

FRA Press Release
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Severe labour exploitation of migrant workers: FRA report calls for 'zero tolerance' of severe labour exploitation

FRA research published today highlights the urgent need for European governments to do more to tackle severe labour exploitation in firms, factories and farms across the EU. First-hand interviews with hundreds of exploited workers reveal the illegal practices in sectors including agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, manufacturing and transport.

Many exploited workers are often invisible. But the workers' perspectives in FRA's report '[Protecting migrant workers from exploitation in the EU](#)' show how their exploitation contributes to the supply chains of the everyday goods and services we take for granted – from the food on our plates, to the shirts on our backs.

Powerful accounts* from 237 workers reveal challenges in eight EU Member States. Researchers found more than one-third of victims in France were made to work seven-day weeks, while three-quarters were subjected to violence, or threats of violence, from employers.

FRA heard how French employers denied workers access to healthcare, arbitrarily withheld wages and arranged fake marriages to secure visas. Some were forced to live in shipping containers with no water, toilet or bedding, while being allowed to shower just once a month.

The report reveals that over half of the workers found their jobs by word of mouth but ended up in 'concentration camp conditions' where 'they keep us like dogs, like slaves'.

FRA researchers found that some of the EU's exploited migrant workers are:

- paid as little as €5-a-day;
- forced to pay debts to traffickers before earning a cent;
- working 92-hour, with no holiday or time off;
- monitored on CCTV 24/7 by bosses;
- given no protective clothing to work with hazardous chemicals;
- face sexual and gender-based violence or forced into moving drugs;
- threatened of dismissal and deportation when they ask for their wages.

The report outlines 13 actions for EU institutions and Member States to end exploitation:

1. End fraudulent or deceptive recruitment practices.
2. Work with Europol, internet service providers and social media to tackle recruitment websites used by traffickers and exploitative employers.
3. Enforce labour laws to protect migrant workers' rights on pay, conditions and hours.
4. All EU Member States, which have not yet done so, should ratify the International Labour Organization's decent work for domestic workers Convention and include domestic workers in national laws resulting from the EU's Working Time Directive.
5. Ensure all workers, including seasonal and posted workers, have adequate living standards and fair rental agreements and that the rent is not automatically deducted from the wage, when accommodation is provided by the employer.
6. Build labour exploitation into the EU's Occupational Safety and Health Strategic Framework by 2020.

7. Include domestic workers in the EU's Safety and Health at Work Directive.
8. Enable law, inspection and monitoring bodies to identify and tackle labour exploitation through training and sufficient resources.
9. Develop regulated and targeted labour migration programmes to fill labour market shortages.
10. Reduce workers' dependency on employers, by issuing residence permits or visas not tied to a single employer, for example.
11. Enable seasonal workers to freely change employers more than once, under the EU's Seasonal Workers Directive.
12. Inform workers of their rights in a language they understand.
13. Make specialised support services available to all victims of crime, including victims of severe labour exploitation. This includes ensuring organisations supporting trafficking victims also cover victims of labour exploitation.

FRA Director [Michael O'Flaherty](#) says: *"This report shows how exploitation often starts with false promises and fraud, describes the extreme conditions the exploited workers endure, and identifies what facilitate exploitation. But it also outlines what can be done to help exploited workers access justice.*

"We hope that our focus on this issue encourages the responsible national authorities, as well as social partners, to recognise the reality of severe labour exploitation, and to take the steps necessary to create a climate of 'zero tolerance'."

Editor's notes

The report draws on face-to-face and focus group interviews with 237 adult workers who have been victims of severe labour exploitation between 2013 and 2017. It focuses on Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and the UK.

* Verbatim quotes from interviews carried out in France are below.

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France interviewee quotes:

"I had never had any intention to leave Egypt but this man was offering me a lot of money and a better life. I hesitated a lot and then I accepted his offer because I realised that it would enable me to make my family's life better."

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

"The basic salary is 800 euros. And then he [the employer] said: 'I give you 400 euros, and I keep 400 euros for your papers, to pay taxes, to declare you.'"

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, hospitality, migrant in an irregular situation)

"At first, I often told him [the employer] he needed to pay me so that I could send money to my family in Egypt. He always replied that he was keeping my money in a safe place so that I didn't worry, and that I had to be patient. "

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

"What they did was every month take the money from what I receive. It went to their account, and then they took for them and gave me what they wanted."

(France, female interviewee from Sub-Saharan Africa, hospitality, unknown status at the time of exploitation)

"I worked many hours. I worked at the restaurant and I worked at his place because he lived above the restaurant. I was doing the cleaning at his place, I was preparing the meals at 1am for him and his mistress...We closed the restaurant at about 12am, 12:30am, and I do the cleaning to clear the place up, and him at 1am he starts his evening so I prepare food for him...2am, 3am."

(France, female interviewee from Northern Africa, hospitality, migrant in an irregular situation)

"The dismissal can happen overnight. You have commitments, bills to pay, rent to pay, social charges. But the employer the day when he doesn't want you anymore he doesn't care about that. Overnight, he tells you: 'It's not possible, we can't stay together, you can't work for me anymore'. And how do we manage to pay the rent, to support the children?"

(France, female focus group participant from Sub-Saharan Africa, domestic work, migrant in an irregular situation)

"We were put in three different containers on the different construction sites. Every time, he locked us in at night. In the three containers we had no water, no electricity. For ten months, he only gave us bread, tomatoes and cheese to [eat]. We could wash with cold water from a hosepipe. We didn't have a shower as such. I was allowed to shower behind the container only once a month. We didn't have access to any toilets."

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

"He [the employer] kept us [me and my colleague] away from the other workers on the site, he was deliberately making us work in parts of the sites where the others weren't working. One day I asked him why he wasn't treating me like the other workers who weren't working as much, and who he was not shouting at, and who were paid. He replied to me that I wasn't like them, that I didn't have a choice but to work for him, unlike the others."

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

“In Egypt he [the employer] made it sound to me like a paradise. And I came here and I saw nothing, and I found like I’m a slave to him and he can do whatever he wants with me and I just work, and I work, and I work, and I don’t have the right to ask him ‘why you do that?’ and when I ask him he tells me: ‘If you don’t like it, I take you to the police and they will take you to Egypt.’

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

“He got mad, so I tried to leave. He followed me to the studio apartment and wanted to hit me and he threatened me saying he was the one who brought me to France, that he could take me back to Morocco anytime and that he could hurt me. He tried to take the TV and throw it at me, I hid and his daughter who was there stepped in and prevented him from doing it.”

(France, female interviewee from Northern Africa, domestic work, tourist visa)

“The first thing was the fear. Because I knew no one, whereas he [the employer] had been living here for 40 years so he knew the law well, he knows things. He was aggressive with me, so I was afraid that if I leave today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow he would find me, so what am I going to do? He had already told me: ‘Me, I know a lot of people here, I just have to make a phone call and the people who annoy me do not live anymore.’ That’s what scared me. I wanted to find a solution to leave so that he would not be able to kill me. Sometimes I thought, ‘he can kill me that’s fine, if I’m dead I’m dead. But if he beats me and I become disabled or something like that, I’ve no one here. That’s the problem, that’s what I feared.”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation).

“He burnt me, but this I forgot, because the scars fade away with time. But the words, they stay with me today. He used many swear words towards me, he would say: ‘You’re as fat as a cow, you’re filthy’, he laughed with the customers, he said: ‘Tomorrow there’s no need to buy milk, we have a cow in the kitchen look at her breasts, how big they are.’ You know, these words they stay with me, until now.”

(France, female interviewee from Northern Africa, hospitality, migrant in an irregular situation)

“I wanted to file a complaint, so that all the harm he was inflicting on me [...] would not [be] do[ne] to another woman. Because he [the employer] is someone who takes advantage of people a lot, he takes advantage of people who come from villages, who do not know about the law, who do not know France.”

(France, female interviewee from Northern Africa, hospitality, migrant in an irregular situation)

“The food it was [...] he was throwing food to me and to another man who was working with me. Just like you throw food to a dog or to an animal. And there was very little food. A piece of bread or sometimes it was a piece of cheese, tomatoes, that [was] all.”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

“If I wanted to compare my situation before and now, before I was lost, before I was like an animal, like a dog, I was sleeping in the street, and before sleeping in the street I was with this man, like an animal and he was also treating me very bad. And since I came to [the victim support organisation] they started to speak with me like [a] human. I had never felt that I’m a human in France, before I came to CCEM.”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation).

“The material for the site was brought by a person from outside. One day, I wanted to talk to the driver because I couldn’t stand the situation anymore, I was exhausted. But my boss saw me and told me to go and work and started talking with the driver to prevent me from talking. I didn’t insist because I knew that once the driver was gone, my boss would make me pay for it.”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

“When the owner of the studio came to get the rent, I was asked to hide in a closet. (...) At the bar, there were occasions when I had to stay shut away for a whole day, they called me and told me: ‘Do not come out.’”

(France, female interviewee from Northern Africa, domestic work, tourist visa)

“If you don’t have papers in France, it’s like you’re nothing.”

(France, male interviewee from Sub-Saharan Africa, construction, migrant in an irregular situation)

“[E]nding exploitation starts when you are regularized. It is then when the person can breathe. [...] [Even if] they [employers] manage to exploit those who have working papers, [...] at least, I am no longer at the mercy of threats, I am no longer at the mercy of threats of deportation.”

(France, female focus group participant from Sub-Saharan Africa, domestic worker, regular migrant).

Some research participants had the additional burden of the need to pay off debts to people that supported them in leaving their country of origin (e.g. family members, recruitment agencies, intermediaries, middlemen). The need to sustain ones family and pay off debts puts workers in the situation of accepting very low salaries. For example, an Egyptian migrant in an irregular situation working in the construction sector in France under very harsh conditions highlighted this issue reporting he borrowed money from his father’s friends and used his savings in Egypt, to pay a fee of 5,000 euros for a journey by boat to France incurring a debt of 4,000 euros.

“They just told me that I could get my papers in 6 years...that it was not easy to get papers and that I had to do that [stay in the exploitative job] to be able to live.”

(France, female interviewee from Sub-Saharan Africa, hospitality, unknown status at the time of exploitation)

“So I asked my boss to give me back the other 400 euros that he took from [] the beginning, and he told me: ‘You have nothing on me’ and he told me: ‘At the end of the month you’re gone’. And after that I called my brother and I explained everything to my brother, and it’s my brother who helped me. He called the employment inspectorate, and they came on the 30th”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, retail, migrant in an irregular situation)

“I could not go to the police, because it’s tough there...Straight to Morocco! If I don’t have a residence permit, I can’t report to the police.”

(France, male interviewee from Northern Africa, retail, migrant in an irregular situation).