



SEEFAR

Exploring the Role of Technology in Forced Labour

Analysis of the potential benefits, limitations, and risks of digital
recruitment platforms

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN FORCED LABOUR

Digital platforms have the potential to safeguard migrant workers from exploitative recruitment practices. However, there is a lack of evidence regarding their impact on reducing forced labour.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in the number and usage of online migrant worker recruitment and migration platforms. These digital platforms vary in purpose and structure: some are government-run systems designed to regulate migration actors; others are privately-owned applications that match employers with migrant workers. At their core, these systems are united by their common interest in digitising and facilitating overseas labour migration and recruitment, long considered one of the [most exploitative industries in the world](#): Migrant workers are deceived, indebted, and exploited by an unscrupulous network of recruitment actors from the earliest stages of migration.

As recruitment and migration systems go virtual, there has been surprisingly little research on whether digital platforms affect forced labour outcomes among migrant workers.

With an increased number of online platforms, there are plenty of reasons to believe that digital recruitment platforms can have a positive effect on forced labour outcomes, reducing the vulnerabilities of migrant workers to exploitative situations. Digital systems can increase transparency between workers and employers, regulate the use of third parties, keep records of travel, contracts, and visas, and facilitate access to grievance mechanisms. But critics point to several reasons for skepticism, such as digital illiteracy among potential users, weak data privacy laws and the fact that forced labour cannot be eliminated through technology alone, as it needs to be complemented with on-the-ground efforts.

This article consolidates the available evidence on the impact of digital recruitment platforms on forced labour outcomes for migrant workers. Such research is necessary to understand whether digitalisation is linked to greater protection for migrant workers and helps identify the benefits and challenges of these platforms, which can contribute to the development of improved digital tools.

KEY FINDINGS

There is initial evidence that technology can streamline the recruitment process, facilitate access to migration information, and increase the monitoring of recruitment agencies. However, there is limited evidence on whether digital platforms can reduce the vulnerabilities associated with forced labour and decrease migrant worker exploitation.

The lack of standardised and publicly available data on the impact that digital platforms have on forced labour is a challenge to building such an evidence base.

There are concerns that digital platforms can increase migrant worker vulnerabilities and exacerbate inequalities between them, however, there is limited evidence analysing the impact of these platforms on such vulnerabilities. To counter these concerns, several authors consider that digital platforms should be inclusive of illiterate migrants and be accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns on the risks of migrating.

There is no evidence that digital platforms automatically change the existing model of overseas labour recruitment. There is consensus among experts that technology alone will not eliminate exploitative recruiting practices unless accompanied by investments in enforcement, worker awareness-raising, and political will.

1. Migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitative recruitment practices

Lower-skilled labour migrants almost always depend on private recruitment agencies and local brokers. These actors connect job seekers in remote areas with employment opportunities in destinations like Qatar, Malaysia, and the United States. This reliance on intermediaries and an asymmetry of information between migrant workers and their recruiters frequently puts workers at risk, as recruitment agents are incentivised to profit directly from debt bondage. Unethical and illegal practices among recruiters include deceptive or misleading recruitment (e.g. deceiving workers about their job, pay, or benefits), confiscation of personal documents (e.g. passport retention), visa fraud (e.g. securing a tourist visa rather than an employment visa), and charging illegal recruitment fees that can be hundreds or thousands of dollars.

Digital migration platforms have emerged around the world within this challenging context. Some argue that technology has the potential to increase the efficiency and transparency of the overseas recruitment process as well as to strengthen the monitoring of recruitment actors. However, there is limited research on the impacts of digital recruitment platforms, specifically when it comes to whether they decrease migrant worker exploitation.

2. What are the different types of digital migration platforms?

Digital migration platforms can be broadly categorised in four dimensions:

1. **Purpose:** Digital migration platforms may be designed to manage migration, facilitate overseas recruitment and keep digital travel records. They may also aim to regulate private actors, connect job seekers with employment opportunities, disseminate information to migrant workers, facilitate migrant workers' engagement and offer grievance channels or other forms of assistance.
2. **Ownership:** Digital migration platforms may be owned and operated by government agencies, private sector actors, or non-profits (including a mix of international organisations, UN agencies, NGOs, and civil society organisations).
3. **Users:** Migration systems target different users. For example, some platforms explicitly prohibit the participation of third parties or recruitment agencies, while others require their registration in the system. Relevant users can include migrant workers, recruitment agencies in origin and/or destination countries, employers, and government officials.
4. **Features:** In general, migration platforms offer five core features: information (platforms offering know-your-rights campaigns, awareness-raising, fraud alerts and legal notifications); job matching (systems that allow migrants, recruiters and/or employers to connect); visa and deployment (platforms to access pre-departure clearance or register for entry); legal services (including application forms for recruitment licensing, insurance policies, etc.); and grievance mechanisms (allowing workers to lodge complaints and/or receive support).

The landscape of technology solutions in labour migration is varied, multi-dimensional and has multiple purposes. While some digital initiatives aim to eliminate labour exploitation, others may prioritize other issues such as job-matching and efficiency. This article focuses on digital recruitment platforms that facilitate overseas recruitment and that have the potential to reduce labour exploitation. Prominent examples include:

- **Government-run digital migration systems:** These include India's eMigrate system, the Philippines' Electronic Case Registry and Response System, the EU's EURES system, South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), and Saudi Arabia's Musaned platform.
- **Private recruitment platforms:** These include private digital platforms that specifically promote ethical recruitment, such as start-ups Sama, and Joblio. Malaysian start-up PinkCollar offers a hybrid recruitment model.
- **Nonprofit or government information platforms:** These platforms include SafeStep, Safer Migration, Recruitment Advisor, PantauPJTKI, and many others.

3. What are the potential benefits of these platforms?

Digitalisation is **disrupting the way companies, governments, and society operates**, and this shift has been **accelerated during COVID-19**. There is a general consensus that adopting digital technologies has the potential **to achieve higher organisational performance, competitiveness, and efficiency**. Additionally, it can improve costs through automated and more streamlined processes, which can lead to shorter processing times and the ability to manage large user groups at lower costs.

The promise of the positive impacts of digitalisation pushed governments and private actors to implement digital solutions in the recruitment industry, as **digital platforms can make job-matching more efficient reducing the time and cost of overseas placement**. For instance, e-Migrate, a platform run by the Indian Government, has **expedited the recruitment process for Indian migrant workers** from three months to two weeks by digitising the e-migration clearance process. A more streamlined recruitment process, with shorter waiting periods and lower costs, can incentivise individuals to migrate through formal channels, which drastically lowers migrant workers' vulnerabilities to exploitation.

Digital platforms can also facilitate access to grievance mechanisms by providing an online system where migrant workers can easily raise complaints. For instance, in 2016 **EURES received 2,414 complaints**. Furthermore, they can **strengthen the monitoring of recruitment agencies**, as most platforms require recruiters to be registered and can block them if they have been sanctioned for illegal recruitment practices. Additionally, online platforms that **review and rate recruitment agencies** can help migrant workers make more informed decisions and safeguard them from illegal recruitment practices (see box 1). Easy access to grievance mechanisms and increased migration monitoring of private recruitment agencies are essential in upholding the accountability of labour migration actors.

Box 1: Recruitment Advisor and HANSA Complaints Mechanism

The **Recruitment Advisors** is a global recruitment platform where migrant workers can rate and review recruitment agencies (RA), facilitating the exchange of information and allowing them to make safer and more informed decisions. As of 2021, **4,835 recruitment agencies have been rated on the platform** from several countries of origin and destination, such as Nepal, the Philippines, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. However, one limitation is that it only includes registered recruitment actors.

The Recruitment Advisor Platform partnered with HANSA, a platform developed by Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA). HANSA acts as a grievance mechanism for the Recruitment Advisor platform. HANSA, once it receives a complaint, notifies a national coordinator, who assists the individual in processing the complaint. Thus, it makes it easier for individuals to raise complaints and can help the authorities monitor recruitment agencies and hold them accountable.

Digital platforms are also **beneficial in keeping a record of documents** (or “digital trail”), providing migrant workers with access to an online repository where they can store key documents, such as IDs and employment contracts. In this regard, the **OWWA Electronic Case Registry and Response System** in the Philippines stores the employment details of Filipinos migrating abroad and **SafeStep** maintains records of employment contracts. This could facilitate addressing work-related disputes about contract terms and fee charges and detect situations of contract substitution, wage theft, and confiscation of personal identification.

Online platforms can also facilitate access to information on migration to migrant workers. This is especially important since the current recruitment model equips private recruitment agencies

with information at the expense of worker knowledge, which ultimately puts migrants in a vulnerable situation. A **lack of knowledge** of legal recruitment practices increases migrant vulnerabilities to experience fraud, overcharging fees, and unpaid salaries. Thus, platforms such as **Contratados**, **Safer Migration**, and **Just Good Work**, which publish accurate information on labour rights and risks of migrating have the potential to empower migrant workers to make safer decisions.

4. What are the potential drawbacks and limitations of digital migration platforms?

There are concerns that digital platforms can increase the vulnerabilities of migrant workers and exacerbate the inequalities between them. Some are new risks caused by the adoption of new technology, such as weak data privacy laws. Others are risks that are long standing migration issues that are not being impacted by the shift to digital platforms, such as dependency on private recruitment agencies and challenges with their oversight.

Limited access to technology and low literacy levels remain a challenge for digital platforms. If the recruitment process is shifting online, there can be **an increased dependency on labour brokers and recruitment actors**, especially for **women** and individuals with lower levels of education and income, where - once again - they could have the power to control the full online recruitment process. This dependency will be further exacerbated by platforms that exclude migrant workers as well as those whose design is complex and requires specific technical skills to access it. For example, **a study** conducted by the ILO in 2019 showed that some respondents were unaware of how to search for information outside of Facebook. Others did not use the internet to search for migration information since they considered that personal sources or recruiters were more trustworthy than information found online. This situation could sustain the exploitative recruitment industry and maintain the status quo of the power imbalance between recruitment agencies and migrant workers.

Another potential drawback is that **not all digital platforms are inclusive of the most vulnerable migrant workers**, such as individuals with low levels of literacy and migrants who live in isolated regions. Some digital platforms are not user-friendly and have complex wording, others do not include the option to use the platform offline, which is necessary for regions with poor connectivity. Also, some platforms are not available in minority languages.¹ Furthermore, migrant workers can be exposed to **financial and identity theft** due to **weak data privacy laws** as well as the **misuse of personal data** collected through digital platforms.

There are also several **challenges in the oversight of private recruitment agencies, local brokers and sub-agents**, as governments frequently do not have a **robust and effective labour inspection system to make them accountable** and **have limited resources to keep the digital platforms updated**. For instance, **according to an ILO and IOM report**, eMigrate has listed 500 unlicensed labour recruiters, yet no further action has been taken to restrict their operations. Additionally, there is a general **lack of oversight of the recruitment process by private recruitment platforms**. Most digital platforms are also focused on the country of origin or destination but it is necessary to oversee both ends to enforce and regulate the entire recruitment process.

Lastly, **the impact of these platforms will be limited if they are not accompanied by awareness campaigns on the risks of migrating abroad on the ground**. If migrant workers are not aware of illegal recruitment practices or believe that there are no risks when migrating abroad, then they will not understand how these platforms can aid in their migration process. For instance, they will not use a platform to store their employment information if they are not aware of the risk of contract substitution and wage theft. Thus, the potential to scale up digital platforms' impact **will depend in part on the level of awareness of migration risks** by the targeted users.

¹ Despite the fact that some digital platforms are not user-friendly for workers with low levels of literacy, there are **some developers that are using picture-based options or audio to make them more inclusive**. For instance, rather than videos, **Contratados** has designed small-sized downloadable comics to explain workers' rights for those with limited internet.

5. Which benefits or risks are substantiated by evidence?

There is limited evidence on the impact that digital recruitment platforms have on ethical recruitment and forced labour outcomes. Platforms often do not publish quantitative data and there are no comprehensive reports comparing the impact on migration vulnerabilities between migrants that have used, or not, digital recruitment platforms. Despite limited research, most reports agree that [digital platforms can play a role in improving the efficiency, transparency, and accessibility of certain aspects of the recruitment process](#). However, there is also a general consensus that technology is only effective as long as there is institutional will and financial support to eliminate abusive and exploitative practices.

To reach the above conclusion, we analysed what benefits and risks of digital recruitment platforms are supported by evidence to provide a clear view of the research gaps.

There is some evidence that migrant workers are engaging with digital platforms to access migration information. For instance, the [NGO Issara](#) has nearly 50,000 individuals following their channels, where they regularly publish information on labour migration and workers' rights.² **There is also limited published data on whether digital recruitment platforms that facilitate access to personal documents have contributed to reducing exploitative situations,** such as wage theft and confiscation of IDs. Thus, despite having the potential to reduce these vulnerabilities, additional available data is necessary to understand the impact that these platforms have on reducing these situations.

Additionally, [a research report conducted by IOM and ILO](#) provides evidence that **state-led platforms have improved the efficiency of the recruitment process by reducing the time and cost of overseas placement.** For example, the timeframe to place domestic workers in Saudi Arabia has been reduced from four months to two to six weeks and the recruitment cost in South Korea dropped from USD 3,500 to USD 941 in 2014.

It is necessary to access more data to understand whether digital platforms can strengthen the monitoring of recruitment agencies. Migrant workers seem to be engaging with platforms that facilitate raising complaints about illegal recruitment practices. For instance, [Recruitment Advisors](#) has reviews for 4,835 recruitment agencies, and eMigrate received [1,000 complaints](#) between 2017 and 2019. However, it is not clear whether this has led to an increased number of labour inspections and a reduction in unethical recruitment practices. There is some initial evidence that [Contratados](#), through its grievances mechanism, has helped the authorities [identify labour recruiters](#) that committed fraudulent activities, which in some instances has led to legal cases [won in the US courts](#). Additionally, [85% of respondents in a survey](#) conducted in South Korea agreed that corrupt behavior by recruitment agencies have been reduced due to strict monitoring of the EPS platform. Thus, while it could be promising, there is still insufficient evidence to understand the role that digital platforms can play in monitoring recruitment agencies.

There is evidence that [digital literacy remains low in some countries](#), that [data privacy laws are not adequate](#) to protect migrant workers, and that most platforms are not inclusive of illiterate migrants. **However, while there is significant information on the risks and challenges of technology, there is no data connecting these concerns with forced labour outcomes.** For instance, it is not clear if technology has increased dependency on labour brokers or whether there have been reports of identity theft connected to digital recruitment platforms. Thus, more data is needed to determine whether these platforms have led to an increase or decrease in forced labour.

It is necessary to increase the capacity to collect, analyze and share quality data from digital recruitment platforms in order to understand how they are contributing to reducing the vulnerabilities to forced labour.

² However, quantitative data published by platforms is often not linked to the “bigger picture”, making it difficult to understand the significance of these numbers and how they in fact contribute to reducing the prevalence of forced labour.

6. Conclusion

Digital recruitment platforms play a key role in streamlining certain aspects of the recruitment process, increasing its transparency and accessibility. However, our research suggest that there is insufficient data and evidence to conclude whether recruitment and migration platforms are reducing vulnerabilities to forced labour.

Our assessment of the available body of evidence highlights the need for in-depth research on digital migration platforms. Examples of important and unanswered research questions include:

- **Have migrant workers that used digital platforms been less vulnerable to forced labour? How do they compare to migrant workers who have not used them?**
- **How can we complement digital platforms with non-digital and on-the-ground solutions to better combat illegal, corruptive, and unethical practices?**
- **How do digital platforms collect their data and measure their impact?**

Such research is necessary for concerned stakeholders and donors to determine whether digitalisation is linked with greater protection and better outcomes for migrant workers. Drawing on best practices from around the world and research with hard-to-access populations, such findings could point to extremely cost-effective ways to strengthen migration management while also safeguarding vulnerable people.

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