

**RECRUITMENT DECEPTION AND THE ORGANIZATION OF LABOR FOR  
EXPLOITATION: A POLICY-THEORY SYNTHESIS**

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**Acknowledgement:** We would like to acknowledge Alexander Breysem for his early work on this paper.

## **ABSTRACT**

Responding to policy initiatives on fair recruitment and the eradication of recruitment fees, and research calls to focus on the labor supply chain, this article provides a synthesis of scholarly and policy work on the issue of recruitment deception and its role in the organization of labor for exploitation. Recognizing that this topic is not explicitly theorized in management research, this analysis draws together concepts, arguments and insights from across the social sciences and policy arenas to provide clarity on the meaning and prevalence of recruitment deception, with explanations on where and how it occurs, the actors involved and the mechanisms and tactics through which it is enacted. Attention is drawn to the key tactics and strategies labor recruiters use to exploit the labor of migrant workers namely, misinformation, recruitment fees, identity document confiscation, debt, and grooming or trauma-bond recruiting. These tactics are organized into four exploitative capacities that we argue characterize a regime of enmeshment that starts with the abuse of vulnerability and then advances into recruitment deception, exploitation, and coercive control. The article concludes with an overview of initiatives and areas for future research that can help to reduce recruitment deception and pave the way for more responsible recruitment practices.

**Keywords: Labor exploitation; recruitment deception; labor chains; enmeshment schemes; recruitment fees; labor recruiters; responsible recruitment.**

## INTRODUCTION

“Fernando paid GTQ 8,000 (\$965 USD) to a labor broker for an H-2B visa to plant trees in the United States. He was promised a one-year visa and free food and lodging during his stay in the US. The broker demanded that Fernando sign over the deed to his wife’s property (valued GTQ 50,000-\$6030 USD). When he got to the work site in the US, Fernando’s passport and visa were confiscated; he was told that the visa was only valid for four months, and that food and lodging would be deducted from his pay.

Fernando’s employer required workers to plant 800 trees a day in order to be paid the daily wage. The first day, Fernando was only able to plant 300 trees because the ground was frozen – so his employer refused to pay him. With no income, Fernando couldn’t cover his food deduction and the employer refused to feed him. After going several days without eating, Fernando asked for his passport and permission to leave. His employer denied both requests, saying he had to stay until the end of the planting season. Fernando snuck into the office to photocopy his visa so he would have some form of identification. A few days later, after conditions had not improved and he had still not been paid, Fernando escaped, and friends helped him to find a better job.

Shortly thereafter, the labor broker’s lawyer began to threaten Fernando’s wife saying that they would take his wife’s property. Fernando returned to Guatemala and currently has an open lawsuit against the broker for violating his rights and withholding his payment”. [source: Verité, 2012: p.29].

For almost a century, a foundational principle guiding the work of the International Labor Organization (ILO) is that the placement of workers should not be turned into a commodity or commercial transaction from which profits can be made, and that “workers should enjoy free

placement and employment services” (ILO, 2020b: p.10). Despite this, and decades of institutional efforts<sup>1</sup> coordinated by the ILO supervisory bodies to advance labor rights, social protection, decent work<sup>2</sup>, migrant employment and fair recruitment<sup>3</sup>, workers like Fernando continue to end up in temporary, informal, unregulated, or undocumented forms of work which

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<sup>1</sup> These Conventions, International Labour Standards and Operational Guidelines include, to name a few, Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No.97); the Migrant Workers (supplementary provisions) Convention, 1975, (No.143) supplementing Recommendation (No.151); the Private Employment Agencies Convention (1997), (No.29 and No. 181), and the (Protocol of 2014 and Recommendation No.203, supplementing the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29); the ILO’s Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at work (adopted in 1998 and amended in 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Defined as “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity”, ILO, 2019: p. 12). The Decent Work Agenda was formulated by the ILO in 1999 and affirmed at the 2005 UN World Summit where countries agreed to make employment and decent work for all a central objective of development strategies to support fair globalisation. Also, in 2014, the G20 declared employment creation as its priority objective. Decent work explicitly entered the European development agenda in 2006, with the first European Consensus on Development stating that “the EU will contribute to strengthening the social dimension of globalisation, promoting employment and decent work for all” and the European Commission communication ‘Promoting decent work for all’ calling on other EU institutions, EU countries, social partners, and all those involved to work together to promote decent work for all in the world., the [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/sustainable-growth-and-jobs/employment-and-decent-work\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/sustainable-growth-and-jobs/employment-and-decent-work_en) [accessed 15 November, 2022].

<sup>3</sup> The Fair Recruitment Initiative has three key objectives: (i) to help prevent trafficking in persons for the purposes of forced or compulsory labour within and across countries; (ii) To protect the rights of workers, in particular migrants workers, from abusive and fraudulent practices during the recruitment process, which involves pre-selection, selection, transportation, placement and the possibility to return; and (iii) to reduce the costs of labour migration and enhance development outcomes for migrant workers and their families, as well as for countries of origin and destination. [see ILO, 2019; see also: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/fair-recruitment/lang-en/index.htm> [accessed 1 June, 2023].

have low incomes and no social security (Verite, 2010a; Gordon, 2015). The ILO estimates, for example, that close to 1.4 billion workers are engaged in vulnerable, precarious, or informal forms of employment (ILO, 2018: p.6) – often in sectors related to hospitality, agriculture, domestic work, food production, manufacturing, construction, mineral extraction, and fishing (ILO, 2021b: p.3). Informal and precarious work is characterized by “high levels of poverty, inequality and decent work deficits” (ILO, 2018: p.14), and unregulated or undocumented work refers to labor mobility which breaches immigration, residency, and employment laws (Andrees, Nasri & Swiniarski, 2015: p.7). These forms of work are vulnerable because there are “fewer chances [for workers] to engage in social dialogue, and [they] are less likely to benefit from job security, regular incomes and access to social protection” than salaried persons (ILO, 2018: p.6). Moreover, the number of those working in vulnerable work situations is anticipated to increase by an additional 17 million a year (ILO, 2018: p.6) as economic inequalities, political suppression, civil war, environmental crises, and the loss of common land, continue to displace people, forcing them across borders to search for work in unfamiliar environments (Bales, Trodd & Williamson, 2009; Global Migration Group, 2017).

Whilst labor mobility brings many advantages to the global economy, as well as to workers seeking better lives and prosperity for themselves and their families, the increases in migration trends over the last three decades<sup>4</sup>, along with the huge demand for recruitment and placement services, suggest that the foundational principle of the ILO is increasingly challenging to uphold. Some authors argue, for example, that policies to protect the most

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<sup>4</sup> There are 740 million people who move across administrative borders within a country in search of work and around 281 million migrants (3.6% of the global population) who cross international borders for the same reason. Figures have more than doubled since 1990 (128 million) and are three times higher than in 1970, with Europe and Asia experiencing the highest increases (87 million international migrants in Europe; 86 in Asia; and 59 million in Northern America) (United Nations Institute of Migration, World Migration Report, 2020).

vulnerable workers are failing' (Barrientos, 2013; Farbenblum, 2017), whilst others speak of the ungovernability of employment and recruitment matters, especially in relation to irregular and temporary migration (Gordon, 2015: p.3). In the policy domain, for example, attention is drawn to the 'governance gaps' (Gordon, 2015: p.3) created by the 'multi-layered and opaque' eco-system for labor recruitment services (ILO, 2021b: p.3). This opaqueness is exacerbated by the 'outstandingly vast and complex' global recruitment market (Gordon, 2015: p.5) - a large part of which is made up of 'unscrupulous brokers and employers' (Verité, 2013: p.6) who seek to secure worker vulnerability and indebtedness through recruitment deception, fraud, coercion, and physical abuse (Anti-Slavery International, 2021; Verité, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2015). It is also aggravated by the continuing use of recruitment fees by recruiters, even though they are prohibited in most parts of the world (ILO, 2019; ILO, 2020a). These empirical realities mean that many job-seekers are not able to enjoy the unencumbered placement services that the ILO envisaged. On the contrary, it is often recruitment and placement process themselves (and their associated fees) that are the starting point for deception as high interest rates, penalties and costs of accommodation and transportation are added to the costs of recruitment (Andrees, Nasri & Swiniarski, 2015; Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017; ILO, 2016a, 2019; Crane, LeBaron, Phung, Behbahani & Allain, 2022; Stringer et al., 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2015; Verité, 2012).

In the management literature, however, although general recruitment practices are extensively evaluated, the deceptive side of recruitment is less reported and theorized, particularly when it relates to migrant work. A filtered search on 'deceptive recruitment' in the management literature, for example, yielded few studies over the last two decades, although substantially more studies were found in the broader social sciences. This preliminary observation shows that studies of deceptions in labor recruitment are dispersed across a range

of disciplines. Also, where labor exploitation is discussed in the sub domains of the management field, these tend to use a range of discipline-based units of analysis and analytical categories. Examples include, but are not limited to: the (pyramid) or multi-layered system of labor contracting and intermediation (Barrientos, 2013); outsourcing and supply chain strategies (Gordon, 2015; Gold, Trautrim & Trodd, 2015; New, 2015; Silvestre, Viana & Monteiro, 2020; Soundararajan, Khan, & Tarba, 2018; Soundararajan, Wilhelm, & Crane, 2021); global value chains (Clarke & Boersma, 2017; Gereffi, Humphrey & Sturgeon, 2005; Stringer, Kartikasari & Michailova, 2021); global production networks (Barrientos, 2008; Henderson, Dicken, Hess, Coe & Yeung, 2002); labor supply chains (Barrientos, 2013; Gordon, 2017); precarity chains (Alberti, Holgate & Tapia, 2013; Silvey & Parreñas, 2020); recruitment chains (Verma, 2020); and triangular employment relationships (Allain, Crane, LeBaron, & Behbahani, 2019; Barrientos, 2013; Gold et al., 2015; New, 2015; Stringer et al., 2021). Although deception is recognized, therefore, to be an integral part of the organization of labor for human exploitation in the management literature (Crane, 2013; Crane, LeBaron, Phung, Behbahani, & Allain, 2022; Shepherd, Parida, Williams & Wincent, 2022; Stringer, Whittaker & Simmons, 2016), the topic of recruitment deception is not explicitly theorized. Also, whilst the above-mentioned constructs bring useful perspectives for pinpointing the market structures that produce global spaces for deceit and exploitation, an integrated policy and conceptual analysis of the role that recruitment deception plays in facilitating the organization of labor for exploitation, has yet to be realized.

In this paper, we seek answers, therefore to: ‘What constitutes recruitment deception, where and how it occurs, and what enabling tactics and mechanisms are employed to facilitate or inhibit the control and exploitation of labor’. Our objectives are to provide: (i) an integrative analysis of policy efforts and cross-disciplinary research on the issue of recruitment deception; and a (ii) “conceptual evaluation of the scholarly literature” (Markham & Wood, 2022: p.1) on

this topic. In advancing these objectives, we respond to three ‘calls for action’. The first is attending to a policy challenge raised by the ILO concerning the need to explain “why the market for ‘recruitment operates as it does’” (Gordon, 2015: p.3), such that workers continue to be deceived about the nature of the work for which they are being recruited. The second is responding to Shepherd et al.’s, (2022: p.2422; 2424) observation about the need for a “cohesive view of how actors organize the exploitation of vulnerable people’s labor” and “the structures and practices that initiate and perpetuate human exploitation”. The third is focusing on the labor (rather than product) supply chain to expose the tactics and mechanisms aiding exploitation (Caruana, Crane, Gold & Le Baron, 2021; Le Baron, 2021; Stringer et al., 2021), including the role of labor recruiters. In responding to these calls, our analytical efforts result in a policy-theory synthesis (Markham & Wood, 2022: p.2) on the organization of recruitment deception. This synthesis is important for three key reasons.

First, recruitment deception in the context of cross border recruitment, is a major challenge for Governments, society, as well as worker or employer organizations (Andrees et al., 2015; Gordon, 2015; ILO, 2020b). The accumulated ‘costs of (labor) coercion’, for example, are estimated to amount to approximately US\$21 billion, with underpaid wages costing US\$1.4bn, and illegal recruitment fees costing US1.4 billion’ (ILO, 2020b: p.8, referring to ILO, 2014b). Recruitment deception is also a problem for legitimate businesses who work within the parameters of international labor standards and who, as a result, face higher labor costs and competition disadvantages. Businesses also face negative reputation effects (i.e., in terms of brand value, company reputation, legal risk, trade-related risk and threats to investor relations) if they are found to be implicated (even inadvertently) in the unethical recruitment partners or subsidiaries or suppliers’ (Verité, 2012: p.6). Additionally, it is a problem for society in that recruitment abuses produce an economy of disposable people’ (Bales, 1999) – an economy which is characterised by displacement, irregular migration,



human trafficking, unregulated recruitment, weak labor rights protection, inequities at work, and (in)decent work (Grossman-Thompson, 2019; ILO, 2015; UNODC, 2015; Verité, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). At the individual level, recruitment deception is destructive for people in that it capitalizes on the “theft of [peoples’] lives and work” (Bales, 2002: p. viii) and, ultimately, it can also lead to ‘trauma, untreated disease and the destruction of dignity for those persons affected’ (Bales, 1999: p. viii).

Second, various criticisms are made concerning the effectiveness of policy work on this topic. Jones, (2022: p.303), for example, argues that scholarly work has “largely neglected the ILO’s role in developing ‘fair recruitment’ as a mechanism of global social policy”. Also, in terms of the governance of fair recruitment policies, it is argued that this is ‘a patchwork with many holes’ (Gordon, (2015: p.6, p.8). These criticisms centre on the inadequacies of governance issues related to, for example, the regulation of global labor recruiters, who are argued to “operate in a world that is half-light and half-shadow” (Gordon, 2015: p.1), providing positive and useful placement services, on the one side, whilst facilitating precarity (Deshingkar, Abrar, Sultana, Haque & Reza, 2019; Sanchez, 2016), on the other. They also draw attention to the ongoing imposition of recruitment fees by recruiters across the world, although recommendations have declared that recruitment fees “should not be collected from workers by an employer, their subsidiaries, labor recruiters or other third parties providing related services” (ILO, 2019: p.28). Taken together, these conditions have created a context for “the expansion of an informal brokerage system” (Lindquist, 2010: p. 132) – a system which is central to the functioning of a migration industry but which, at the same time, facilitates a global marketplace for the organization of exploitation. This is a marketplace within which labor protection is “very uneven, especially during processes of recruitment and relocation” (Verité, 2012: p.6) but also during employment, in that these workers are often not legally permitted to join trade unions (Mitlacher, 2007; Smith & Neuwirth, 2009).

Third, on a theoretical level, we argue that this policy-theory synthesis is important because recruitment deception is usually the starting point for the chain of labor exploitation that occurs in vulnerable work contexts. By giving critical scrutiny, therefore, to the main lines of argument and explanatory theories being evaluated in cross-disciplinary academic and policy work concerning recruitment deception, the forthcoming analysis helps to clarify not only the contexts, enabling conditions and capacities which, authors argue, facilitate the organization of recruitment for exploitation but also the actors and tactics involved. Additionally, by drawing together the insights from management research and policy reports, a conceptual framework is devised that captures the four dominant capacities which characterize the organization of labor for exploitation, including recruitment deception. This framework is helpful for displaying the layers of vulnerability (Underhill & Rimmer, 2016), or what Negi, Siegel, Calderon, Thomas & Valdez (2020) refer to as structural vulnerabilities, and how these progress into regimes of enmeshment. Finally, from this policy-research synthesis, directions for a future responsible recruitment research agenda for management studies are identified based on sustainable recruitment approaches, digital technologies, and ethical practices.

In what is to follow, we outline the methodology used to guide the data search and analysis. A policy-theory synthesis of the body of material on recruitment deception is presented. This is followed by the presentation of the conceptually derived framework. In the final section, a range of solutions, policies, and research themes for reducing deceptive recruitment are outlined.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Three stages of research and analysis were conducted to facilitate the conceptual evaluation. First, policy documents were assembled from prominent organizations that are

centrally involved in the dissemination of information and policy suggestions concerning deceptive recruitment, namely, Anti-Slavery International, International Labor Organization (ILO), United Nations (UN), Verité, and Walk Free Foundation (WFF) in view of their contributions to understanding and combatting recruitment deception through research and partnerships. These reports provide global evidence and policy overviews related to this topic and are integrated in the analysis.

Second, a targeted Web of Science (WoS) search was conducted of academic articles (on Titles, Abstracts and Keywords) using various search combinations such as: “deceptive recruitment”; “fraudulent recruitment”; “abusive recruitment”; exploit\* AND “labo\* recruit\*; decept\*, fraud\* or abus\* AND “labo\* recruit\*. In addition, given that recruitment intermediaries are identified to be key actors in migration flows (Bonet, Cappelli & Hamori, 2013; Lindquist, Xiang, & Yeoh, 2012) and deceptive recruitment (Stringer et al., 2021), a further search term was added: “labo\* intermediary”. The period selected for the analysis was 2000-2022 to recognise the increased visibility both in the popular and social media on issues related to labor exploitation. From this targeted search, a total of 449 articles were identified, of which 29 were in the Business and management domain, and 420 articles in ‘other’ domains identified by WoS categorization. Given the high number of articles in the ‘other’ category, a further filtering was undertaken to include specific field domains that had relevance to the topic and potential for providing a multi-disciplinary perspective to the analysis (Markman & Wood, 2022). These were: social science, political science, sociology, economics, industrial relations, development studies, women studies, ethnic studies, humanities, operations research management science, business finance, multidisciplinary sciences, and public administration. From this filtering, plus an initial reading of abstracts to establish scope and relevance of the articles to this topic and elimination of repeats and historically focused articles, a final list of 101 academic articles was retained for close analysis. This list of articles (organized

alphabetically) provides the material for the categorization of themes that help generate an understanding of this phenomenon (Grodal, Anteby, & Holm, 2021: 592). The academic articles are listed in Table 1, with the management articles highlighted in bold.

Insert Table 1 about here

Five questions guided the analysis and categorization process of the downloaded articles: (i) What types of recruitment processes constitute deceptive recruitment (i.e., how it occurs and through what types of entrapment tactics and practices), with attention also to the actors involved; (ii) In what work, country, or industry contexts is recruitment deception reported to occur; (iii) What mechanisms, conditions or structures are identified by the authors as enabling recruitment deception to occur or persist; (iv) What theories or concepts are used to describe or explain the phenomenon; and (v) What solutions (theoretical or practical) are offered by the authors to address the problem of recruitment deception.

Third, to complete the analysis, purposeful reading (Grant & Booth, 2009; Hardy, Maguire, Power & Tsoukas, 2020) was undertaken to identify published articles in the top management journals that address some of the issues raised in the policy documents, namely, debt bondage and modern slavery, forced labor, human trafficking, the sociology of labor markets, labor supply chains and exploitative work. This additional reading helped the interpretation of the data sources concerning deceptive labor recruitment practices and provided insight for the creation of the conceptual framework.

In what is to follow, we present the evidence and data drawn from the analysis. The following section identifies the market for recruitment deception in terms of: the nature and

prevalence of recruitment deception, the recruitment mechanisms and tactics through which it occurs, and the range of actors involved.

## **LABOR RECRUITMENT AND THE MARKET FOR RECRUITMENT DECEPTION**

### **The Nature and Prevalence of Recruitment Deception.**

Recruitment deception refers to those situations in which workers "are tricked into jobs where they are paid little or nothing and then [from which] they cannot leave because they have been manipulated into debt and/or had their identity documents confiscated" (ILO, 2016<sup>5</sup>). Although this definition was designed specifically with forced labor in mind, it is useful on two counts. First, it draws attention to how labor recruitment provides an opportunity context for acts of deception (ILO, 2021b, referencing ILO, 2017). Second, it underscores how deception – that is, ‘the act of hiding the truth to get an advantage, often through dishonest or illegal methods’ (Cambridge Dictionary), can be central to labor recruitment. Labor recruitment is “a process in which one party provides specific services based on an agreement or contract established between the provider and the recipient of the service for the purpose of matching job seekers with available job offers”, (Andrees et al., 2015: p.6<sup>6</sup>). As the latter authors

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<sup>5</sup> Sourced from: <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Forced-Labour/Deceptive-Recruitment-and-Coercion#introduction-deceptive-recruitment-and-coercion> [accessed February 13, 2023].

<sup>6</sup> These services include some, or all, of the following: (i) matching offers of, and applications for, employment without the private employment agency becoming a party to the employment relationships; (ii) employing workers to help them become visible to a third party which extends to the agency assigning and supervising tasks; and (iii) other services related to job seeking, such as the provision of information (Article 1.1. of the ILO Convention on Private Employment Agencies, 1997, No.181): Source: Andrees et al., 2015: p.6).

elaborate these services can include: canvassing, testing, (pre)selection, placement, repatriation of the worker, ancillary services, medical tests, document processing, transportation within or across international borders, harbouring and transfer to the premises of the employer.

Given the range of services offered through labor recruitment, therefore, the opportunity to hide, disguise or misrepresent the truth about potential work opportunities to trick people into believing something is true when it is not, permeates all stages and aspects of recruitment. To evidence this, various policy documents and advocacy work from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) testify that situations, such as the one faced by Fernando, are not isolated cases, but are prevalent across the world (Andrees et al., 2015; Anti-Slavery International; Verité, 2010a, 2010b, 2012; 2013; 2021). Additionally, social media accounts, newspaper reports (Herbert, 2021) and television documentaries ('The Workers Cup' Film<sup>7</sup> and 'Maid in Hell', 2018<sup>8</sup>) provide graphic portrayals of the persistency of deceptive tactics. The Global Slavery Index reports that these tactics are commonly found in certain industry sectors, namely domestic work, the construction sector, food production/agriculture, as well as mining, fishing, forestry, textiles/clothing/carpet production and sex work – sectors which are widely reported for their absorption of low-skill and seasonal, temporary, casual, undocumented and unregulated labor (Andrees et al., 2015; Global Slavery Index; Gordon, 2015; ILO, 2021a). In the articles analysed for the current study, we found that the commercial sex sector has received the most amount academic attention specifically related to recruitment deception, followed by domestic work, construction, fishing, food production/agriculture, textiles, electronics, forest work, mining and security work. These sectors (with supporting articles) are outlined in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theworkerscupfilm.com> [accessed Mar 2017]

<sup>8</sup> Maid in Hell, BBC documentary, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06mfbc9> [viewed November, 2019].

These industry sectors are implicated in the commercial dynamics of global production processes, and the demand for flexible, cheap, ‘just in time’ labor that can be matched at short notice to variations in (production) demand (Barrientos, 2013, p. 1063; Rye & Scott, 2018). Work in these sectors is also influenced by labor market features that have evolved, historically and contextually. To give one geographical example, for instance, the use of migrant labor and temporary work contracts are very prevalent in the Gulf States where migrants form 41.4 per cent of the labor force and where there is a ‘deep intergenerational impact’ concerning temporary or irregular labor market recruitment (ILO, 2021a; Jureidini, 2016: p.8).

Whilst most opportunities for exploitation of labor occur during transit, the opportunity for deception also often occurs before people have left their homes. It is widely reported, for example, how exploitation occurs in migration sites or ‘corridors’ through which people transit in search of work (such as those between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East or Europe; Central America and the United States; or Southeast Asia and the Gulf States (ILO, 2021a; IOM, 2019; UN Institute of Migration). In these situations, workers often resort to (or are baited into) accepting false or unreasonable recruitment terms or work conditions to meet basic subsistence needs (Andrees et al., 2015; Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017; Hoang, 2020; Stringer, et al., 2021; Verité, 2010a), or to avoid denunciation to immigration authorities (Gordon, 2015; ILO, 2022). What is less understood is that exploitation also commonly occurs before departure when assistance is sought from third party labor brokers, or local authority figures ‘to secure credit, information and visas that are necessary to access employment opportunities abroad’ (Andrees et al., 2015: p.2; ILO, 2016a; Farbenblum, 2017, p.153; LeBaron, 2014). Exploitation can also continue at the destination point, through the working period and often at the exit point when the worker or their families are vulnerable to threats of intimidation, forfeiture of collateral or wages, and threats of blacklisting (Stringer et. al., 2021).

Whether at migration sites, destination or pre departure points, workers are vulnerable because of the unfamiliarity of the labor market, region, or state to which they are migrating and also because of language or cultural differences (UNODC 2015: p.5). Given this unfamiliarity, they are often prepared to pay high fees and relocation costs to secure work – a preparedness which makes them susceptible to victimization (De Vries & Farrell, 2018), psychological coercion, violence and abuse (Dando, Walsh, & Brierley, 2016).

Deceptions take the form of false or misinformation concerning ‘the nature of the job, details of the employer, work conditions, the legality of the contract, housing and living conditions, legal documentation processes, travel and recruitment conditions, wages, earnings, and education opportunities’ (UNODC, 2015: p.16). They also include, as Andrees et al., (2015: p.10-11) identify: ‘charging workers fees that are not in their interest; threats, intimidation including verbal and psychological abuse; restrictions on the freedom of movement; retention of identity documents; recruitment of children and the manipulation of parents using threats to children; and the recruitment of workers into hazardous and unsafe work’. Other deceptions are also advanced through (false) promises of family unification, marriage or adoption, forged travel documents, contract substitution, and wage theft, extreme working hours (Herbert, 2021; Verité, 2010a, 2013). The range of mechanisms and practices used in deceptive recruitment is summarized by the UNODC, (2015: p.16) into 9 key indicators which have, for the purpose of this article, been synthesized, under six categories. These are outlined horizontally in Table 3, although in practice, they are usually interrelated. The indicators are also elaborated with related sub themes and are now briefly summarized with reference to some selected articles.

Insert Table 3 here



## **Recruitment Mechanisms and Tactics through which Deception Occurs**

*Misinformation, false information and contract substitution.* These tactics are used by recruiters and employers to misinform workers about their prospective wages and the nature or conditions of employment (UNODC, 2011), whilst also often charging fees for this misinformation (Farbenblum, 2017). In his study of women and girls recruited for the Lao-Thai sex industry, for example, Molland (2010: p223) finds that workers are often initially tricked into sex work but continue in the work as, in his words, they become “used to it” over time - which suggests that victims are manipulated to become accomplices in their own abuse. Deshingkar (2021) also reports how construction workers stay in work or occupations for which they have not been recruited to fulfil debt, family, and recruiter obligations. Another example relates to the recruitment of women from the Phillipines for nursing work – work which is switched to residential care work in the destination country (Van den Broek, & Groutsis, 2017). Similarly, in Africa, ex-militia personnel are recruited into the security sector in the absence of information about the work conditions, pay levels and engagement country which, Christensen, (2017: p.30-33) argue, keeps workers ‘blind’ and in ‘an endless state of suspension’ about the work for which they have been recruited. Stringer et al., (2016) also report how recruiters use differences in maritime laws to obscure information about legal pay levels for Indonesian fishermen. These examples demonstrate how misinformation can be turned to the advantage of the recruiter in that the workers are tricked into work, and then enticed to stay to repay debt or recruitment fees or to receive levels of pay that they can’t get at home.

Misinformation also enables recruiters to falsify or substitute contracts. Contract falsifying, substitution or switching is a common tactic “where the conditions and salary approved by the employee prior to departure are replaced after arrival by a contract with

reduced benefits usually salary levels, working hours or even the type of work itself” (Deshinkar, 2019: p.2732). Although the latter authors are speaking about construction work in Qatar, these practices occur across all industries. An account is given by Belanger (2014: p.96), for example where: “Vietnamese migrant workers in Asia “believed they had signed a three-year contract, [whereas in fact] they often had only a one-year visa”. In this case, a lack of understanding about the need to renew visas to extend their work contracts resulted in terminated contracts, or workers being sent home without explanation. In other cases, severe penalties are applied to Filipino agriculture and construction workers in Poland when workers try to leave their job within a certain time frame, even though penalties are not legally permitted in Poland (Verité, 2021). Misinformation and contract substitution are underscored, therefore, by the role that illiteracy and low levels of education play in rendering migrant workers vulnerable to deception and enslavement (Crane, 2013; Molland, 2012). Recruiters might also use certain wordings or technicalities when setting up contracts to conceal as well as to legitimize fraudulent placement and employment (Yea & Chok, 2018).

*Identity document confiscation.* Given that certain kinds of documentation are needed to arrange migration, transportation, employment and accommodation, multiple studies report how identity documents, passports and immigration papers of workers are often confiscated upon arrival at the workplace (i.e., Andrijasevic & Novitz, 2020; Stringer et al., 2016; Yea, 2022). This can severely affect a “worker’s freedom of movement and can be used to bind them to a particular job or employer, forcing them to do work that they may not have originally consented to for fear of losing their documents... or jobs” (UNODC, 2015: p.6). A report covering Southeast Asia, for example, found that 65 per cent of the surveyed migrant workers were subject to identity document confiscation (ILO, 2020a). The confiscation of identity documents intensifies the vulnerable conditions in which migrant workers find themselves, in part because it can be used as a deportation threat if the worker breaches the employment

contract or attempts to escape. As Barrientos (2013) contends, the inability to leave a work arrangement is the fundamental feature of unfree labor. Confiscation tactics also increase ‘the means of pressure and control’ over the workers (Chapsos & Hamilton, 2019: p.265), producing ‘a sense of isolation and reliance’ on the perpetrator (Dando, Walsh, & Brierley, 2016: p.3). We also note from the studies, however, that recruiters are increasingly choosing to not withhold identity papers to communicate an impression of voluntariness (Frangéž, & Ručman, 2017).

*Recruitment fees.* Although the charging of fees goes against various international standards and recommendations set by the Private Employment Agencies Convention (1997, No.181), research evidence indicates that the practice is widespread. Recruitment fees are “fees or [related] costs incurred in the recruitment process in order for workers to secure employment or placement regardless of the manner, timing or location of their imposition or collection” (ILO, 2019: p. 28). They include: fees, charges, or costs used for “for soliciting, identifying, considering, interviewing, referring, retaining, transferring, selecting, or placing potential employees; for covering the cost, in whole or in part, of advertising; for certifying labor applications; for processing petitions; for visas and any fee that facilitates an employee obtaining a visa such as appointment and application fees; for government-mandated costs such as border crossing fees; for procuring photographs and identity documentation, including any nongovernmental passport fees; fees charged as a condition of access to the job opportunity, including procuring medical examinations and immunizations and obtaining background, reference and security clearance checks and examinations; and for an employer’s recruiters, agents or attorneys, or other notary or legal fees” (ILO, 2019: p. 28)<sup>9</sup>.” Housing, documentation

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<sup>9</sup>Source: UNODC, 2015: p.7, taken from the United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau. April. 3, 2014. [accessed at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/SRMigrants/A.HRC.26.35.pdf>. Paragraph 18, on December 2022].

and transportation also fall under the scope of recruitment fees (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017), although migrant workers may initially not be aware of these additional costs.

The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB, 2016: p. 1), for example, reports that “recruitment fees charged to workers represent the dominant business model of the recruitment industry in the global south, including within the supply chains of leading brands”. This is especially the case for the lower echelons of the labor market who tend to pay a higher price for job matching than higher skilled workers (Mekong Club, 2022; UNODC, 2015: p.8). Verité (2010a: p.26) report, for example, that ‘Indonesian, Phillipine and Nepalese workers bound for work in IT factories in Taiwan and Malaysia, frequently pay recruitment fees in excess of legal limits’, in spite of the fact that they don’t have the financial means to fund placement fees. Other cases show that “lower-skilled migrant workers in construction, agriculture and domestic work pay agencies between US\$500 to \$5,000, or equivalent to between 1 to 15 months of their earnings abroad” (Jureidini, 2016: p.8) and the amount can be as high as US\$21,000 (ILO, 2020: p.8; Verité, 2010b; Verité, 2021).

The collection of recruitment fees has generated a billion-dollar recruitment industry (Fernandez, 2013; ILO, 2014; Jureidini, 2016) with estimates that the private employment industry alone was worth approximately €495 billion in 2019 - a 5 per cent increase compared to 2018 (The World Employment Confederation, 2021). Also, Jureidini, (2016: p.10) calculates that ‘if 80% of the 13 million migrant workers in the Asia-Arab States corridor pay recruitment fees to private agencies of, on average, US \$1000 over and above actual costs, these unauthorized transactions amount to US \$10 billion over a decade or so’. This suggests that the increasing numbers of migrant labor are fuelling a demand for labor recruiters in the global South (Farbenblum, 2017), in that for some countries, paying recruitment fees (even if it is illegal) is perceived as the only route through which workers can access what might

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otherwise be inaccessible, employment opportunities. Despite ILO Recommendations against the imposition of recruitment fees (ILO, 2020b), charging recruitment fees is, therefore, a profitable recruitment technique that economically benefits the labor recruiter and provides opportunities through which deception and exploitation can be formulated into long term debts by labor recruiters (Andrees, et al., 2015). The result is that in some regions, such as Asia, “fee-charging recruitment industries’ ... have become gatekeepers to temporary employment in low-wage occupations (Jones, Ksaifi & Clark, 2022).

*Debt Bondage.* As highlighted in the case of Fernando outlined earlier, most workers lack the financial means to fund the cost of migration and placement (Verité, 2010a). This means that when a worker receives an advance (or is provided some service, such as accommodation, transportation, or help with documentation) by a recruiter or employer, these costs often become formulated into debts with high interest rates which the worker may not be aware of until their arrival at the workplace (Andrees, et al., 2015; UNDOC, 2015). The worker is then obliged to repay the advance via wage deductions, or they are dispossessed of their wages (Low, 2019; Kabir, Maple, Islam, Usher, 2022). Recruiters use debt as a method to retain workers in carrying out work for which they have been deceptively recruited (Langhorn, 2018), or when family resources have been used to pay fees (Deshingkar, 2021: p. 2730). Debt gives recruiters the ability to control workers and ensure that they are compliant, dependent, and exploitable’ (Dey & Palash, 2017; Hoang, 2020). It also ensures that recruiters can secure long term revenue streams by adding ancillary services to the business models – costs which are passed onto the victim (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017; Crane et al., 2022). Whilst migration can potentially increase workers’ freedom, therefore, debt perpetuates inequalities in labor-sending countries, not least because of the financial pressure it puts on migrant families as debts can transcend generations (Jureidini, 2016; Mekong Club, 2022) but also because it often leads to isolation and confinement (Molland, 2012). Debt-financed migration also results in

dangerous work and produces more workplace fatalities and injuries, and even deaths (Hebert, 2021; Sallie, 2022).

*Grooming, trauma-bond recruiting and trafficking.* In addition to the above tactics and mechanisms, we also identified other forms of manipulation used in recruitment purposes, such as ‘trauma-bond recruiting’. Trauma bonding is defined by Reid & Jones, (2011: p.19) as “a form of coercive control in which the perpetrator instills in the victim fear as well as gratitude for being allowed to live” (see also Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, McFarlene, & Weisaeth, 2007). Whilst we did not search for use of this term directly, we identified several studies that investigated how intimate partners are often recruited and groomed especially for the purpose of labor exploitation. Merodio et al., (2020), for example, discuss what they refer to as ‘the lover boy problem’ to show how most predatory trafficking starts from intimate relations and the coercion of women. Duron et al., (2016) also gives examples of some common tactics used by perpetrators to isolate, groom, and control individuals with intimate partners. Similarly, Petrunov, (2014) also outlines different organizational structures and profiles of operators who groom women for sex trafficking. Other studies discuss the importance of (non-violent) psychological methods of control including deprivation of psychological needs (e.g., no medical care, restricted food and water, limited sleep) which physically humiliate and degrade victims, and induce physical exhaustion (Dando et al., 2016: p.3). Finally, many studies reported how recruitment deception is the main means to facilitate human trafficking. Fernandez et al., (2021), for example, examines the experiences of human trafficking victims during recruitment and other stages. Also, Cockbain et al., (2018) disentangled the behaviors and dynamics across three major stages in the trafficking process: recruitment, control, and exploitation. Similarly, De Vries, & Farrell, (2018) identified victimization patterns of people trafficked for labor exploitation.

Having outlined the mechanisms and tactics through which recruitment deceptions are enabled, we now discuss the key actors at the centre of the global recruitment market.

### **Types of Actors in the Recruitment Market**

As noted by Gordon, (2015: p.5), “the global recruitment business is enormous..... and astoundingly complex.....”..... [It is] made up of moneylenders, notaries, brokers and sub agents in remote villages (some of whom are migrants themselves recruiting from their own employer) [or] recruitment firms in key cities of migrant origin countries and their counterparts in destination countries; ... and multinational agencies that manage most high-skilled recruitment” (Gordon, 2015: p.5). Often the term labor recruiter is used to capture the range of “public employment services, ... private employment agencies and all other intermediaries or subagents that offer labor recruitment and placement services. They take many forms, whether for-profit or non-profit, or operating within or outside legal and regulatory frameworks” (ILO, 2019, p. 12).

Although many recruiters are dedicated to aiding migrant workers in a legal and ethical manner, the increased demand for placement services and opportunity to charge recruitment fees has created opportunities, for informal and unregistered labor recruiters to enter the market. It has also meant that the recruitment business has become a ‘breeding ground for ‘fly-by-night’ or unscrupulous labor intermediaries (Gordon, 2015: p.8). Unscrupulous labor recruiters are especially apparent in regions that have large emigration flows (India, Mexico, North Africa, Eastern Europe), in that larger flows and demands produce agglomeration effects and reduce recruitment costs for traffickers (Mahmoud, & Trebesch, 2010: p.174). For example, the Pakistani-Saudi migration corridor is one of the most expensive in the world with respect to recruitment fees paid by vulnerable workers with limited financial resources. While informal labor recruiters are illegal according to Pakistani law, the networks of informal

recruiters continue to be the key intermediary between migrant workers and employers in Saudi Arabia (Qadri, Shahzad, & Usman, 2019). Motivated by low barriers to entry, minimal capital requirements, [and] no fixed offices', labor recruiters have found ways to operate 'under the radar' for the purpose of exploiting people's basic human needs (Barrientos, 2013, p. 106; LeBaron, 2014; Stringer, et al., 2021; Fernandez, 2013; Mair, Martí, & Ventresca, 2012; Verité, 2013). For these recruiters, misleading and abusive recruitment practices are a core business activity (Stringer et al., 2021). This criminalization of brokering (Deshinkar, 2021), for example provides opportunities for recruiters to exploit regulatory loopholes (Mair, Marti & Ventresca, 2012; Crane et al., 2022) and to manage the placement and employment of these workers in a deceitful manner. In extreme cases this can lead to human trafficking and smuggling, whether this is direct (Sanchez, 2016), through internet-based trafficking (Volodko et.al., 2020), or using children (Sanchez, 2018).

From the academic research, we noted the complexity of organizational actors involved in the recruitment market. This range of actors provide a 'methodological vantage point' for understanding the broader infrastructure that facilitates mobility (Lindquist, Xiang, & Yeoh, 2012: p.7). These actors include: labor agents (Barrientos, 2013), recruiters (Demetriou, 2019; El Didi et al., 2022), labor contractors (Barrientos, 2013), brokers (Deshingkar et al., 2019; Forrest, 2014; Verité, 2010a; Verité, 2010b), dilletante or migrant brokers (Molland, 2012); labor providers (McCollum & Findlay, 2018); intermediaries (Bonet, Cappelli, & Hamori, 2013; Enright, 2013; Fernandez, 2013; Fransen and LeBaron, 2019; Samaluk, 2016), organized crime syndicates (Chapsos & Hamilton, 2019; Langhorn, 2018), criminal family firms, Salmon, 2022), temporary work agencies (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017), governments/states (Chin, 2019), human traffickers (Dando et al., 2018; Duron et al., 2021; Koegler et al., 2022; Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010; Preble, 2021; Shepherd et al., 2022; Surtees, 2008; Walsh, & Brierley, 2016) and sex traffickers (Mehlman-Orozco, 2020). As noted above,



it is also reported that recruiters come in the guise of intimate partners (Duron et al., 2021; Merodio, et al., 2020), family and friends (Duron et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2022) and through informal networks (Cranford, 2005; Deshingkar, 2021; Molland, 2010a; Palacios, 2022). Some studies also reported that recruiters are often female, especially in the sex industry (Molland, 2010a), or in smuggling contexts where women often provide supporting roles by preparing food and accommodation (Sanchez, 2016).

## **DISCUSSION: LABOR RECRUITMENT AND THE MARKET FOR RECRUITMENT DECEPTION**

In the preceding section, a cross disciplinary synthesis has been provided of the policy work and research efforts on recruitment deception in the global economy. Recognizing that this topic is not explicitly attended to or theorized in management research, this synthesis has drawn together concepts, arguments and insights from across the social sciences and policy work to provide clarity on the meaning and prevalence of recruitment deception, with explanations on where and how it occurs, the actors involved and the mechanisms and tactics through which it is enacted. This synthesis identifies, therefore, the complex mesh of human (tactical) practices, (socio-material) arrangements (Schatzki, 2001) that intersect to create global spaces for deceit and exploitation – one manifestation of which is recruitment deception. These human practices include, on the one side, practices enacted by guest workers, migrants, and other job seekers to secure work, such as seeking out recruitment services, paying recruitment fees and assenting to risky recruitment terms. On the other, there are the tactics and mechanisms used by unscrupulous labor recruiters who take advantage of the demands involved in global human mobility by coercing or retaining workers to undertake work for which they have not been recruited. These tactics include hiding or misrepresenting the truth

about the nature of work, through misinformation, contract falsifying or substitution and/or the use of recruitment fees, debt, and grooming or trauma-bonding.

These practices and tactics do not operate in a vacuum, however. They are entangled in complex political-economic systems that are shaped by neo liberal economic policies, labor market deregulation, the outsourcing practices of businesses, fragmented labor supply chains, the privatization of the recruitment industry, immigration restrictions and the changing nature of recruitment processes. Collectively, these globally reaching systemic forces allow states and businesses to profit from alternative and flexible labor market arrangements which strengthen their position in the global economy and help them to respond quickly to market fluctuations (Enright, 2013; McCollum & Findlay, 2018). They have also enabled certain socio-material arrangements to emerge in the form of labor supply chains, production networks, labor brokerage systems, triangular employment relationships, precarity chains, and enmeshment schemes. Additionally, these arrangements have created opportunities for labor recruiters or intermediaries to become key and powerful actors in the global economy (Farbenblum, 2017; Forrest, 2014; Gordon, 2015; El Didi et al., 2022; Jones, Ksaifi & Clark, 2022; Mon Myatt, 2010; Richard & La Pierre, 2020; Rye & Scott, 2018; Stringer, et al., 2021; Takasaki, 2022), and to position themselves as integral to labor or ‘human’ supply chains (Barrientos, 2013; Forrest, 2014; Stringer et al., 2021).

Whilst neoliberal economic policies, labor market deregulation and the privatization of the recruitment sector have brought multiple benefits for the global economy, they also produce opportunities for the organization of labor exploitation to persist in the twenty-first century. As Mair et al., (2012) explain in the context of rural Bangladesh, various political-economic conditions create institutional voids that permit and normalize the marginalization, deception and mistreatment of ill-protected and disadvantaged people. This is especially the case for non-standard (temporary, transient or undocumented) workers who are entangled in broader

political-economic forces such as, for example, state-sanctioned and controlled labor migration (Ciupijus, 2010). This means, some argue, that temporary labor has become a legitimate form of labor that is commodified for the marketplace (Henderson, 2020; Lindquist, 2010: p. 132; Sanchez, 2018; Walton-Roberts, 2020) in that workers acquiesce to unreasonable or unanticipated work conditions such that their autonomy is gradually eroded (Shepherd, Parida, Williams & Wincent, 2022). Moreover, it is often through the recruitment process that workers become indebted (Platt, Baey, Yeoh, Khoo & Lam, 2017) through the labor process. Their labor is also often commodified for the marketplace, in the sense that recruitment agencies or intermediaries use the precarity of migrant workers to produce ‘ideal workers’ for certain kinds of work (Awumbila, Deshingkar, Kandilige, Teye, & Setrana, 2019; Deshingkar et.al., 2019). Labor market deregulation also contributes to commodification processes because it coincides with a partial deregulation of labor protection. This has resulted in workers’ rights being undermined, especially those in temporary and irregular work, while putting labor recruiters in a favorable position (Alsos & Evans, 2018). Also, labor recruitment has become more fragmented with businesses “operat[ing] along a continuum of formality and informality, compliance and non-compliance with regard to national and international standards” - with fair recruitment at one end and human trafficking at the other (Andrees et al., 2015: p.10). It is also a nuanced sphere of activity with extensive elements of criminality (Langhorn, 2018; Salmon, 2022), and also intimate mechanisms as well as community-based forms of labor recruitment (e.g., Awumbila et al., 2019; Crane, 2013; Nadeem & Kayani, 2019; Reinecke, Donaghey, Wilkinson & Wood, 2018; Sanchez, 2016).

In these voids and difficult to monitor spaces, therefore, labor recruiters have the means to extend their power and influence and to produce modern business models that ensure profitable revenue streams (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017; Crane et al., 2022; Gordon, 2015). This is because they sit at the nexus between flexible labor market structures and migrant labor

(McCullom & Findlay, 2017: p.558) which gives them influence over working conditions and employment relations (Rye & Scott, 2018) as they ‘disintermediate particular elements of management usually carried out by employers’ (Bonet, Cappelli & Hamori, 2013: p. 341–342). In this way, they can take advantage of their influential position by charging exorbitant recruitment fees for services that many migrants are obliged to use if they want to succeed in finding work abroad (Kushnirovich, Rajjman, & Barak-Bianco, 2019). States play a role here, too, especially concerning guest worker programs which, given that they are outsourced to private entities, ensures a “potent form of control over migrants” (Anderson & Frank, 2019: p. 1218; Henderson, 2020; Verma, 2020). Additionally, employers “purposefully create and perpetuate their advantage in interaction with labor market dynamics” as they outsource responsibilities and costs related to recruitment and employment (Hamann & Bertels, 2017: p.394).

By drawing concepts, themes and insights from across the social sciences and policy work, therefore, several substantive points can be made about recruitment deception and its role in the organization of labor for exploitation. First, we identify the global empirical prevalence of forms of recruitment deception, as well as its locally contextualized nature. Second, we highlight its entanglement with neo-liberal market conditions alongside its contribution to precarity. Third, we demonstrate the scale and opaqueness of the recruitment sector, and how it defies governability (Gordon, 2015: p.3). Fourth, by revealing the mechanisms through which deception occurs, we make explicit the intent through which labor power is extracted ‘in the interests of global capital’ (Ngai, 2005: p.77). Lastly, we clarify its subtle origins but layered, and emotionally entangled outcomes. For example, we show how deception, in the context of recruitment, is not isolated to a singular point in time but is the means through which perpetrators enmesh workers into regimes from which they cannot escape, tying them into long term arrangements that are exploitative of the worker and

beneficial to the recruiter (Shepherd et. al., 2022; Veldhuizen-Ochodničanová, Jeglic & Boskovic, 2020). Taken together, these conditions, mechanisms and tactics can be synthesized into a conceptual framework which characterizes recruitment deception and demonstrates its role in the organization of labor for exploitation. This is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Fig 1 here.

In this figure, a visualization of how labor is organized for the purpose of exploitation is presented. The categories outlined in the figure are broadly informed by Stringer et al., (2014), Shepherd et al., (2022) and Verité (2010a), each of which provide useful themes and classifications characterizing exploitation. From the study by Verité (2010a), we retain the language and terminology of ‘baiting’, ‘entrapment’ and ‘switching’. From the study of sex work in Mumbai by Shepherd et al., (2022), we find the notion of a cycle of exploitation that is constantly shifting and iterating, useful. Also, from Stringer et al.’s (2014) study, we note their efforts to classify a range of exploitative and coercive tactics according to three time points in the human trafficking process as it progresses towards forced labor: recruitment, destination and exit points in the trafficking. For our synthesis, however, the objective was to retain the detail of the practices that are central to the organization of labor for exploitation, whilst also making explicit the role of recruitment and what happens in the pre and post recruitment process. In this sense, we retain some features of the two existing models, whilst also accommodating the findings from this policy-research synthesis. We also display how the exploitation of labor begins with the abuse of vulnerabilities which become, over time, intensified into ‘layers of vulnerability’ (Underhill & Rimmer, 2016), or to adopt the terminology of Reid (2014) ‘enmeshment regimes’. This framing is now explained.

*Step 1: Abuse of vulnerability – the baiting stage.* Beginning on the left side of Figure 1, the ‘abuse of vulnerabilities’ category, is the first step in the enmeshment regime. Given their unfamiliarity with the (cultural, and political) landscape of the labor market they are hoping to enter, in the first part of the regime, recruiters use baiting mechanisms to lure the unsuspecting worker. The ‘bait’ derives its power from the fact that workers have needs that they cannot meet (subsistence items and food for the family; information, contacts visas and other documents related to employment services; support with accommodation, transportation, and logistical issues; and/or the supply of drugs, alcohol, or other items upon which the worker is dependent). The recruiter offers to meet some of these needs and, therein, starts the process of victimization and abuse of trust given that these placement services come at a high price.

*Step 2: Recruitment services (or deceptions about them).* In the second stage of the enmeshment regime, the ‘baiting’ work is extended to promotion of the employment opportunity (including promises about the nature of the work etc., and delivery of services, documents, accommodation, or transportation needed to access the work). It is here that deception begins to occur as recruiters misinform, falsify or ‘switch’ details about the forthcoming work or wages to intensify the vulnerability and helplessness of the worker.

*Step 3: Labor exploitation in the third phase.* In this stage of the regime, the recruiters’ work centers on ensuring the enmeshment of the worker through mechanisms such as debt manipulation, wage theft, confiscation of papers, physical and psychological abuse, restricting mobility and distinguishing alternatives for escape. Here also, enmeshment is extended as workers are manipulated to become complicit in their abuse, and/or through expectations to work longer hours or engage in supplementary or illegal activities.

*Step 4: Coercive control.* In the fourth phase of the enmeshment regime, the forms of exploitation become further intensified as the need to coerce and control become dominant tactics in the retention of workers. For example, debt is further accumulated, isolation tactics

are used, or threats of violence, as well as the deprivation of basic human needs and the use of drugs which are administered to control or indoctrinate. In this part of the regime also, workers are often repurposed into new roles if they can no longer fulfill the function for which they were recruited, or they are expected to become an exploiter or recruiter themselves.

A final point regarding the conceptual framework is that although, for analytical clarity, the categories are presented in a static, sequential way, in practice, they overlap substantially and there is also progression of exploitation over time and a deepening of the level of enmeshment. The progression is shown in the arrows linking the categories, and also in the link looping back to the abuse of vulnerability which is a central dynamic in the chain. Finally, the framework also recognizes the possibility to exit the enmeshment regime at any point whether this is through escape, deportation, return home or emancipation.

Having explained and visualized the mechanisms and tactics through which labor is organized for the purpose of exploitation, the challenges involved in advancing a policy and research agenda are now discussed.

### **Advancing a Policy and Research Agenda for Responsible Recruitment: Key Challenges**

From the policy-theory synthesis and the purposeful literature search we noted various challenges that contribute to the persistence of recruitment deception. Some emphasize the importance of increased resources to state labor departments for better tracking of workers and increased communication across states (Sarathy & Casanova, 2008), or more campaigns about the positive contributions of migrants to the economy (Molland, 2013). Others promote the value of information sharing and awareness-raising training sessions for migrants before they leave home so they understand the potential pitfalls in recruitment, rights of redress and complaint resolution options (Deshingkar, 2021; Kabir, et al., 2022; Konrad, 2019; Mieres & McGrath, 2021). Other studies highlight the importance of more effective regulatory and

monitoring mechanisms to enable the right to fair recruitment as enshrined within the ILO (2014) Fair Recruitment Initiative (FRI). It is argued that labor recruiters are rarely held accountable for abuses, deceptions or for misinforming workers (Farbenblum, 2017; Gordon, 2017). Like states and businesses, they often operate in vast opaque networks (Stringer, et al., 2021) which are difficult to identify and regulate. Consequently, labor recruiters and agents coerce and deceive workers whilst operating with almost complete impunity (Qadri, Shahzad, & Usman, 2019).

At the same time, however, businesses also benefit from using labor recruiters because outsourcing ensures some legal distancing from any human or labor rights violations that may occur along the supply chain (Wise, 2013). Indeed, outsourcing labor makes it increasingly challenging to detect the source of exploitation (Andrijasevic & Novitz, 2020), which has led to “troubling issues of fragmented and opaque social accountability” (Verité, 2010a: p. 2). In their examination of Chinese workers in the shipping industry, for example, Shan and Zhang (2021) show how multinational companies operating within this industry tend to use labor recruiters to evade any liabilities for worker mistreatment. These companies hire labor recruiters to become independent employers of workers so they can transfer all liability risks. Anderson & Franck, (2019) also demonstrate how governments outsource migrant worker recruitment to the private employment industry to maintain a certain form of control over migrant labor while simultaneously protecting themselves from accountability.

Even when mechanisms to encourage accountability and transparency of organizational processes are in place, non-compliance with the law is prevalent and goes unpenalized (Monciardini, Bernaz and Andhov, 2021). In view of this, disclosure-based enforcement models’ (Harris & Nolan, 2022), or ‘employer pays recruitment models’ (Low, 2020) are proposed as potential solutions as well as codes of conduct, social audits, and certification schemes. Several scholars have commented, however, that given that these models are often



self-regulatory, these measures are insufficient and ineffective (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Barrientos, 2008; Christ & Helliard, 2021; Crane, 2013; New, 2015; Stevenson & Cole, 2018). LeBaron (2021), found, for example, found that certification schemes rarely prevent the incidence of forced labor by showing that the difference in labor conditions between certified and noncertified tea plantations is negligible. Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) also comment on the inadequacy of ‘top-down’ codes of conduct, recognizing that labor conditions are not a technical issue, but rather, a politically contested one. Additionally, other scholars stress that audits usually overlook the involvement of labor recruiters, leaving their operations largely unmonitored (Crane, 2013; Stevenson & Cole, 2018). Where fraudulent recruitment practices are detected, labor recruiters can claim that they merely act as intermediaries, not as employers (Shan and Zhang; 2021) and are not, therefore, responsible for misconduct. Situations like these make it difficult for migrant workers to seek accountability, not least because they do not know who they are legally working for. This is illustrated in a report by Verité on Filipino migrant workers in Europe: “... A Filipino seafarer, they posited, could be recruited by a manning agency in the Philippines, have a ship manager based in Singapore, working on a ship with a German owner, while the flag state of the ship is Panama” (Verité, 2021: p. 35).

In response to these challenges and criticisms, a range of solutions are being explored to reduce the opportunities for recruitment deception and to advance responsible recruitment. These are outlined under six headings: (i) co-regulatory measures and labor supplier selection and management, (ii) policies to eradicate recruitment fees; (iii) rights-based recruitment governance, (iv) transnational efforts to reform recruitment industry business models; (v) licensing, and (vi) technological tools. Within these headings, reference is also made to some exemplary examples of policy or practical initiatives that have been advanced with suggestions also on avenues for future research.

## **RESPONSIBLE RECRUITMENT**

**Co-regulatory measures and labor supplier selection and management.** As multi-stakeholder initiatives have burgeoned over the last decade (Clarke & Boersma, 2017; Gordon, 2017), business, governmental and nongovernmental actors have joined forces to create more ethical and sustainable supply chains by combatting deceptive recruitment practices and forced labor. This can be achieved, Cole & Aitken (2019) argue through careful (labor) supplier selection and management work that occurs prior to choosing a supplier, rather than after they have been selected, at which point it is difficult to remedy. It can also occur if organizations adopt a collaborative approach with their suppliers or if they ally with NGOs (Benstead, Hendry & Stevenson, 2021). Such ethical, sustainable sourcing (labor) strategies can ‘attempt to fill the governance gap by formulating ‘co-regulatory measures’ that provide an alternative to corporate self-regulation’ (Clarke & Boersma, 2017: p. 127). Further research on co-regulatory measures would help businesses to assess their relevance and feasibility.

**Policies to eradicate recruitment fees.** A recent pilot project that brought together different stakeholders of the Jordanian garment sector resulted in the adoption of a zero-fee recruitment fee policy for migrant workers. From the 81 factories that were being monitored and at the risk of being reported, 75% stopped charging recruitment fees from migrant workers. This has led to the expansion of the same principle in other sectors in Jordan to evaluate whether the widespread application of recruitment fees can be reduced (ILO, 2021c). Furthermore, a recent case study of a contracting and construction company in Qatar demonstrates that the cost of responsible recruitment is negligible compared to other costs that the company must cover (Ng, 2019). This suggests that companies that seek to extract value by transferring recruitment costs onto workers may not benefit from this process. On the contrary, it has been argued that the adoption of a zero-recruitment fee policy might enhance productivity, and therefore financial gain, not least because workers are not recruited based on

their ability to pay high recruitment fees, but by their capacity for skill development (Ng, 2019). While these insights may hold important implications for business, they are based on limited samples and there is, therefore, scope for further research to assess how national schemes can advance and enforce zero-recruitment fee policies and the role of businesses in monitoring this. There is also scope for more research on how businesses are responding to the Fair Recruitment Initiative – a theme which is underdeveloped in the management field.

**Rights-based recruitment governance.** While multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the FRI have resulted in the formulation of significant state policies and regulations aimed at criminalizing and eliminating recruitment deception, the final responsibility for implementing and enforcing these rules lies at the national level. Some scholars advocate, therefore, the need for improved national regulatory regimes not only to better protect migrant workers from fraudulent recruiters but also that explicitly adopt a rights-based approach (Farbenblum, 2017; Gordon, 2017; Pittman, 2016). According to Farbenblum (2017: p. 154), a sustainable rights-based approach to labor recruitment provides clarity about who is entitled to exercise their rights and who has the obligation to respect and protect these rights – a point which should be enshrined in national law. Essential in this regard is that migrant workers are legally described as rights-holders – which is surprisingly rare in many countries in that public and private entities are usually the legal entities obliged to protect migrants' rights. Farbenblum (2017) also emphasizes the importance of involving migrants in decision-making processes (during the recruitment phase and at a broader policy level), and grievance mechanisms through which migrant workers can be awarded meaningful legal reparations. This helps to reduce migrant worker vulnerability by democratically including them in corporate governance and decision-making processes (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021; Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020). The democratic participation of workers, Reinecke & Donaghey, (2021) argue, can be achieved through trade unions, and has the potential to result in more inclusive and representative corporate decision-

making that better protects workers from exploitation. This kind of worker-driven supply chain governance is exemplified by the collective bargaining agreement between the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), a farm workers union, and the North Carolina Grower's Association (NCGA), the largest employer of agricultural guest workers in the United States. As Gordon, (2015: p. 33–36) reports, the union has been involved in several lawsuits against NCGA, over the years, related to detrimental working conditions and it continues to protect and strengthen supply chain workers' rights in agriculture through unionization.

While many states are already committed to these kinds of measures, it is when they are implemented and enforced that rights-based recruitment governance becomes most efficient and sustainable. Despite some positive case studies, the inclusion of workers in corporate decision making remains rather uncommon. A recent report evaluating 129 companies operating in multiple sectors shows that only 15% of the surveyed companies engage with workers in their due diligence processes (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022). Also, Heinrich, Shire & Mottweiler's (2020) research shows that trade unions' strategies toward (temporary) migrant workers is selective rather than inclusive. They found that status and origin contributed to the formulation of collective agreements that treat migrant workers unfairly in terms of equal pay and employment opportunities in comparison to other workers (Heinrich et al., 2020). Relatedly, it has been demonstrated that trade unions are prone to perceive migrant workers in general terms as workers, whereas as Alberti, Holgate, & Tapia, (2013) highlight, migrant workers encompass specific and intersecting forms of oppression. This means that “the effective involvement of diverse and marginalized workers into unions [is impeded]” (Alberti, Holgate, & Tapia, 2013: p. 4132). These findings highlight the potential of future research on how labor rights protection can be enhanced to ensure the successful inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalized workers into their activities. This could be enhanced by ethical recruitment policies, codes of conduct, worker grievance mechanisms and

worker associations (Verité, 2012; Whilhelm, Kadfak, Bhakoo & Skattang, 2020). It could also be advanced, Shamir (2012: p.76) argues, by shifting from a human rights - to a labor approach - that “targets the structure of labor markets prone to severely exploitative practices”.

**Transnational efforts to reform recruitment industry business models.** As discussed earlier, there are, however, major challenges to regulating transnational labor recruitment in an effective way. This is, in part, because it includes both origin and destination countries, often with distinct laws and policies related to immigration and labor recruitment. As recruitment fees can be charged at any point during the recruitment process, laws prohibiting recruitment fees in origin countries can be easily circumvented by charging them in destination countries where the practice may not be illegal. This has called for transnational efforts to reform recruitment business models through bilateral or multilateral agreements between origin and destination countries (Andrees et al., 2015; Farbenblum, 2017). Kushnirovich et al., (2019), for example, have examined the impact of bilateral agreements between Israel and several other countries, including Thailand, Romania and China, on migrant workers’ rights. They found that although these agreements resulted in significant reductions of recruitment fees, they did not achieve better working conditions and even led to lower wages for migrant workers. These authors argue that one reason for this is that labor recruiters aim to neutralize the financial loss stemming from lower recruitment fees by reducing the salaries of the workers or depriving them from social protection (Kushnirovich et al., 2019: p. 920).

As bilateral or multilateral agreements between origin and destination countries are promising tools to enact rights-based recruitment governance and ensure migrant workers’ wellbeing, further research on how to close governance gaps is needed. The inclusion of activist, human rights and anti-slavery organizations in the formulation and implementation of these agreements might be an interesting starting point, since it already has been pointed out that these actors can serve as successful intermediaries between workers and government

entities to protect and enforce workers' rights (Kaine & Josserand, 2018). Additionally, whilst Allain et. al., (2013) distinguish the types of business models used to facilitate forced labor, further research is needed on how business models in the recruitment sector operate with a view to identifying areas for reform and innovation.

**Licensing.** Licensing schemes have also become a widespread practice to combat fraudulent labor recruiters (Underhill et al., 2018), and are considered by some scholars to be one of the most promising approaches to regulate and monitor labor recruitment (i.e., Allain et.al., 2013; Pittman, 2016; Underhill et al., 2018). An illustrative example of licensing is the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), a government agency in the United Kingdom which grants (and revokes) grants licenses to labor recruiters according to how their practices conform to a series of labor standards, (GLAA, 2022). While the establishment of the GLAA is a positive initiative for protecting workers from coercion and exploitation, its licensing scheme remains restricted to the food sector, which merely leads clandestine labor recruiters to expand their operations to other sectors (Allain et al., 2013). It has also been argued that the GLAA has limited success because it lacks resources due to fragmented labor inspection functions (Mustchin & Lucio, 2020) and has difficulties engaging with the corporate sector (Monciardini, et al., 2021). These or similar problems have also been identified in other countries where agencies seek to implement licensing schemes (Fernandez, 2013; ILO, 2020b, Verité, 2013). This suggests that both governments, businesses and scholars can play a role in improving the efficacy of licensing schemes. For example, governments should consider the centralization of labor inspection entities because this may allow them to allocate sufficient resources to enhance the monitoring and enforcement of labor protection. Businesses, in turn, can benefit from stronger engagement with government entities and more efficient state-financed licensing schemes to overcome the high-cost investments required by traditional risk management tools when detecting and combatting labor abuse (Christ & Helliari, 2021).

Researchers could also assess the effectiveness of licensing schemes in different sectors and countries not only to benchmark best practices but also to facilitate contextually-informed theoretical explanations about the challenges inhibiting the effectiveness of such schemes.

**Technological tools.** In recent years, there has been increased attention toward the use of digital technologies to mitigate recruitment deception. The ILO (2021b) published a report outlining how ICT and digital technologies can be employed to: (i) enable social dialogue, collective voice, worker organization; (ii) capture and analyze data better to understand market needs; (iii) enhance the capacity of enforcement measures; (iv) automate and digitalize administrative procedures; (v) encourage the use of digital inspection tools, information systems for standardization, data storage and processing; (vi) enable institutional actors, such as border enforcement to screen for, monitor and record violations; (vii) facilitate digital record-keeping of financial transactions related to, for example, recruitment fees; (viii) enable secure storage of contracts to prevent contract substitution. Examples include the use of online portals for recruitment purposes and the evaluation of labor recruiters, and web or app-based digital grievance mechanisms for workers to report abuses. One examples is: HelperChoice which is a Hong Kong-based company that has developed a transparent and ethical online (free) platform to match employers with domestic migrant workers. HelperChoice has cooperated with the ILO to promote fair recruitment claiming that it has already assisted around 50,000 migrants to find employment, thereby saving an estimated US\$60 million of illegal recruitment fees (HelperChoice, 2021).

Another technology tool that has been proposed to reduce migrants' vulnerability is the introduction of blockchain technology, with its ability to record transactions and contracts on a network of computers through a distributed ledger (Murray et al., 2021). Christ and Helliard (2021), for example, have evaluated the use of blockchain technology in labor supply chain contexts, arguing that it increases transparency and accountability because migrant workers are

able to include their work contracts and identity documentation on the blockchain via an app. Through blockchain, data storage is immutable, secure and can be accessed by appointed workers and organizations (Christ & Helliard, 2021; Murray, Kuban, Joesfy & Anderson, 2021; Wang, Han, & Beynon-Davies, 2019). Moreover, blockchain can assist businesses, as well as human rights and worker-based organizations, to ensure that recruitment and employment processes conform with international standards. However, as seen in the case of migrant workers who are targeted by unscrupulous labor recruiters, these people often come from poor or uneducated backgrounds and may not have the technical skills required to use blockchain technology. Also, during the recruitment process itself, deception may not be immediately apparent, so workers may only realize that they are being deceived upon arrival at the workplace at which point their mobile devices are sometimes confiscated, meaning that it is too late, or difficult, to act (ILO, 2021b). Whilst the use of blockchain technology could save businesses some costs (Christ & Helliard, 2021), other scholars exercise caution about the additional costs and risks (Murray et al., 2021) involved in the use of this technology for governing labor chains.

Despite these concerns and challenges, blockchain technology is argued to be one of the most promising and innovative tools to detect and eliminate deceptive recruitment in supply chains. For this reason, future research could, for example, examine how the most vulnerable and marginalized groups can be included in the blockchain process, whilst scrutinizing also how deceptive practices could be employed to circumvent the use of the technology. In addition, business and management scholars are well-positioned to further investigate the extent to which blockchain technology can serve to reduce costs for businesses and enable businesses to have more control over their supply chain activities. A further challenge that would benefit from closer research scrutiny relates to criticisms concerning “the market fragmentation caused by the existence of too many [digital]systems [that can] contribute to



user indifference, confusion, and irrelevance” (ILO, 2021b: p. 42 referencing Farbenblum, Gerg & Kintominas, 2018). Whilst many technology mechanisms are devised with good intentions and have brought benefits for responsible and ethical recruitment of migrant workers, there is a need for further research on the efficacy of digital platforms for enabling responsible recruitment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Recognizing the limitations of international labor standards and operational guidelines advanced by the ILO to facilitate the fair recruitment of workers as they seek jobs within or across national borders, in this paper we have sought answers to what constitutes recruitment deception and how this is used to facilitate or inhibit the control and exploitation of labor. Putting the spotlight directly on labor supply chains and how they are organized for the purpose of exploitation, our analytical efforts have focused on providing a conceptual evaluation and an integrative analysis of policy efforts and cross-disciplinary research on the issue of recruitment deception, particularly in the context of temporary and irregular labor markets.

The objective, therefore, has been to bring to center stage the primary tactics and practices used to deceive workers, namely, recruitment fees, misinformation, debt manipulation, and identity document confiscation, as well as the pivotal role played by unscrupulous labor recruiters in this process. The analysis demonstrates the multi-disciplinary, and multi-sited nature of deceptive recruitment. This is especially apparent from the complex assemblage and mix of corporate or government organizational actors, practices and labor recruiters’ strategies that are at play here, and which contribute, whether directly or indirectly, to the continuation and advancement of recruitment deception. The result is a manipulated form of exploitation that seeks to profit from the labor that can be coerced from a person’s

capacity for work – efforts which center on the body but which also embody a significant amount of emotional or psychological abuse.

Our contribution has been to use the synthesis of policy and research material to derive a conceptual framework that captures the intersecting tactics and strategies involved in the organization of labor for exploitation. This responds to Shepherd et al.'s (2022) call for a more cohesive perspective of how actors organize the exploitation of vulnerable labor. These tactics and strategies are organized into four interlinking analytical categories which constitute an 'enmeshment regime' that starts with the abuse of vulnerabilities and then progresses to recruitment deception, exploitation, and coercive control. This conceptual framework draws attention to how workers can be manipulated and exploited through more subtle means, other than physical violence (although physical abuse is still very prevalent). It also displays how exploitation does not start with recruitment per se, but rather, recruitment is the mechanism through which the abuse of vulnerabilities is secured and extended. Also, by undertaking a policy-research synthesis, we have clarified, as called for by Gordon, (2015: p.3), the (market) structures and mechanisms that explain the prevalence and persistence of recruitment deceptions in the global economy. These market structures include labor market deregulation, the dynamics of supply chains, the changing nature of recruitment practices, the power and role of labor recruiters and inadequate national labor laws and policies for ensuring enforcement, and accountability.

Finally, to conclude our analysis, we have reviewed some of the key challenges involved in advancing a policy and research agenda for responsible recruitment. These center on governance gaps, resource constraints, ineffective monitoring mechanisms, poor enforcement, evasive strategies, and transfer of worker liabilities to intermediaries. We have also identified six areas where managerial, policy and research efforts are being targeted to reduce the scope for deceptive recruitment. These include: measures to improve labor supplier selection and

management; policies to enforce zero recruitment fees; rights-based recruitment governance; transnational efforts to reform recruitment industry business models; licensing arrangements and technological tools. In different ways, these six areas provide possibilities for advancing responsible recruitment and the decent work policy and research agenda. They seek to expose and transform some of the market structures that prevent workers, such as Fernando, from benefitting from free placement services as intended in the foundational principles guiding the work of the ILO. Without this exposure and transparency, the placement of people for work purposes will continue to be seen as a commodity for exploitation.

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