The 13th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the mandate and programme of work –
Focused thematic discussions
Conference Room 6, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Participation, inclusion and the right to development of migrants

Thursday 23 April 2026, 15:00 to 16:30

Unofficial transcript of the oral statement by Ms. Neha Misra, Specialist in Migration

Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank the EMRTD Secretariat and OHCHR for inviting me. Just one little side thing. I'm very excited and grateful to be on a panel with the ambassadors from Kenya and Mexico in particular because both countries have been champions on the idea of a rights-based migration framework. So, I'm honored to be with you today. I've known Pia for about 20 years. I'm also very honored to be on the panel with her today and to meet Mr. Anwar.

I've been engaged in this framing of migration and development since the first UN High-level Dialogue on Migration and Development in 2006 through 20 years of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, the second High-level Dialogue in 2013 and the adoption of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular migration.

To be honest with you, I've become deeply frustrated, as it seems that there is a persistent, narrow overemphasis on remittances as the primary barometer of development rather than a holistic picture of human rights. The predominant paradigm treats job placement abroad as a catch-all solution to unemployment while ignoring the fact that millions of these low-wage jobs are inherently exploited. Let's look at the scale. We're talking about 168 million international migrant workers. They make up 5% of the global labor force and are the backbone of essential sectors, 68% in services, including in the care economy, 24% in industry and construction, and 7% in agriculture.

The dominant global narrative championed by institutions like the World Bank, often measures the success of this migration through remittances, and the numbers are staggering. Global remittances reached an estimated 857 billion in 2023 and were projected to be 905 billion in 2024. To put that in perspective, these private transfers now exceed foreign direct investment and are more than three times the volume of all official development assistance combined. But this is where the narrative fails. When we measure development only by money sent home or job placement, we reduce the migrant experience to a mere financial metric rather than a human one. We treat migrants as economic engines to be fueled rather than human beings with agency. True development is a human right, not a financial transaction.

The evidence shows that remittances do not equal upward mobility. A few years ago, the Solidarity Center commissioned a report by the Just Jobs Network. It highlights a village in Indonesia where families have been sending out migrant workers for over 30 years. The outcome? Children are migrating for the same exact low-wage, precarious work that their parents did. Without structural change, migration becomes a cycle of just barely over poverty preservation rather than a ladder to development. We cannot call it development when those billions are earned through the cost of forced family separation, where workers are denied the right to live with their children, spouses, parents for years at a time.

We must recognize the right to a family. True, sustainable development must include family rights. And yet, as Pia just talked about, the majority of regular labor migration schemes separate families

for years at a time. We are counting on migrant agricultural workers to put food on the table for our families. We rely on migrant domestic and care workers to care for our children, our families, and our homes. Our elderly are sick. And yet we are separating millions of migrant workers for years at a time from their own families, their own children, their own parents, their own spouses, all in the name of development.

We are talking about potentially more than 40 million migrant workers, and more if you count irregular migrants that are separated from their families due to immigration policy incoherence. This is not true or sustainable development. We are instead creating a segregated class of low-wage migrant workers who are denied the most basic of labor, democratic and human rights. We cannot call it sustainable when the system relies on employer-tied visas like the kafala system, which again Pia talked about, but also guest worker programs in North America, the UK, and Europe. In fact, temporary labor migration schemes that tie workers to their employer and separate workers from their families for years at a time are the predominant paradigm of regular migration schemes today.

This creates a structural power imbalance that effectively silences workers. This system strips workers of their most basic civic rights as well. As documented in a report from the CIVICUS and Solidarity Center, from a few years ago, migrant workers faced a triple threat to their fundamental freedoms. They are denied systematically the freedom of association, the right to a union, to collectively bargain, to speak up in their workplace, to identify wage theft, etc. They face threats of deportation or retaliation for trying to do so. They don't even have freedom of expression. Migrant workers in many countries are detained, deported, even put in jail for just posting on social media. They also don't have freedom of assembly. It was Earth Day yesterday, and migrant workers around the world aren't even often allowed to participate in an Earth Day march. How is a development where workers spend years in a civic vacuum, unable to vote in local elections or act as democratic actors in their destination communities? Moreover, we must explicitly address wage theft, which the ILO has identified as the No.1 indicator of forced labor for migrant workers when migrant workers are three times more likely to be in forced labor than other workers.

Debt bondage, reduced minimum wages for migrant workers, and the high cost of remittances. These are all financial burdens that actively strip away the income and earnings that were supposed to drive economic development in the first place. When a worker spends years just repaying illegal recruitment fees, it isn't an opportunity. It's a trap.

Our path forward must align with International Labor Organization core labor standards. We need a zero-free recruitment model and portability of status, so workers can leave abuse without losing their right to stay. We need long term rights-based, regular migration pathways that are based on real, identified labor market needs that allow for family unity and provide a clear route to residency and citizenship. And we must support basic human rights for migrant workers. Let's start with the freedom of association, the right to organize and collectively bargain, as well as the freedom of expression and assembly. We also must recognize that development fundamentally includes the right to stay. This is not to suggest a limitation on the right to migrate, but rather to ensure that migration is a choice made out of opportunity, not a desperate escape from economic coercion. There needs to be a renewed emphasis on the creation of decent work in origin communities. A Penn State University study in Honduras found that garment workers with union representation and collective bargaining agreements were 25% less likely to migrate. By creating conditions that offer fair wages and working conditions, we empower workers to decide on their own terms, to stay with their families, or to migrate out of choice.

Inclusion also means equal access to social protection. Migrants pay into health care and social security systems they are often legally barred from using.

I'll leave you with this. If we want to measure real development, stop looking at bank transfers, look at human outcomes, our families united, can workers organize, is the debt eliminated. Focus on shared prosperity. Anything less than a rights-based approach to development is just a managed form of inequality that relies on human precariousness to fuel global wealth. In just one last thought from listening for the last two days, I hope that there can be more coherence between this body, between the broader development is a right work that is happening at the UN and the migration and development initiatives that are taking place within and outside of the UN. Right now, the migration and development rhetoric is mostly propaganda. I hope that together we can make it reality.

Thank you so much.

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