnant local economy and strained social relations. The individual is left with a deep sense of disorientation and betrayal. The homeland they carried in their heart as a spiritual anchor during years of hardship no longer exists, or, more accurately, they no longer fit within it. This feeling of being an outsider in one's own land, a ghost in one's own family, is a deeply painful and invisible wound. It is the poignant epilogue to the migration story: the realization that the sacrifice was not only years of their life but also their uncomplicated sense of belonging. The return, therefore, is not an endpoint but a continuous, often unsuccessful, negotiation for a place in a world that has moved on without them, rendering the migrant a perpetual stranger, forever marked by the journey and forever displaced from the home they sought to secure.

8. Pathways to a More Humane Paradigm

The preceding analysis has systematically dismantled the

simplistic economic narrative surrounding non-professional labor migration. The social costs detailed—the fractured families, the eroded identities, the systemic exploitation, the psychological trauma, and the hollowed-out communities—are not unfortunate byproducts but are, in fact, calculated outcomes of a global economic model predicated on the creation of a disposable workforce. This system, characterized by precarity and structured by systemic violence, extracts labor while externalizing the human cost onto the workers, their families, and their nations of origin. The financial remittances that gleam in macroeconomic reports are shadowed by a ledger of hidden debts paid in emotional currency and social disintegration. To continue on this path is to sanction a form of socially accepted human sacrifice in the name of economic efficiency. Therefore, a fundamental paradigm shift is urgently required—a move from a governance model that manages migrant flows to one that upholds the inalienable rights and dignity of migrant persons.

This transformation demands a multi-scalar and interconnected policy response, the foundations for which have been discussed throughout this analysis. To synthesize and elaborate:

At the international and host country level, the architecture of exploitation must be dismantled and replaced with a framework of rights and integration. This begins with the abolition of exploitative sponsorship systems, such as the kafala, and their replacement with regulatory frameworks that grant migrant workers labor mobility, allowing them to change employers without penalty and escape abusive conditions. This must be coupled with the extension of comprehensive legal protection to all workers, without exception. Domestic workers, often hidden from view, must be brought under the umbrella of national labor laws, guaranteeing them minimum wage, limits on working hours, overtime pay, and safe working conditions. Rights on paper, however, are meaningless without enforcement. Robust, accessible, and anonymous complaint mechanisms, paired with guaranteed legal aid, are essential to bring justice within reach. Furthermore, severing the link between employment and basic well-being is critical. Host nations must ensure universal access to public healthcare, including culturally sensitive mental health services, recognizing that a healthy workforce is a human right, not a corporate benefit.

Simultaneously, sending countries must transition from being passive exporters of labor to active guardians of their citizens abroad. This requires stringent regulation of the recruitment industry, imposing strict caps on fees to prevent debt bondage and providing pre-departure orientation that honestly outlines both rights and risks. Robust welfare embassies in host countries are necessary to offer concrete support and advocacy. Upon the worker's return, the cycle of neglect must end. Pro-active reintegration programs are not a luxury but a necessity, offering returning migrants financial literacy training, formal recognition of skills acquired abroad, and access to low-interest loans for sustainable entrepreneurship. Ultimately, the most profound policy shift must be the fostering of sustainable domestic economies through investment in infrastructure, educa-

tion, and diversified industries. The goal must be to create dignified work at home, thereby transforming migration from a desperate necessity into a genuine choice.

Finally, the power of civil society and grassroots movements cannot be overlooked. Empowering migrant workers to become agents of their own liberation is paramount. This means supporting their right to form and join unions and worker associations, providing them with the collective voice to bargain for better conditions. Furthermore, fostering community support networks and cultural centers in host countries can provide a vital antidote to the isolation and alienation that so often characterize the migrant experience, rebuilding the social fabric torn by displacement.

In conclusion, the true measure of a globalized society lies not in the efficiency of its supply chains or the volume of its remittances, but in its commitment to universal human dignity. The current system, which treats millions of human beings as temporary and disposable inputs, is morally indefensible and socially unsustainable. The pathways outlined here provide a roadmap for a more just and humane migration paradigm—one that recognizes the indispensable contributions of migrant workers by affording them the rights, protections, and respect they deserve. We must choose to build a world where prosperity is not funded by hidden social costs, and where the pursuit of a better life does not demand the sacrifice of the very life one seeks to improve.

Abbreviations

CKDu	Chronic Kidney Disease of Uncertain (or Non-traditional) Etiology
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OMRS	Orion Management and Research Services
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Author Contributions

Wagura Peter Waithaka is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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