



How to Report on Migrant Seafood Labor

by Eva Tesfaye



Overview

The European Union, the United States, China, Japan and South Korea are the top five importers of seafood. [80% of seafood](#) in the United States comes from Canada, Chile, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. [An investigation by the AP](#) found that, in the case of shrimp, these imports rely on cheap, exploited labor.

A lot of attention has been paid to the exploitation involved in this imported farmed seafood, often urging consumers to instead purchase local wild-caught seafood. But it's also important to look at the labor conditions in this industry at home.

Because seafood is a global market, domestic companies competing with foreign imports may look to lower the prices of their products by keeping labor costs low, which can breed exploitation of workers.

At the same time, fishing and seafood processing, which is often done by hand, are dangerous and unappealing jobs. Seafood processing has one of the [highest rates of injury and illness](#) in the United States. When employers cannot find people domestically willing to do these jobs, they often turn to foreign workers who have fewer protections.

Migrant Worker Programs

Countries may facilitate the hiring of foreign workers by creating visa programs. These workers might be referred to as migrant workers, temporary foreign workers or guest workers.

In the United States, migrant seafood workers arrive on the [H2B visa](#). In Canada, it's called the [Temporary Foreign Worker \(TFW\) program](#).

Under these kinds of programs, the workers' migration status depends on the specific job at that specific employer, meaning that if they lose this job, they could be deported. That creates a power imbalance, leaving these workers vulnerable to exploitation.

Both programs have been equated to [modern slavery](#). In the United States, the Trump administration and Congress are [further eroding protections](#) for these already vulnerable workers. Most H2 workers are Mexican, who are [overwhelmingly targeted](#) by immigration arrests under Trump.

Some problems that migrant workers face include:

- Racial discrimination and xenophobia: Workers report discrimination, especially for not speaking English, from both managers and other workers.
- Gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment: women face unique challenges.

- Unsafe or unsanitary labor conditions: As mentioned, seafood processing has one of the highest rates of injury and illness in the United States.
- Overcrowded, expensive or unsuitable housing: Companies often provide the housing for these workers.
- Limited access to medical care: Particularly if they're working on boats, workers do not have access to timely medical care if they get sick or injured.
- Low wages, wage theft: People working in processing often report working long hours and not getting paid overtime. On boats, they may be paid a flat rate and then extra depending on how much they catch. If they are not paid the flat rate, this could open up workers to working longer and in more dangerous conditions to make money. According to [a report from the Economic Policy Institute](#), seafood employers "collectively paid their H-2B workers \$4.13 less per hour than the national average wage in the meat, poultry, and fish cutters and trimmers occupation, over 22% less."
- Recruiting fraud: In Mexico, companies use recruiters whom the workers will pay to get these jobs and their visas. Often, they can get scammed by fake recruiters (sometimes called coyotes).
- Blacklisting: Companies and recruiters will often weaponize blacklisting against workers and their coworkers to keep them from speaking out about poor conditions.

Key questions

For journalists interested in reporting on migrant seafood labor, there is a set of key questions they should ask:

- What kind of seafood is this area known for? Is it wild-caught or farmed? How much is imported and how much is produced locally? How is that seafood processed?
- What kind of visa are these workers on?
- How is their wage determined? How long are their hours? Are they getting paid for overtime?
- Who provides their housing? Where are they housed? What are the housing conditions like? How many people live in a unit?
- Where are these workers coming from? What caused them to seek work elsewhere?

Reporting on Migrant Workers

Migrant workers may be reluctant to speak for fear of losing their jobs or working status in the country. Therefore, it's important to build trust and provide special considerations when reporting on them. Here are some tips:

- Reach out to local migrant rights organizations who may be able to connect you with people who are willing to talk.
- Look for migrant worker organizations in their country of origin. You may have an easier time speaking with people when they are back in their home countries.
- People might not necessarily see themselves as being exploited. Ask questions that get at the issue, such as "Is there anything you wish was different about your job?" or "What would make your job better?"
- Consider granting anonymity, following [this guide](#).
- Use correct and respectful terminology when referring to their status, e.g., migrant worker, temporary worker, undocumented
- Consider publishing the story in their language.
- Read these guides:
 - NPR: [Interviewing Vulnerable Sources](#)
 - NAHJ: [Cultural Competency Guide](#), Migration (starts on pg 10)

Example questions for migrant workers

- Why did you decide to work in (destination country)?
- What makes it difficult to find work in (home country)?
- Do you prefer to work in (home country) or in (destination country)?
- What kind of work are you doing? (Ask them to describe physically what they do.)
- What is your job in (home country)?
- Is there anything you wish were different about your job?
- What would make your job better?
- How many hours do you work? Do you get paid for overtime?
- How are you paid, by hour, by catch?
- Have you ever been injured on the job? What kind of medical attention did you receive?
- What are the housing conditions like?
- Do you feel like you can speak up when something is wrong?
- Do you have children? Is it difficult being away from them?

Women in seafood

Women face unique challenges as migrant workers in the seafood industry. While men generally are employed on fishing boats, women are typically employed in the processing plants, where they can be subject to both gender and racial discrimination at the hands of their managers.

According to the Coalición de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Migrantes Temporales Sinaloenses, women often report being sexually harassed and asked for sexual favors by their managers. They are often prevented from speaking out by the threat of blacklisting.

Another impact of the use of migrant workers in this industry is the creation of a matriarchal society in the home country. In Topolobampo, Sinaloa, because so many men travel to the United States yearly, the women who are left behind become the heads of household.

Helpful reports and studies

- [USDA report on aquaculture, seafood consumption and trade](#)
- [Research on labor conditions of migrant seafood workers in Canada](#)
- [Why seafood processing labor matters to emerging Blue economies in the United States](#)
- [Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery in Canada \(the TFW program as one of them\)](#)
- [Economic Policy Institute report on the H2B visa program having negative impacts on wages and working conditions](#)

Experts

- **Christine Knott**, Assistant Professor, San Diego State University, Associate Researcher, Ocean Nexus, cmknott@sdsu.edu - Seafood processing and labor conditions
- **Jessica Sparks**, Assistant Professor, Tufts University, Jessica.Sparks@tufts.edu, working conditions in marine capture fisheries and seafood supply chains
- **Marta Maldonado**, Associate Professor, Oregon State University, marta.maldonado@oregonstate.edu, the experiences of Latinos in Oregon's coastal communities, and in seafood processing work
- **David Griffith**, Cultural Anthropologist, East Carolina University, Department of Coastal Studies, griffithd@ecu.edu, temporary foreign contract workers in seafood processing and on fishing communities of the South Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico

Groups supporting migrant workers

- [Coalición de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Migrantes Temporales Sinaloenses](#) – Mexico's first union for migrant workers recognized by the Mexican government, documenting "violations" against migrant workers from Sinaloa, based in Topolobampo, Sinaloa. coalicion.sinaloah2@gmail.com
- [Cooper Institute](#) – an education and community development center based on Prince Edward Island, Canada, works on many issues, including supporting migrant workers.
- [Southern Migrant Legal Services](#), Texas RioGrande Legal Aid – TRLA provides free civil legal services to migrant and seasonal farm workers throughout Texas. Its Southern Migrant Legal Services (SMLS) office in Nashville, Tenn., serves migrant farm workers in that state and five others: Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

