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Labor trafficking among migrant populations: a scoping review and qualitative interview study with stakeholders

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Introduction: Labor trafficking is a widespread yet underreported form of exploitation that disproportionately affects migrant populations. Migrants often face coercion, deception, and abuse across various labor sectors, and these circumstances are often exacerbated by structural inequalities and legal protections. There is a pressing need to synthesize existing knowledge and integrate stakeholders' perspectives to inform future prevention and policies.

Objective: This study examines the scope, nature, and thematic trends in the literature on labor trafficking among migrant populations and augments these findings with qualitative insights from stakeholders working directly with trafficked migrant populations.

Methods: A scoping review was conducted following A scoping review was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines. Nineteen peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 were analyzed across four databases. In parallel, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers, researchers, and advocates experienced in labor trafficking. Structural violence theory guided the thematic analysis using Quirkos software.

Results: Seven major themes emerged: (1) informal recruitment networks, (2) hazardous and exploitative working conditions, (3) psychological and physical coercion, (4) economic and structural vulnerability, (5) gender-based vulnerabilities, (6) inadequate legal protections and enforcement gaps, and (7) mental health impacts. The qualitative data highlight the lived realities and systemic challenges trafficked migrants face and help validate and enrich the findings from the scoping review.

Conclusion: Labor trafficking among migrants is driven by economic, legal, and social vulnerabilities. Comprehensive, survivor-centered policies are urgently needed: reforms to recruitment practices, expanded mental health support, and stronger legal frameworks. The study findings call for cross-sectoral collaboration and the integration of migrant voices in program and policy design to combat trafficking for labor exploitation.

KEYWORDS

human trafficking, labor exploitation, migrant workers, occupational health, public policy

1 Introduction

Labor trafficking, also referred to as forced labor or trafficking for labor exploitation, is a severe violation of human rights in which perpetrators intentionally exploit individuals, often those facing socioeconomic hardship and precarious migration status, for personal gain (Clark, 2003). In the United States, the term was first codified in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, whose definition closely aligns with that of the United Nations (United States, 2000). According to Article 3 of this protocol, trafficking involves “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction or fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices like slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (United Nations, 2000, p. 2). Throughout this article, the terms *labor trafficking*, *forced labor*, and *trafficking for labor exploitation* are used interchangeably, as they are consistent with both the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and UN definitions. Such forms of exploitation are pervasive in industries such as construction, agriculture, domestic work, fishing, and sex work, where workers are frequently controlled through debt bondage, threats of violence, or other coercive practices (Brennan, 2014; Gezie et al., 2019; Pocock et al., 2020, 2021; United States, 2000).

Labor trafficking affects millions of people worldwide, disproportionately impacts migrants, and remains one of the most invisible forms of exploitation (Brennan, 2014; Gallagher, 2015; Segarra and Prasad, 2024). Migrant workers often face financial instability and restrictive immigration policies that push them into vulnerable positions, which make them prime targets for traffickers. In the Global South, recruitment agencies, or “middlemen,” often exploit migrants by charging excessive fees or falsely promising good working conditions (Speck et al., 2024). International organizations highlight pre-departure fees charged by labor recruiters as a significant factor contributing to debt bondage, whereby individuals are compelled to work to repay a debt, with most or all their earnings used to cover the loan. This dynamic not only exacerbates migrant vulnerability but also constitutes a form of trafficking and forced labor (International Labour Organization, 2017; International Organization for Migration, 2020). Within the United States, particularly in Texas, which consistently ranks among the states with the highest volumes of trafficking signals and identified cases, proximity to the United States-Mexico border, large migrant flows, and major transit/industry corridors create layered vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit across labor and sex markets (Lane et al., 2024; National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2024). Texas-specific briefings further document the scale of victimization and high-risk sectors, underscoring how economic and housing insecurity, education gaps, and migration-related barriers amplify risk in border-proximate regions (Linares and Robinson, 2021).

To understand how these forms of exploitation persist, a framework must be adopted for the study of structural violence that explains how social mechanisms such as political, legal, and economic systems produce and normalize the conditions of labor trafficking among migrants (Lee, 2016). These systems not only create barriers to protection and justice but also maintain environments in which exploitation becomes routine and invisible. The term *structural violence*

refers to institutionalized social structures, such as poverty, immigration status, ethnicity, and gender inequality, that prevent people from meeting their basic needs (Farmer, 1996). Integrating this framework allows us to analyze why specific populations, particularly migrants with precarious status, are disproportionately exposed to labor trafficking risks. The social structures further compound this vulnerability.

Structural violence is linked to restrictive migration policies and governance regimes that sustain systemic vulnerabilities and account for the conditions that constrain human potential (Galtung, 1969). Within this framework, violence exists when there is a gap between what individuals could achieve and what they are able to achieve, due to structural barriers that limit opportunities and perpetuate harm. This perspective underscores how the Global North’s institutional, political, and governance failures that sustain vulnerability function as forms of structural violence. Although individual traffickers’ actions are overt and reprehensible, broader systems of exploitation, such as unsafe labor conditions, economic marginalization, and restrictive migration policies, are equally implicated. From this standpoint, failing to address preventable harms is not merely passive neglect but an active manifestation of structural violence; such failure entrenches the conditions under which labor trafficking persists and normalizes the suffering of already marginalized populations. Consequently, states, policymakers, and global governance institutions bear direct responsibility for transforming these structures to reduce harm and promote justice.

Responses to policies vary, with some proving more effective in preventing exploitation and aiding survivors (U.S. Congress, 2015; Kyriakides and Demetriades, 2022; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023). However, traditional approaches to human trafficking, typically focused on the investigation and prosecution of offenders, fall short in the prevention, protection, and healing of those experiencing trafficking (Choiriyah et al., 2024). Recent research findings emphasize the need for multi-sector collaboration to combat labor trafficking and protect migrant workers (Fabbri et al., 2023). This includes paying closer attention not only to traffickers but also to the role of employers and recruitment agencies in sustaining exploitative practices. Our analysis focuses instead on structural and policy conditions driving labor trafficking. Despite the growing recognition of trafficking as a global concern, the evidence base remains fragmented, particularly in understanding how structural conditions perpetuate exploitation among migrants. By combining a global scoping review with qualitative interviews in the United States, we sought to capture both the breadth of existing evidence and the grounded insights of stakeholders (researchers, service providers, and advocates) working directly with survivors. This dual approach strengthens the analysis: the scoping review maps international patterns and knowledge gaps, while the interviews contextualize these findings within the lived realities of service provision in the United States. Taken together, these two sources of evidence allow for a more rigorous and policy-relevant understanding of labor trafficking, bridging global perspectives with national realities.

2 Methods

2.1 Study design

This scoping review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (Page et al., 2021) and followed the methodological framework outlined by Arksey and

O'Malley (2005) with enhancements proposed by Levac et al. (2010). The study aimed to map existing knowledge on labor trafficking among migrant populations and to complement the literature findings with qualitative insights from service providers, researchers, and advocates who had experience working with migrant survivors or victims of human trafficking.

2.2 Research questions

Research questions suitable for a scoping review were developed using the Population, Concept, and Context framework (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2015; Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020), focusing on the population of global migrants, the concept of human trafficking, and the international context. The two research questions guiding this study were: What is the scope, nature, and breadth of the literature on labor trafficking among migrant populations? How do the experiences of stakeholders working with migrant populations and victims of labor trafficking align with, challenge, or expand upon the themes identified in the existing literature?

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they were published in English or Spanish, focused on international or cross-border aspects of trafficking, and explicitly addressed labor trafficking among migrant populations. Eligible articles had to be empirical investigations examining risk factors, vulnerabilities, intervention strategies, or policy responses. We also considered studies that provided critical insights into the characteristics, challenges, and risk mitigation strategies relevant to international migration and human trafficking. Exclusion criteria ruled out studies that did not focus on labor trafficking among migrants, lacked full-text access, or were opinion pieces, editorials, or otherwise unrelated to the research questions. These parameters ensured that the included studies offered both empirical evidence and meaningful perspectives on the complex intersection of migration and labor trafficking.

The review was restricted to peer-reviewed articles published in English and Spanish, reflecting both the linguistic feasibility and the research team's capacity. These two languages capture a substantial and diverse body of literature on international migration and labor trafficking, particularly from regions such as Latin America and the United States. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that excluding studies in other languages (e.g., French, Portuguese, Mandarin) is a limitation, as it may preclude valuable regional perspectives. Non-empirical or inaccessible studies were excluded to maintain methodological rigor and relevance to the research objectives. Because labor trafficking is an evolving issue, no time frame was applied, allowing for the broadest possible inclusion of literature. This approach aligns with scoping review standards, which prioritize mapping the extent of available knowledge rather than analyzing trends over time.

2.4 Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted in Medline Ovid, Embase, Scopus, and Cochrane databases from July to September 2024. Search terms were developed in consultation with a research librarian in both

English and Spanish, incorporating Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) such as “human trafficking,” “transients and migrants,” “emigrants and immigrants,” “undocumented immigrants,” and “refugees.” Additional keyword combinations aligned with the Population, Concept, and Context framework, including terms such as “international migrant/s AND human trafficking AND cross-border trafficking” (“migrantes internacionales AND trata de personas AND trata transfronterizo”). The full search strategy in English and Spanish is provided in [Appendix](#).

2.5 Screening and selection process

All retrieved studies were imported into Covidence systematic review software (Veritas Health Innovation, Melbourne, Australia), where duplicates were removed. Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts to exclude ineligible records, followed by full-text screening based on the predefined eligibility criteria ([Figure 1](#) shows the evidence selection process). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or in consultation with the principal investigator. This review did not include grey literature, such as reports from government agencies, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The focus was solely on peer-reviewed empirical research, to ensure methodological rigor and consistency in the quality of synthesized evidence.

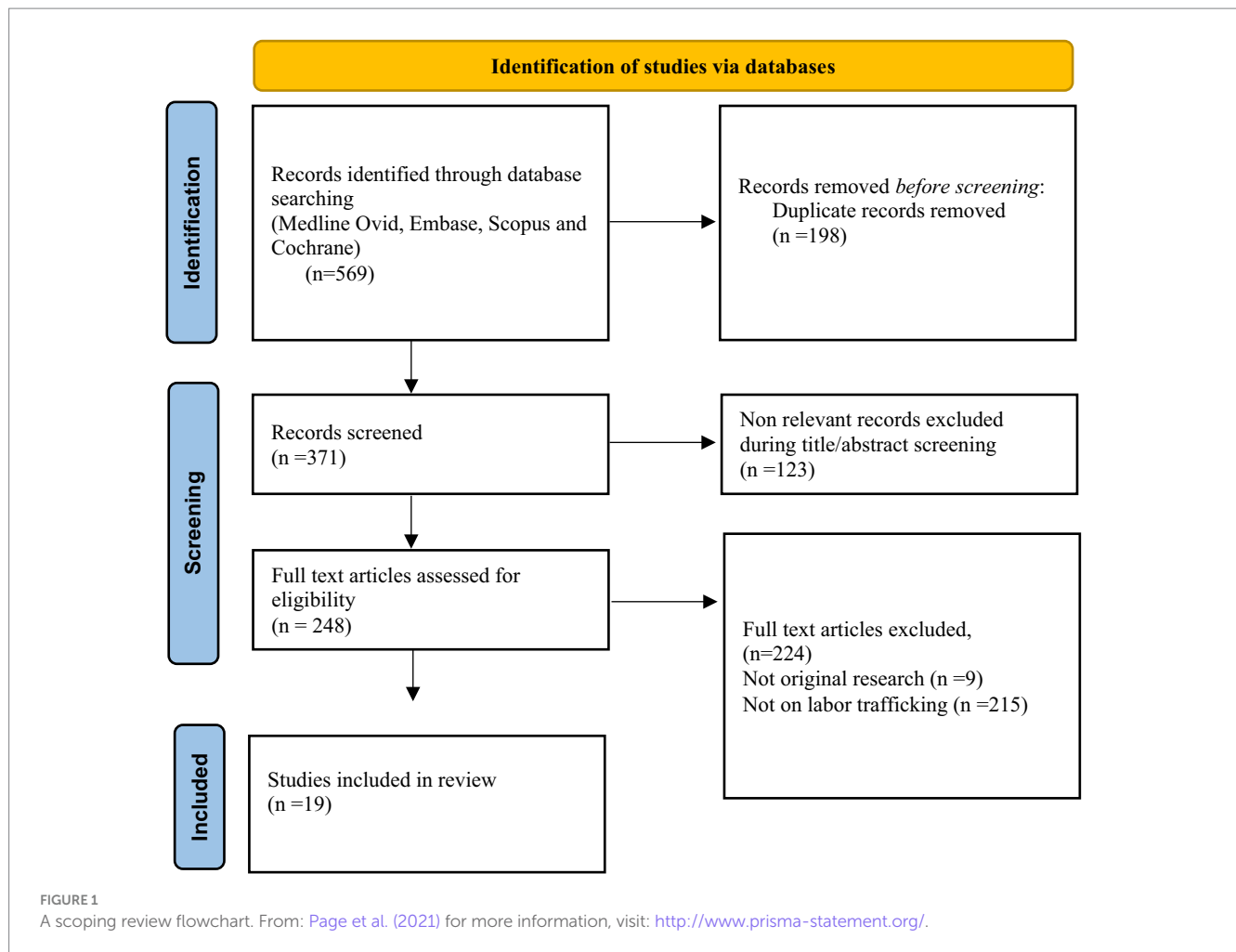
2.6 Data extraction and charting

Data were extracted using a Microsoft Excel template created by the research team and aligned with the objectives of this review, capturing study characteristics such as author, year, country, study design, methods, and sample. Other extracted information included population demographics (e.g., gender, migrant group, country of origin and destination, legal status), type and nature of labor trafficking experiences, risk factors and vulnerabilities, prevention and intervention strategies, policy and legal responses, and health impacts.

2.7 Qualitative component: stakeholder interviews

In conjunction with the scoping review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including service providers, researchers, and advocates working with migrant survivors of labor trafficking. The interviewees were selected in Texas, because this state has been consistently identified as a key entry and transit point for extracontinental migrants, including those from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, who increasingly use the United States-Mexico border as their access route (Yates and Bolter, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024), making it a relevant site for recruiting stakeholders. All interviewees held key positions in the care, support, research, or case management of survivors of labor trafficking, and their experience encompassed both local and international contexts. This perspective allowed interviewees to offer insights grounded in United States-based experiences, which intersect with transnational dynamics but have limited broader global generalizability.

To ensure ethical recruitment, participants were approached through transparent, voluntary, and respectful means. Participants



could withdraw at any point without penalty or explanation, and no incentives were provided, which helped to prevent any undue influence or coercion. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive (Campbell et al., 2020) and snowball (Sadler et al., 2010) sampling. All potential participants received detailed information about the study's aims, confidentiality measures, and their rights prior to agreeing to participate. In addition to snowball sampling, three separate email attempts were made to directly reach out to potential participants, ensuring a wider range of perspectives.

2.8 Data collection

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams using a semi-structured interview guide, which included questions on perceptions of labor trafficking among migrant populations, risk factors and systemic challenges, effectiveness of current interventions and policies, and recommendations for future research, policy, and practice. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted approximately 48 min and were conducted in English between September and December 2024. The lead author, a trained qualitative researcher with expertise in migration and human trafficking, conducted the interviews. Two

research assistants, a nutrition undergraduate student and a Master of Public Health student, were also involved in data collection. The lead author trained the research assistants in qualitative methods and analysis. Data saturation (Mwita, 2022) was reached after 14 interviews, as no new themes emerged, and responses became repetitive. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of emergent themes, bringing the total to 17. This approach helps ensure that no new themes emerge while avoiding unnecessary redundancy in data collection.

2.9 Data analysis

For the scoping review, extracted data were synthesized using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Descriptive statistics were used where applicable. For the qualitative component, interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis and Quirkos software (version 2.5.3) to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights. A coding framework was developed iteratively based on an initial review of transcripts. To integrate the findings from both components, the results of the scoping review and qualitative interviews were analyzed in parallel. Key themes emerging from qualitative data were compared with those identified in the literature, allowing for triangulation of findings

(Bans-Akutey and Tiimub, 2021). This approach enabled a multidimensional analysis of labor trafficking among migrant populations by integrating empirical evidence and professional insights.

2.10 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the interview component was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Blinded Institution] (Approval Number: HSC-SN-23-0975) in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. All data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, and interview transcripts and participant information were stored in a secure, restricted-access Excel file accessible to only the lead author. Given the sensitive nature of labor trafficking, specific measures were taken to minimize potential distress for interview participants. Interviewees were informed in advance about the topics to be discussed, allowing them to prepare for potentially difficult conversations. They were also given the option to skip any questions or terminate the interview at any point without providing a reason.

3 Results

3.1 Demographics of qualitative interviews

Seventeen participants completed the interviews. The mean age was 45 years (range = 30–68, SD = 11.24). The majority were female ($n = 14$). Most participants resided in Texas ($n = 15$). The majority held a master's degree ($n = 7$), followed by a doctorate ($n = 4$) and a bachelor's degree ($n = 3$). These included executive directors and senior directors ($n = 8$), researchers ($n = 5$), outreach specialists ($n = 2$), and other roles such as clinical managers and volunteers ($n = 2$). The participants worked in various contexts, such as NGOs, government agencies for labor or migration protection, community service centers, hospitals, universities, and research centers.

3.2 Characteristics of sources of evidence

This scoping review synthesized 19 articles on labor trafficking among migrant populations published between 2014 and 2024. Study designs were predominantly qualitative ($n = 7$) and quantitative ($n = 7$), with five employing mixed methods. Across studies, participant framing varied: nine articles focused on victims of labor trafficking, eight on survivors, and two on individuals at risk. For this review, we used *victim* to denote those currently experiencing labor trafficking, *survivor* for those no longer trafficked, and *at risk* for potential migrants exposed to trafficking vulnerabilities. Although all studies centered on labor trafficking, several also documented co-occurring forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation ($n = 8$) and child exploitation ($n = 2$). Most studies examined female participants ($n = 8$), several included both men and women ($n = 6$), and four focused exclusively on men ($n = 4$). Notably, no Spanish-language or US-based publications met the inclusion criteria; articles

published in the United States were typically policy-oriented or mixed-population (immigrant and non-immigrant) reports, lacked primary data, and/or did not specifically investigate labor trafficking (see Table 1).

Across the migration continuum, labor trafficking was most frequently reported during transit ($n = 14$) but was also documented at the destination ($n = 10$), pre-migration ($n = 7$), and recruitment stages ($n = 2$). Reported perpetrators included employers ($n = 11$), trafficking networks ($n = 7$), recruitment agents ($n = 4$), other individuals ($n = 2$), and police ($n = 1$). Table 2 summarizes key study-level findings. Thematic analysis identified seven cross-cutting themes: (1) the role of informal recruitment networks in facilitating labor trafficking; (2) occupational hazards and exploitative working conditions; (3) psychological and physical abuse as mechanisms of coercion; (4) economic vulnerability and structural inequality as core risk factors; (5) gendered dimensions of labor trafficking; (6) inadequate legal protections and gaps in law enforcement; and (7) mental health consequences linked to labor trafficking (see Figure 2).

3.3 Role of informal recruitment networks in facilitation labor trafficking

One of the most significant drivers of labor trafficking is the migrants' reliance on informal recruitment networks. This reliance constitutes a form of structural violence (Galtung, 1990) in which the absence of accessible, affordable, and transparent migratory regimes systematically pushes migrants into high-risk migration pathways. Restrictive migration regimes, designed primarily by the Global North, limit safe and affordable legal pathways, thereby forcing migrants from the Global South to depend on informal networks that expose them to exploitation (Klaus and Pachocka, 2019). In rural areas, where formal migration agencies are often out of reach, migrants turn to brokers, informal facilitators, or community contacts (Busza et al., 2023). These intermediaries often lure potential migrants with false pretenses: lucrative jobs, legal migration, and reasonable fees abroad. After migration, traffickers proceed to charge exorbitant fees, falsify migrants' documents, and collaborate with corrupt local officials to exploit and restrict migrants' movements (Busza et al., 2023; Pocock et al., 2021).

Lydia, an advocacy coordinator, described how “many workers arrive through labor contractors who charge excessive fees and control their movements, effectively trapping them in debt bondage.” Similarly, John, a rights specialist, noted that workers are often “promised false job offers and told they will work in a hotel, someone's home, or a restaurant, only to find themselves in completely different and exploitative situations.” These testimonies illustrate that recruitment deception is not a side effect of migration but a deliberate mechanism for placing migrants in exploitative positions. The normalization of informal recruitment in certain sending communities reflects structural violence (Galtung, 1990), where exploitation is seen as a “normal” cost of migration rather than a preventable injustice. Ava, a lead advocate, stressed that “if they hire a smuggler, they are at a much higher risk of being trafficked,” underscoring how community perceptions can mask the risks inherent in these channels.

In the fishing and domestic work industries, traffickers and recruitment brokers play a central role in deceiving workers about wages, working conditions, and contract terms (Pocock et al., 2021;

TABLE 1 Characteristics of included studies.

Author and year	Study design	Victims or survivors	Gender	Country of origin	Destination	Where in the migration process did trafficking occur?	Who is the trafficker?
Busza et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Victims	Mixed	Ethiopia	Middle East, African Gulf States	Pre-migration, transit	Recruitment agents
Pocock et al. (2018)	Mixed Methods	Victims	Male	Cambodia, Myanmar	Thailand, Indonesia, Mauritius	Transit, destination	Employers
Pocock et al. (2020)	Mixed Methods	Victims	Female	India	Internal migration within India	Pre-migration	Recruitment agents, employers
Jowett et al. (2021)	Quantitative	Survivors	Mixed	Various (37 nations)	United Kingdom	Pre-migration, transit	Varied (state and non-state actors)
Kissane et al. (2014)	Quantitative	Survivors	Mixed	Various (18 countries)	United Kingdom	Pre-migration, transit	Varied (state and non-state actors)
Zimmerman et al. (2021)	Mixed Methods	At-risk individuals	Female	India, Nepal, Bangladesh	Gulf States, internal migration	Pre-migration	Recruitment agents, employers
López-Domene et al. (2019)	Qualitative	Victims	Female	Sub-Saharan Africa, Maghreb	Spain	pre-migration, transit	Trafficking networks, madams
Lumley-Sapanski et al. (2023)	Mixed Methods	Survivors	Female	Sudan, neighboring regions (e.g., Eritrea)	Sudan (transit and destination), Libya, Europe	Transit, destination	Trafficking networks, police (corruption cases)
Gezie et al. (2019)	Quantitative	Victims	Mixed	Ethiopia	Multiple	Recruitment, transit, destination	Trafficking networks
Cahyono and Embi (2020)	Qualitative	Victims	Unspecified	Indonesia	Malaysia	Recruitment, transit	Employers
Harrison et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Victims	Male	Myanmar	Bangladesh	Transit	Trafficking networks
Pocock et al. (2016)	Quantitative	Survivors	Male	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam	Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam	Transit	Employers
Pocock et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Victims	Male	Southeast Asia	Thailand	Transit and Destination	Employers
Wickramage et al. (2017)	Quantitative	Victims	Female	Sri Lanka	Middle East	Destination	Employers
Winarso and Silitonga (2021)	Mixed-methods	At-risk population	Female	Indonesia	Various (unspecified)	Transit and destination	Employers
Price et al. (2022)	Quantitative	Survivors	Mixed	South Africa and neighboring countries	South Africa	Transit and destination	Employers, trafficking networks,
Baldwin et al. (2015)	Qualitative	Survivors	Female	10 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America	United States	Destination	Employers, trafficking networks,
Busza et al. (2017)	Qualitative	Survivors	Female	Ethiopia	Dubai, Saudi Arabia,& Qatar	Transit and destination	Recruiters, employers

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author and year	Study design	Victims or survivors	Gender	Country of origin	Destination	Where in the migration process did trafficking occur?	Who is the trafficker?
Brady et al. (2021)	Quantitative	Survivors	Mixed	Multiple countries including Nigeria, Albania, India, Nepal, Vietnam, China, South Africa, Kenya, & Philippines	UK	Transit and destination	Trafficking networks

Winarso and Silitonga, 2021). Some migrants are even sold from one employer to another, compounding their vulnerability (Pocock et al., 2018). From Farmer’s perspective on structural violence (1996), this harm is not caused by one “bad actor” but emerges from systemic inequities in migration governance, particularly the restrictive migration policies of the Global North. This dynamic reflects a colonial legacy of labor extraction, where Northern economies depend on cheap, precarious Southern labor while misplacing the risks of migration onto migrants themselves. Restrictive migration policies are often designed by wealthy countries to exploit migrants of lower economic backgrounds, systematically channeling migrants into precarious arrangements that guarantee employer control and limit workers’ autonomy by preventing collective resistance to exploitation (Quirk et al., 2020). The qualitative data collected here not only confirm patterns identified in the literature but also expose the intimate, human-level dynamics, the false promises, the community-level normalization, and the direct voices of those working with victims.

3.4 Occupational hazards and exploitative working conditions

Migrants subjected to labor trafficking often endure hazardous and inhumane working conditions, including excessive hours without rest, lack of protective equipment, and denial of medical care (Pocock et al., 2016, 2018). In construction, fishing, and agriculture, workers frequently suffer severe injuries such as deep cuts, chronic back pain, and exposure to extreme weather. Domestic workers are often confined to employers’ homes, laboring 14–18 h daily without adequate food, pay, or rest (Wickramage et al., 2017). Jose, a senior caseworker, recalled interviewing “a woman who was made to work at a restaurant for 11.5 h a day, 7 days a week, and her partner taking all her money and locking away their documents.” Her partner controlled her finances and documents, a common dynamic in labor trafficking cases, these findings align with those of a study by Wickramage et al. (2017), in which over 85% of women had their passports confiscated by employers, and nearly two-thirds were restricted from leaving their workplace. These findings illustrate how these conditions--excessive working hours, financial control, and restricted mobility--continue to entrap and facilitate the exploitation of migrants subjected to labor trafficking.

Exploitation also extends to employer-provided housing. An executive director described visiting farm labor housing “not just surrounded by chain-link fences, but... locked,” where “gates are locked on the weekend unless [employers] just happen to take them to the local Walmart... preventing their interactions within the community.” Such arrangements isolate workers from the outside world, remove them from normal human interactions, and cut them off from sources of help. Peter, a legal advocate, added, “The more isolated someone feels, the fewer secure attachments they have to prevent them from having escalating relationships with dangerous people.” This reveals an underexplored dimension of social isolation as an occupational hazard that exacerbates vulnerability beyond physical risks.

Restricted in their ability to interact with others both in their place of employment and after their working hours, migrants remain trapped under physical and social restraint with no means of reporting exploitative working conditions (Wickramage et al., 2017). The decline in labor inspections has coincided with the rise of “voluntary business compliance protocols, which are designed to encourage rather than enforce compliance” (Quirk et al., 2020, p. 8); these protocols reinforce structural violence by permitting employers to police their own labor practices. This policy shift is emblematic of Global North governance regimes that privilege corporate self-regulation over enforceable protections (Kuptsch and Mieres, 2025). In Galtung’s (1969) framework, such conditions represent direct and structural violence, as the harm is embedded in economic and political structures prioritizing profit and employers over worker safety. Moreover, these arrangements reproduce colonial labor hierarchies, in which Southern workers are constructed as expendable and “temporary,” legitimizing their exclusion from full labor rights in the North (Ferguson and McNally, 2015). By integrating these perspectives, qualitative interviews enrich the literature by revealing not only which hazards exist but also how they interact with social factors to deepen exploitation.

3.5 Psychological and physical abuse as mechanisms of coercion

Trafficked workers are often subjected to psychological control, including threats of deportation, coercion, and constant surveillance (Baldwin et al., 2015; Pocock et al., 2016; Price et al., 2022). Galtung’s (1969) theory clarifies that this form of power is not just a result of

TABLE 2 Summary of key findings.

Author and year	Key findings
Busza et al. (2023)	There are four main types of intermediaries: formal and informal facilitators, recruiters, and brokers, each handling different stages of migration. Informal facilitators are preferred by many migrants because they offer faster, cheaper services. However, they often circumvent regulations, forge documents, and collaborate with local authorities to facilitate migration.
Pocock et al. (2018)	Long-haul fishermen, primarily trafficked to Indonesia, endured harsher conditions, spending a median of 23 months in trafficking situations compared to 5 months for short-haul workers. Many suffered serious injuries (49.5% long-haul, 40% short haul), lacked safety equipment, and had little to no rest, working a median of 21 h per day. Over half experienced severe violence, including threats of being killed, and some were sold between boats or abandoned when sick.
Pocock et al. (2020)	Female migrants in Ganjam, Odisha, primarily migrated due to economic hardship (73.9%) and worked in informal sectors like construction (25.3%), domestic work (24%), and agriculture (13.9%). Many faced vulnerabilities, with 4.35% reporting forced labor and 67.9% having no formal education. Limited awareness of rights was common, as only 9.7% received pre-migration information.
Jowett et al. (2021)	Half of the participants were trafficking victims. Survivors had greater healthcare needs but faced barriers to medical and psychological care. Post-migration stressors, including destitution, legal insecurity, and homelessness, worsened trauma and heightened the risk of re-exploitation.
Kissane et al. (2014)	27.6% of study participants had experienced human trafficking, often alongside domestic violence or torture. Trafficking victims exhibited high levels of complex PTSD (cPTSD) symptoms, including dissociation, interpersonal difficulties, and trust issues. Labor trafficking survivors experienced trauma earlier (median age 12) and for a longer duration (median 12 years).
Zimmerman et al. (2021)	Pre-migration training failed to change migration behavior or reduce trafficking risks. Many women still relied on informal brokers despite advice to use formal channels. Migration decisions were often influenced by family or recruiters, limiting autonomy. Ultimately, the risk of forced labor depended more on destination country policies than on individual awareness or training.
López-Domene et al. (2019)	Women irregular migrants (WIMs) often face sexual exploitation and forced labor, with trafficking networks controlling their reproductive choices through forced pregnancies or illegal abortions. Many are coerced into prostitution using witchcraft, voodoo, and violence. Upon arriving in Spain, WIMs are often traumatized and hide signs of abuse out of fear and shame. Traffickers frequently exploit the mother–child relationship in trafficking schemes.
Lumley-Sapanski et al. (2023)	The pandemic worsened vulnerabilities in trafficking and forced labor, especially for informal and domestic workers. With legal migration routes closed, many turned to smugglers, increasing their risk of exploitation. Corrupt officials, including police and border security, further exploited migrants. Instability from the transitional government weakened anti-trafficking efforts, allowing traffickers greater impunity.
Gezie et al. (2019)	Over half (50.89%) of Ethiopian returnees were victims of human trafficking, with women particularly vulnerable to labor exploitation in domestic servitude and sex work. Those smuggled at departure were four times more likely to be trafficked. Returners from poorer households and rural areas faced higher risks due to limited legal migration options and misinformation about overseas opportunities.
Cahyono and Embi (2020)	Many Indonesian workers enter Malaysia without legal documentation, making them vulnerable to exploitative labor conditions, including withheld wages, physical abuse, and confiscation of identity documents. Despite Indonesian authorities' administrative actions and cross-agency cooperation, labor trafficking continues due to enforcement gaps and Malaysia's high demand for cheap labor.
Harrison et al. (2024)	Adolescent Rohingya boys are frequently forced into hazardous labor, many are trafficked within Bangladesh with false promises of education or employment, while some are coerced into drug trafficking, sometimes by their own families. Leaving refugee camps in search of work increases their risk of trafficking, abduction, and exploitation. Despite their high vulnerability, humanitarian efforts primarily focus on girls, leaving boys with limited protection and support.
Pocock et al. (2016)	Trafficked men and boys, particularly in the Greater Mekong Subregion's fishing industry, faced extreme exploitation, working an average of 18.8 h per day. Nearly half (48.2%) experienced physical violence, while 37.8% suffered severe abuse, including beatings, threats with weapons, and sexual violence. Most trafficked workers (83.1%) lacked identity documents, making escape and legal recourse nearly impossible. Non-fluent migrants were at higher risk of violence and exploitation.
Pocock et al. (2021)	Migrant fishermen often fall into forced labor due to deceptive recruitment and debt bondage. Boat captains and industry representatives claim they are deceived by brokers or forced to detain workers at sea to recover wage advances. Labor inspections are hindered by a lack of trained interpreters, flawed migrant registration systems, and corruption, as enforcement officials often overlook violations in exchange for bribes.
Wickramage et al. (2017)	A majority (85%) of women had their passports confiscated by employers, preventing them from leaving. Nearly two-thirds were restricted from leaving their workplace, and over 75% were denied wages agreed upon, with some not paid at all. Most (80%) were forced to work excessively long hours (14–18 h per day) without rest. Physical abuse was common (60%), resulting in injuries, while 80% exhibited signs of depression, anxiety, or trauma. Some women were deceived about their jobs and coerced into commercial sex work upon arrival.
Winarso and Silitonga (2021)	Indonesian migrant workers, especially women, face high risks of exploitation, extortion, and abuse due to human trafficking. Limited reproductive health knowledge increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse and sexually transmitted infections. The Indonesian government has failed to provide adequate protection, while weak legal frameworks in both sending and receiving countries allow trafficking and forced labor to persist.

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author and year	Key findings
Price et al. (2022)	A study in Cape Town, South Africa, found a 17% lifetime trafficking rate among surveyed individuals, with many subjected to forced labor through deception and coercion. Traffickers controlled victims using threats, withheld wages, and confiscated identity documents. The study emphasizes the need for better identification tools and stronger legal protections to combat labor trafficking.
Baldwin et al. (2015)	Trafficked laborers, especially domestic workers, face severe psychological coercion, including social isolation, constant surveillance, and threats, preventing escape. Employers use manipulation tactics to maintain control, forcing long working hours, extreme exhaustion, and deprivation of food and medical care. Psychological abuse, such as verbal degradation and forced compliance, is as harmful as physical coercion. Some trafficked workers are falsely accused of crimes to deter them from seeking help or legal protection.
Busza et al. (2017)	Many Ethiopian women migrating for domestic work face severe exploitation, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Limited knowledge of labor rights makes them more vulnerable, while confidence and assertiveness help protect against mistreatment. Many workers are denied communication access, restricting their ability to seek help. Learning Arabic improves their ability to negotiate fair treatment.
Brady et al. (2021)	Trafficked individuals face significant barriers to mental health treatment, including fear and unpredictable needs. Forced labor victims often endure captivity, restricted movement, and deprivation of necessities. The study emphasizes the need for integrated services combining legal, social, and mental health support for labor trafficking survivors.



individual cruelty, but of a kind of structure-making. These mechanisms operate within arrangements in immigration and labor laws, such as visas and work permits that tie migrants to a specific employer with disproportionate power (Arrocha, 2013; Galtung, 1969). These visa regimes, largely established in Global North labor markets, ensure a steady flow of dependent workers from the Global South while systematically undermining their bargaining power (Kuptsch and Mieres, 2025).

Jasson, a human rights advisor, described how “*pregnancy is used as a major leverage point... every girl has a quota they have to make, or something bad will happen to them.*” This testimony highlights how pregnancy becomes a tool of manipulation that reinforces fear and compliance. By exploiting reproductive vulnerability, traffickers can exert deep emotional control, using threat and guilt as means to ensure submission and forced fulfillment of labor demands. Julie, a protection officer, observed that “*when the trafficker beats her, he’ll flip it and tell her it’s her fault... that kind of manipulation is common in trafficking situations.*” These narratives demonstrate that coercion is not solely physical but also psychological, aimed at breaking agency and reinforcing dependence. Applying Galtung’s (1969) definition of structural violence, this form of coercion is not just a form of abuse, but a deliberate impairment of fundamental human needs by actors of power (traffickers). The trauma associated with these experiences is long-lasting; immigration and labor law often reinforce these unequal power dynamics, making psychological abuse both recurring and normalized (Quirk et al., 2020). The dependency created by North-designed labor migration schemes illustrates how the very governance structures that regulate mobility reproduce the coercive conditions that traffickers exploit (Klaus and Pachocka, 2019).

3.6 Economic vulnerability and structural inequality as core risk factors

Economic hardship is one of the primary factors pushing individuals toward high-risk migration paths. Many trafficked individuals originate from economically disadvantaged backgrounds where employment opportunities are scarce. For instance, in Odisha, India, 73.9% of female migrants cited financial difficulties as their main reason for seeking work abroad (Pocock et al., 2020). In many cases, migrants are fully aware of the potential risks associated with informal migration channels but feel that they have no alternative owing to economic desperation (Gezie et al., 2019; Lumley-Sapanski et al., 2023; Pocock et al., 2020). In the case of Rohingya, male Rohingya adolescents (from Myanmar) often fall victim to forced child labor due to income-related violence carried out by family members after migrating (Harrison et al., 2024). These adolescents are not only exposed to traumatic events but also face an ongoing risk of being labor trafficked and enduring adverse experiences because they are unaccompanied or separated from their parents upon migration, or from “households where children assume primary responsibility for the household, households with elderly, ill, or disabled caregivers, and female-headed households” (Harrison et al., 2024, p. 9). The lack of formal education and legal literacy further increases their vulnerability (Harrison et al., 2024; Pocock et al., 2020).

Structural inequality refers to vulnerability arising from one’s context, which limits individuals’ ability to make choices (Galtung, 1969; Quesada et al., 2011). Jose, a senior caseworker, described the

intersection of factors clearly: “*It’s like experiencing domestic violence and being poor, and especially being a woman of color in this country... when you add the layer of migration and legal status and the lack of support, it’s a lot of vulnerability.*” In Ethiopia, migrants who were smuggled out of the country were four times more likely to experience labor trafficking than those who used regulated migration pathways (Busza et al., 2017; Gezie et al., 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, structural inequality and economic vulnerabilities worsened with the shutdown of legal migration routes and increased unemployment rates in many countries of origin (Landry et al., 2021). As a result, many potential migrants turned to high-risk migration pathways, which exposed them to labor trafficking (Lumley-Sapanski et al., 2023). This demonstrates how migration regimes in the Global North, which closed borders during the pandemic while continuing to demand cheap labor, intensified South-to-North inequalities by forcing workers into informal markets (Klaus and Pachocka, 2019; Kuptsch and Mieres, 2025). These economic vulnerabilities and structural inequalities are not natural but are the direct outcome of unjust global policies preventing people from migrating to meet their basic needs (Lee, 2016). Structural violence is produced by maintaining scarcity and vulnerabilities in lower income countries; these circumstances ensure a steady supply of cheap, expendable migrant labor for wealthier countries (Quirk et al., 2020). This arrangement highlights a Global North–South dependency, whereby Southern labor is rendered precarious and disposable, while Northern economies reap the benefits of suppressed labor costs (Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Lydia, an advocacy coordinator, noted that “*mixed-status workers are predominantly men... often living below the poverty level in Texas. These characteristics together really formulate a vulnerable population.*” A health services coordinator, Brittany, added: “*I do not think I ever worked with anyone who wasn’t in some type of financial vulnerability.*” These testimonies confirm and humanize the findings reported in the literature, illustrating how economic precarity, language barriers and migration status intertwine to intensify dependence, limit access to support, and increase exposure to labor exploitation. Framing these vulnerabilities as forms of violence (Christie et al., 2001) shifts the ethical perspective: vulnerabilities are not natural outcomes but foreseeable consequences of the Global North’s policy and governance failures that warrant structural change. These systems persist because they serve the interests of economic and political elites (Quirk et al., 2020), illustrating how structural violence is reproduced through governance arrangements that normalize precarity.

3.7 Gendered dimensions of labor trafficking

Labor trafficking affects both women and men, although the forms of vulnerability differ owing to socially constructed gender roles and expectations. Girls are often removed from school at an early age to assist with domestic or agricultural work. This reflects patriarchal expectations that women should prioritize home and caregiving responsibilities over formal education. From the lens of structural violence, this early denial of schooling systematically deprives women of the basic foundations of education, knowledge, and resources, thereby obstructing their ability to meet basic human needs and reinforcing their long-term vulnerability to trafficking (Galtung,

1990), particularly in sectors such as domestic work, where labor is undervalued, low paid, and culturally perceived as an extension of women's "natural" roles (Winarso and Silitonga, 2021; López-Domene et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2021). Chris, a clinical supervisor, observed that *"women of all ages are vulnerable."* Brittany, a health services coordinator, noted that *"sometimes... gender roles will perpetuate violence against women."* Patriarchal norms encourage docility and discourage complaint, which can perpetuate exploitative conditions and debt bondage. Some women are coerced into sex work under false promises of legitimate employment or forced into pregnancies and often denied reproductive healthcare (López-Domene et al., 2019; Wickramage et al., 2017). Cultural violence compounds these risks, manifesting through threats of witchcraft or voodoo and manipulation of the mother-child relationship, which can deter women from escaping trafficking situations (Galtung, 1990; López-Domene et al., 2019; Shannon et al., 2017; Swingewood, 2014). For women with children, structural barriers compound the risks. Jasson, a human rights advisor, observed, *"There's not a single safe house [in Texas]...that will let a [trafficked] woman bring her kids,"* with only *"two residential houses in the entire country"* allowing it. This arrangement forces women to choose between safety and custody, further trapping them in exploitation.

Men and boys are also made vulnerable to labor trafficking, particularly in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and fishing. Jose, a senior caseworker, explained that *"specifically men...tend to be victimized, and they do not report it... not going to report something that makes them look weak."* Patriarchal expectations that men serve as primary breadwinners compel them to accept any employment opportunity, including hazardous or exploitative work abroad, even at a young age. The very nature of a patriarchal perspective socially brackets and limits the context in which men and boys can navigate life; it limits choice and discourages them from reporting abuse (Galtung, 1990). Social norms pressure men to endure hardship without complaint and avoid seeking help, as doing so may be seen as weak or a failure to fulfill their provider role. These expectations contribute both to men and boys entering trafficking situations and remaining in them, despite abuse, injury, or exploitation (Pocock et al., 2018). Jose, a senior caseworker, confirmed cases *"targeting of young boys... for forced manual labor."*

These gendered vulnerabilities are further structured by migration regimes. Northern economies create demand for feminized domestic labor and masculinized manual labor, while Southern migrants are supplied under conditions of precarity that reinforce patriarchal expectations (International Organization for Migration, 2025; Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Thus, the Global North-South dynamic not only maintains cheap labor flows but also entrenches gendered exploitation through global labor markets. These patterns illustrate that vulnerabilities to labor trafficking are shaped not only by biological sex, but by gendered expectations which determine how men and women are valued, treated and exploited within the labor system. Women's unpaid and low-valued labor, combined with social pressures to remain compliant, increases their risk of exploitation. Men's role as providers, along with the expectation to endure hardship silently, similarly places them at risk of exploitation in labor-intensive sectors. Recognizing these dynamics allows for a comprehensive understanding of gendered vulnerabilities in labor trafficking that goes beyond focusing exclusively on women or sexual exploitation.

3.8 Inadequate legal protections and gaps in law enforcement

Weak enforcement of migrant labor laws and ineffective victim reporting systems contribute to the persistence of labor trafficking. Peter, a legal advocate, recounted, *"Run to what? Run to...there's nowhere to go...the fleeting moment that a victim has the feeling 'I can run now,' there's no resource that can immediately help you."* The lack of safe reporting pathways is a gap in legal protection: the nature of this gap varies across legal contexts. In destination countries, fears of deportation and being misidentified as undocumented migrants often prevents trafficked workers from accessing support services or legal resources (Pocock et al., 2021). Restrictive immigration laws and limited or corrupt labor oversight also hinder victims' ability to seek help even when the opportunities arise (Pocock et al., 2021). Malena, a nurse manager, emphasized that there is *"a complete lack of awareness"* of labor rights among migrants, even those with valid visas. Corruption among law enforcement and immigration officials also plays a role. Some officials accept bribes from traffickers to allow unauthorized migration or overlook exploitative labor practices (Cahyono and Embi, 2020). Carly, a clinical manager, also highlighted how dedicated trafficking detectives and victim service providers *"do training together...push forward policies...[and] create the community response plans,"* noting that this collaboration helps build trust with victims and *"keeps victims engaged in the prosecution of their cases."* However, even when trafficking prevention measures are in place, loopholes in legal frameworks and insufficient international cooperation allow traffickers to continue operating with impunity (Winarso and Silitonga, 2021).

According to Galtung (1969), harm persists not because of the absence of laws but because of systemic failures in implementation and access, which, often accepted as a matter of course, play a substantial role in perpetuating structural violence (Lee, 2016). Instead of addressing structural drivers, many states rely on "raid and rescue" responses that arrest criminals and place victims in enforced rehabilitation centers (Quirk et al., 2020, p. 10). These criminal justice approaches are not community-led; instead, they reinforce structural violence by silencing survivors and perpetuating state control rather than empowerment (Quirk et al., 2020). At the global level, the asymmetry between North and South exacerbates these gaps. Northern states impose migration restrictions that generate irregular flows, while Southern states, often under-resourced, struggle to protect migrants within and beyond their borders (Klaus and Pachocka, 2019). This disconnect reveals that labor trafficking persists not just because of weak laws but because of a global legal regime that privileges border control in the North over migrant protection in the South. Focused on individual traffickers, current criminal justice approaches fall short in addressing the structural violence embedded in weak labor protections, enforcement, and limited legal pathways.

3.9 Mental health consequences linked to labor trafficking

The psychological toll of labor trafficking is profound. Many survivors live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety due to prolonged exploitation (Kissane et al., 2014; Jowett et al., 2021). Studies indicate that 66.23% of trafficking survivors meet

the criteria for complex PTSD, often struggling with dissociation, trust issues, and ongoing fear (Jowett et al., 2021). From Galtung's (1969) perspective, the consequences of labor trafficking are an embodiment of structural violence because of the effects. The harm does not end with the ceasing of immediate exploitation; it persists through structural arrangements that deny survivors adequate recovery resources (Farmer, 2004). Post-migration challenges, including legal insecurity, homelessness, and lack of social support, further exacerbate their trauma and increase the risk of re-exploitation (Brady et al., 2021). Kristen, a medical team leader, shared: *"To gain their trust is difficult because they have had a lot of traumas."* Jose, a senior caseworker, pointed out *"there's not a lot of research on the mental health needs of trafficking victims or migrants."* Malena, a nurse manager, noted that *"feelings of shame and fear often prevent victims from seeking help."*

Despite these needs, access to mental health services remains limited, highlighting the necessity for integrated legal, social, and psychological interventions. Yet, migrants' access to such care is highly uneven. While Northern economies benefit from their labor, they often restrict migrants' eligibility for healthcare and psychosocial services, leaving Southern-born workers without adequate support (Papademetriou and Sumption, 2011). This denial of benefits signals a systematic effort to deny essential care and further limit the basic health needs and recognition of their dignity even after exploitation has ended (Galtung, 1990). These testimonies deepen the literature by showing that trauma is not just a residual effect of exploitation, but an ongoing condition shaped by inadequate post-migration support systems, a structural reality that continues the harm well after the immediate exploitation has ended (Lee, 2016). This North–South imbalance illustrates how structural violence transcends the trafficking episode itself, embedding trauma in the global governance regimes that deny migrant workers long-term recovery (Ferguson and McNally, 2015).

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the scope, nature, and thematic trends in the literature on labor trafficking among migrant populations, and to complement these findings with qualitative insights from stakeholders working directly with trafficked migrant populations. By applying a structural violence approach, the analysis reveals how inequalities within political, legal, and economic systems create and sustain the conditions that normalize labor trafficking. The findings offer an understanding of the dynamics of informal recruitment networks, exploitative working conditions, and the psychosocial and economic factors that increase migrants' susceptibility to exploitation. Furthermore, the impact of inadequate legal protections and law enforcement in both countries of origin and destination is analyzed, along with the effects on the mental health of victims and survivors.

The findings of this study confirm the use of informal recruitment networks as the *modus operandi* and a key structural element that facilitates labor trafficking, particularly for migrants from rural areas and migrants with limited access to employment opportunities. Moving beyond describing deceptive recruitment methods, our analysis situates these practices within a global context and explores the structural inequalities that funnel marginalized migrants into high-risk migration pathways. Our results highlight especially vulnerable sectors, such as fishing and domestic work, where workers'

labor is systematically undervalued, workers are often deceived about wages and working conditions, and workers are even sold between employers. These findings align with those of previous studies in which individuals were at least 94% more likely to report that they were recruited informally if they were engaged in agriculture, fishing and aquafarming, construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and domestic work (Fabbri et al., 2023; Stringer et al., 2021). By framing recruitment deception as structural rather than individual failure, we underline how systemic inequities in migration governance and cultural norms drive trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation.

At times, recruiters even collaborate with local authorities to facilitate irregular migration. These findings support those reported by Stringer et al. (2021) and Adesina (2014), who argue that recruitment agents have been able to operate beyond the reach of laws and regulations, and governments neglect to include mechanisms to protect workers both during the recruitment process and throughout their working hours. Legal remedies remain out of reach for most migrant workers owing to fear of deportation, lack of legal status, and employer control (Sánchez, 2016b). These issues are not caused by the actions of a few bad traffickers, but a systemic failure to implement and enforce policies to protect migrants from these forms of exploitation. Furthermore, coloniality continues to foster current political rhetoric portraying trafficked migrants as inferior, normalizing exploitative recruitment practices under a system that devalues migrant lives (Savaş and Dutt, 2023).

This study provides evidence that migrant individuals who are victims of labor trafficking face occupational hazards and exploitative working conditions, including long working hours, exposure to serious physical risks, lack of rest and food, and unfair wages, as reported in previous studies (ElDidi et al., 2023; Landry et al., 2021). Our results provide additional arguments supporting a common strategy revealed by Tomat and Pérez Huérfano (2022) to keep migrants captive through the illegal retention of identification documents, preventing them from escaping or reporting abuse. This reinforces the viewpoint that "an underlying tolerance to substandard working conditions set the stage for certain forms of exploitative practices," as suggested by Ricard-Guay and Maroukis (2017), p. 118. These practices not only violate migrant workers' fundamental rights but also perpetuate a cycle of exploitation that is difficult to break. Despite migrants being aware of the occupational hazards they are exposed to, forms of exploitation such as illegal document retention and lack of effective reporting pathways are used to systematically keep victims in a state of submission and dependency, due to restrictive migration policy. With current "detain first, investigate later" policies and a lack of policies or protection to ensure migrants can receive their pay and keep their documentation, migrants continue to be systematically exploited (Pasquarella, 2011). Using the structural violence framework, we highlighted how workplaces operate as sites of direct and structural violence, where social isolation, restricted mobility, and employer control intersect with economic and systemic inequalities to reinforce the exploitation of migrants (Galtung, 1969; Quesada et al., 2011; Wickramage et al., 2017).

Our findings indicate that victims of labor trafficking experience multidimensional coercion, going beyond physical abuse; employers use threats of deportation, psychological manipulation, and reproductive control. Similarly, Masudi and Sultana (2022) highlighted tactics of coercion such as isolation, monopolization of perception, induced debility and exhaustion, threats, occasional indulgences,

demonstration of omnipotence, degradation, and trivial demands. These coercive techniques undermine victims' ability to make clear decisions and erode the power and confidence needed to escape their abusers. They also reflect broader patriarchal and legal structures that empower employers while limiting migrants' autonomy. As Benjamin Hawkin specified "wage theft being one of the most common forms of labour abuse" (Quirk et al., 2020, p. 16), interventions designed to recover wages are a practical response that confronts the structural inequalities that underpin labor trafficking (Harkins, 2020). Naming wage theft as structural violence reframes exploitation as an outcome of systemic economic arrangements rather than isolated acts of abuse. This highlights the need to move away from using terms such as *weakness*, *helplessness*, and *dependency* when discussing labor trafficking, instead analyzing vulnerabilities relationally and structurally (Savaş and Dutt, 2023). Coercion in labor trafficking is not an isolated tactic but is embedded within structural, social, and legal inequalities. Policymakers, government officials, and nonprofit organizations should focus on empowering migrant autonomy and implementing policies that address these systemic inequities.

Various studies have documented that economic difficulties and structural inequality are key factors driving many people to take high-risk migration routes (Cameron et al., 2021; ElDidi et al., 2023; Washburn et al., 2022), which aligns with our results. Poverty is frequently cited as a major driver that intensifies vulnerability to exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). The lack of employment opportunities, combined with poverty, increases potential migrants' willingness to accept exploitative work and labor conditions (Washburn et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that poverty, lack of education, and migration restrictions are not incidental; they are outcomes of systemic inequities and colonial legacies that prevent people from migrating to meet their basic needs (Washburn et al., 2022). When these vulnerabilities are recognized as forms of violence, the outcomes can be attributed to shortcomings in current global policy and both the origin and destination governments' failures to support migrants' wellbeing.

Our results show that in some cases, labor trafficking is accompanied by sexual and child exploitation. The exploitation and trafficking of children, adolescents, and minors has been declared a major public health issue in the United States and worldwide, and previous studies have reported that labor trafficking was more commonly reported in children (96%) and victims of sexual exploitation (92%) (Fabbri et al., 2023; Greenbaum et al., 2023). Gendered vulnerabilities in labor trafficking are shaped by intersecting social expectations, structural barriers, and systemic inequalities. Colonialism and patriarchy continue to work against marginalized people, especially women, destroying their sense of being "through sexual and cultural control, violence, political exclusion, and economic exploitation" (Savaş and Dutt, 2023, p. 7). This information underscores that women of all ages are vulnerable to labor trafficking. Current literature that outlines women's experiences of migration often viewed through a gender-neutral lens overlooks how gendered responsibilities and stereotypes shape both their journeys and outcomes (Bastia et al., 2022; Sanchez, 2016a; Savaş and Dutt, 2023). Anti-trafficking policies often fail to account for the full range of harms suffered by migrant women, including labor exploitation and reproductive coercion (López-Domene et al., 2019; Sánchez, 2016b). Men and boys are also made vulnerable, particularly in manual labor-intensive sectors such as construction, agriculture, and fishing, where

social expectations to fulfill provider roles discourage them from seeking help, and endurance of hazardous work conditions is normalized, even at a young age (Harrison et al., 2024; Pocock et al., 2018). Of note, most humanitarian efforts focus more on girls, leaving boys with fewer protections and support services, despite their high exposure to exploitation and dangerous working conditions (Harrison et al., 2024; Pocock et al., 2018). Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that gendered vulnerabilities in trafficking are not solely individual or biological but are created and reinforced by social, cultural, and systemic structures. Cockbain (2020) argued that anti-trafficking and efforts against everyday abuse can align if trafficking is understood within broader systems of exploitation and addressed with complex rather than simplistic narratives. Recognizing these complex patterns and narratives is essential for developing interventions that address the specific needs of both women and men while challenging the underlying inequalities that sustain labor trafficking.

Many workers who are victims of trafficking are mistakenly identified as undocumented migrants, resulting in inadequate legal protections and gaps in law enforcement. This aligns with the experiences reported in a study by Chuang (2014), which revealed that constant threats of deportation and legal action from the recruiter make trafficking victims feel powerless to change their living and working conditions, leading them to accept their current situation. Immigration law further reinforces hierarchies of deservingness, "individuals' perceived worthiness for assistance" (Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky, 2017, p. 194), and normalizes differential treatment based on legal status (Savaş and Dutt, 2023). Although some studies suggest agricultural workers who feel exploited can leave their job during peak labor demand seasons (Barrick et al., 2014), our findings indicate the opposite: workers are less likely to leave because of coercion and fear of deportation. These contradictions highlight how gaps in anti-trafficking measures and weak enforcement allow traffickers to continue operating with impunity.

Our findings indicate that the psychological toll of labor trafficking is not only an individual experience but also reflects the persistent and systemic effects of structural violence on migrants' wellbeing. As Chambers et al. (2024) outline, a multidimensional approach is crucial for treating PTSD, depression, and anxiety in survivors and victims of labor trafficking. This includes comprehensive, evidence-based care plans that address physical, psychological, and psychosocial needs throughout the recovery process. Beyond reporting prevalence, our study emphasizes that ongoing systemic neglect, such as limited access to migrant-specific resources, healthcare, legal protections, and post-migration support, perpetuates harm, representing a continuation of structural violence experienced during and after trafficking. These findings reinforce the need for integrated legal, social, and psychological interventions, aligning with Ottisova et al. (2018), who stressed the importance of training frontline workers to identify and respond appropriately to human trafficking. Overall, entrenched social, economic, and political inequities continue to shape survivors' recovery and reintegration long after the trafficking experience.

4.1 Implications for policy, practice, and research

Based on the findings, we advocate for practical bilateral cooperation between migrants' countries of origin and destination. To

achieve this, national governments must collaborate closely with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), as well as with NGOs specializing in migration and human rights. However, this cooperation must be critically informed by the recognition that the IOM has often aligned with state migration agendas, prioritizing border control and return migration over the protection of migrants' rights and well-being (Ashutosh and Mountz, 2011; Brachet, 2016; Chuang, 2022; International Organization for Migration, 2025). These critiques highlight the need to design future initiatives that prioritize migrants' lived experiences and needs, rather than reproducing state-centric interests. Such a rights-based and migrant-centered framework would ensure that potential migrants, victims, and survivors have timely access to information about labor rights and available support services in both origin and destination countries.

Disseminating this information is fundamental to reducing opportunities for exploitation and strengthening the overall protection of migrants. For instance, governments and their partners should establish accessible, confidential, and effective complaint mechanisms across both ends of the migration corridor. Moreover, consulates and embassies can play a crucial preventive role by sponsoring legal services or facilitating free legal assistance for migrants, particularly during the critical stages of recruitment, transit, and employment. Institutional corruption must be addressed through independent oversight mechanisms and clear protocols to sanction officials complicit in labor trafficking networks. Labor regulatory bodies must implement stricter controls and accountability procedures for labor recruitment agencies, including campaigns to eliminate recruitment fees, which align with the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011). It is important to recognize potential barriers to implementing these measures, such as a lack of political will, limited resources in countries of origin, the absence of inter-institutional coordination, resistance from certain industrial sectors, and victims' fear of retaliation or deportation, which discourages reporting. Overcoming these challenges requires survivor- and migrant-first approaches, sustained political commitment, and strong multisectoral partnerships.

Of note, a decision to migrate does not necessarily mean a person will become a victim of labor trafficking; however, the inherent vulnerabilities many migrants face make them particularly susceptible. Promoting legal and formal migration pathways is therefore essential to safeguard migrants and reduce their risk of exploitation. Addressing existing shortcomings of support and resources that respond to the psychological and physical violence suffered by victims is also equally important. Tailored interventions and preventive measures for potential migrants, victims, and survivors of labor trafficking are urgently needed to ensure a comprehensive approach that promotes safe migration, recovery, and reintegration. Rende Taylor (2020) emphasized that "the anti-trafficking community must let go of the dream that governments can solve trafficking simply by putting exploiters behind bars" (p. 180). Structural violence is maintained through systems that restrict migrants and perpetuate vulnerabilities by leaving the broader political, social, legal, and economic policies untouched. Responses to labor trafficking changes need to be multidimensional and responsive to evolving needs of migrants at a global scale.

4.2 Limitations

Although this study has provided valuable findings, several limitations must be considered. First, the topics are subjective. Because the quality of the selected articles was not analyzed, the reliability and rigor of the synthesized evidence cannot be ascertained; this is a characteristic of scoping reviews. Second, essential studies in other languages relevant to the topic were excluded from regions where other languages are predominant, such as Southeast Asia, the Middle East, or parts of Africa. As a result, certain local perspectives and contextual nuances may be underrepresented in the review. Similarly, an important limitation of this study is the absence of Spanish-language studies within the review. Although the inclusion of literature in Spanish was considered during the search, the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to ensure empirical quality and relevance did not allow the identification of Spanish-language studies that met these criteria for the specific topic addressed. This limitation may have led to an underrepresentation of perspectives and contexts specific to Spanish-speaking regions. Most of the databases used in our review index studies published primarily in English; therefore, future efforts should focus on identifying databases and journals with studies published in other languages and possibly expanding searches to use Google Scholars. Similarly, grey literature (e.g., reports by NGOs, governmental bodies, and international organizations) was excluded to maintain methodological consistency and meet peer-reviewed academic standards; however, doing so may have omitted practical knowledge and frontline experiences that are often well documented in non-peer-reviewed reports. Future research should consider integrating grey literature and multilingual sources to provide a more comprehensive and globally representative understanding of labor trafficking dynamics. Finally, the focus on certain demographic characteristics, specifically within a single geographic context, may be considered a limitation and may result in a partial view of the phenomenon that may not be easily generalized to other international contexts where the dynamics of labor trafficking could differ. However, the diversity of origins of the people served by the interviewees and their experience in transnational support networks provided relevant and complementary information to the review of the international literature.

5 Conclusion

This study highlights the complex dynamics of labor trafficking and offers actionable recommendations to strengthen protections for marginalized migrant populations. By integrating findings from both a scoping review and qualitative interviews, it provides a multidimensional, human-centered perspective on how labor trafficking intersects with international migration, economic hardship, legal gaps, gendered violence, and exploitative recruitment practices. Rather than focusing solely on prosecution, effective responses must prioritize prevention, survivor support, and systemic changes. This includes legal reforms, stronger protections during recruitment and employment, and expanded access to health and mental health services. Crucially, elevating migrant voices in policy development can lead to more ethical and equitable interventions. Addressing labor trafficking is a matter not

only of justice but also of policy urgency. Sustained advocacy, evidence-based strategies, and international collaboration are essential to dismantle the conditions that allow exploitation to persist. This research serves as a critical tool for informing and advancing efforts to protect human rights and promote fair labor migration systems.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas Health Science Center, Houston (HSC-SN-23-0975). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

HF-S: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ZZ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LG: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IV-V: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DSM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix: search strategy

The search was conducted from July to September 2024 in Medline Ovid, then translated to Embase, Scopus, and Cochrane with the following search strategy:

Human Trafficking/ OR "modern slave*" AND ((human* or sex or child* or people pr person* or migrant* or transient* or woman or women or boy or boys or girl or girls or teen* or preteen* or "pre-teen*" or toddler* or baby or babies or infant*) AND "Transients and Migrants"/OR "emigrants and immigrants"/ or undocumented immigrants/ OR Refugees/OR (migrant* or transient* or emigrant* or immigrant* or Refugee* or "Asylum seeker*")).

((migrantes internacionales OR migrantes OR refugiados) AND (trata de personas* OR esclavitud moderna)) AND (trafico transfronterizo* OR tráfico internacional* OR trata internacional* OR trata entre países* OR tráfico transnacional* OR trata transnacional* OR movimiento ilícito internacional* OR tráfico fronterizo*)

A total of 569 results were found.