Participatory action research case studies

Migrant workers in food supply chain sector

Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Here To Support

Authors: **Hamo Salhein, Fanny van der Vooren**

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Table of contents

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

1. Introduction

This report is one of a series of three national case studies developed within the framework of the DignityFIRM project, coordinated by PICUM, the Platform for international cooperation for undocumented migrants. Each case study was led by a grassroots organization in a different country:

- **Here to Support,** in Amsterdam (Netherlands);
- **Mujeres Supervivientes ,** in Sevilla (Spain);
- **Nomada**, in Wrocław (Poland).

In each city, one migrant worker—formerly undocumented and with experience in the Farm to Fork sectors—was trained as a peer researcher. These peer researchers facilitated focus groups with others in similar situations to identify key challenges, examine working and living conditions, and explore collective strategies for resistance and change. This report brings together the findings of those processes and serves as a foundation for the project's upcoming action phase.

DignityFIRM is grounded in an interdisciplinary design that includes a strong commitment to Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a core approach. Rather than positioning migrant workers as passive subjects of research, PAR seeks to engage them as active agents in producing knowledge and shaping solutions. It recognizes lived experience as a critical source of insight and emphasizes collective reflection, empowerment, and action. By training peer researchers within the communities most affected, the project aims to strengthen local capacities, support grassroots mobilization, and generate proposals that emerge directly from those with firsthand experience of exploitation.

The report includes a description of the territorial context and the background of each organization. It details the composition and functioning of the focus groups, followed by a narrative analysis of the main findings. Subsequent sections examine the problems identified across key dimensions of precariousness, as well as the individual and collective strategies of resistance that emerged. Intersectional factors are explored as elements that shape both vulnerability and agency. The final sections offer methodological reflections and propose a series of actions and recommendations drawn from the research process.

For further information:

- PAR cross-country report: Participatory Action Research (PAR) with migrant workers in farm-to-fork sectors in Amsterdam, Seville and Wroclaw (Legarda, I., 2025);
- Participatory Action Research (PAR). Migrant organisations led actions (PICUM, 2025).

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

2. Context of the study: Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2.1 Territorial context

Here to Support conducted the research in the Netherlands. Here to Support is located in Amsterdam, so most of the networks of people included in the research have worked in Amsterdam, Den Haag and Rotterdam.

Here to Support has a Support Desk every Monday, where people come for information and Support. From the contact we have with people in all of our projects, and from the Support Desk, we stay up to date on the status quo in the Netherlands for undocumented people. Our reflections on the territorial context come from our own experiences. In this section, we will reflect upon: work rights, access to banking, access to healthcare, reporting with the police.

In 1998, the linkage act was implemented in the Netherlands. This act links all social services to having a valid residency permit/BSN number (citizen service number). Before this act, undocumented people could rent houses, work, pay taxes. After this moment, this was no longer possible. Undocumented people are not legally allowed to rent a house, register in the municipality, be employed, pay taxes, open a bank account. From many people who work in restaurants, agriculture, and delivery, we hear that they work long and irregular hours. People are not always paid for the work they do.

Irrespective of the exclusion through the linking act, all workers are entitled to labour rights, irrespective of their residence status. To claim these rights, Fairwork, a Dutch NGO informs people about their work rights, and supports people who have experienced exploitation. Fairwork advises people on how to keep proof of the hours they make. They have a team of client consultants, together with voluntary cultural mediators, who consult people on their cases In case of exploitation, FairWork supports people to take legal action or report the exploitation to the authorities. Sometimes, FairWork contacts the employer, to request a lacking payment. For more information about Fairwork, see the blogpost on the DignityFIRM website: *Chain Liability for migrant workers' unpaid wages in the Netherlands* (2025).

Access to banking and digital payments

Undocumented people cannot open a bank account in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, digital payments have become the norm, especially in public transport, where cash payments are no longer accepted. Only a few train station machines still accept cash, making mobility increasingly difficult. Those who travel without a valid ticket risk being placed in a detention center, and potentially being deported.

Access to healthcare

By law, every undocumented person in the Netherlands is entitled to receive medically necessary healthcare. Although they cannot obtain health insurance, the cost of care is covered by the Centraal Administratie Kantoor (CAK). Medical professionals and pharmacies can declare

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

costs for consultations, treatments, and medication via the CAK.
However, in practice, this right is not consistently upheld. Many undocumented people are unaware of their legal entitlement to healthcare and avoid seeking medical attention due to fear of deportation. Simultaneously, healthcare providers often lack knowledge about the CAK system. We have encountered several cases in which general practitioners (GPs) refused to treat undocumented patients. Examples include:

- **Some GPs** incorrectly claim that separate clinics exist specifically for undocumented people.
- **One clinic** told us they were at full capacity when we tried to register an undocumented person. When we called again shortly afterward to register a documented colleague, they were suddenly able to accept new patients.
- **In another case**, a Nigerian man had to visit a hospital. A Here to Support colleague accompanied him and had proactively informed the hospital that the CAK would cover the costs. Nevertheless, the receptionist refused to accept this, arguing that "all Nigerian people have permits in Italy" and therefore couldn't be undocumented. We eventually resolved the issue, but had he gone alone, he likely would have been turned away.

Reporting to the Police

Article 1 of the EU Victims' Rights Directive states that undocumented individuals have the right to report a crime. On a flyer from the police it states:

"I'm a migrant with irregular status, a victim of a crime, and I have the right to file a report to a police officer. I appeal to the 'free in, free out' policy in the Netherlands, which allows migrants with irregular status to enter a police station to report a crime. I am permitted to leave without being arrested or taken into custody."

Undocumented people can report crimes—particularly in cases of human trafficking or labor exploitation. In practice, however, many refrain from doing so out of fear of being arrested at the police station. Although the Netherlands officially adheres to the 'free in, free out' principle, not all officers follow this policy consistently. Police in larger cities, who interact more frequently with undocumented people, tend to be better informed. In Amsterdam, for instance, police officers actively reach out to undocumented communities to inform them about their rights.

Here to Support always advises individuals to be accompanied when going to the police. Our experiences with reporting crimes have been mixed. While some officers have responded appropriately to reports of abuse, we have also witnessed discrimination—particularly in cases involving human trafficking.

Victims of trafficking are eligible for temporary protection while their case is under investigation. If the perpetrator is not found, the victim often loses their protected status. In rare cases where the trafficker is convicted, victims may be granted a multi-year B8 or B9 residency permit.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Because reporting a trafficking case can potentially lead to a residency permit, police sometimes question the credibility of the victim. We have had several troubling encounters:

- **In one case,** a Nigerian man reported human trafficking. A colleague was advised to wait in the lobby to serve as a potential witness. A police officer came out and said, "Don't worry. Here we call Nigerians 'Liegerians'—they always lie." He suggested Nigerians invent stories to obtain residency documents.
- **In another case,** a Brazilian woman reported being forced into sex work. A Here to Support colleague accompanied her into the interview. Despite the nature of the report, the police officer told her it sounded like she had acted voluntarily - while she reported being held against her will. They did not continue any investigation.

2.2. Track record of the organisation in the subject

Amsterdam City Rights

Here to Support facilitates the Amsterdam City Rights coalition, a network of both documented and undocumented residents of Amsterdam. Within this coalition, people from various undocumented communities come together to raise awareness about human rights violations in the city and to challenge the status quo. The coalition meets once a month to discuss emerging issues and determine collective responses.

Through Amsterdam City Rights, community members engage in advocacy across multiple platforms: public demonstrations, media appearances, theatre performances, Pride events, social media, and collaborations with other local initiatives.

Many undocumented individuals in our network work in the food supply chain. We maintain relationships with people from large undocumented communities originating from North, West, and East Africa, as well as from Asia, Latin America, and Central America.

Our experience organizing and participating in these meetings has been crucial in shaping our Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. All the actions taken by Here to Support are grounded in the knowledge and lived experiences of the communities involved in Amsterdam City Rights and other initiatives we facilitate. All participants in this PAR project were people we knew through our own networks.

Shared Visions

Mainstream portrayals of migrants and undocumented people are often reductive and stereotypical: images of helpless children, mothers with small children, or refugee camps. These representations frequently fail to reflect reality.

Here to Support coordinates Shared Visions, a project in which we engage with undocumented people and migrants across the Netherlands to critically examine and reshape visual narratives.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Last year, we organized a two-day session during which participants, divided into four working groups, developed various prototypes aimed at positively shifting public perceptions. These included concepts for: a social media channel, a toolkit (website) for positive news and storytelling, a consultancy agency run by undocumented people, and a pilot episode of a talk show.

City Rights App

Undocumented people often lack access to vital information. This is largely due to the fragmentation of resources across different organizations and platforms. Even professionals—such as NGO workers and volunteers—often struggle to find reliable referral points. This information gap severely limits undocumented people's ability to navigate daily life and build self-reliance.

Our colleague Mohamed Bah personally experienced this lack of access during the COVID-19 lockdown, when he was undocumented in Amsterdam. In response, he initiated the development of an app to centralize and simplify access to essential information for displaced people arriving in the city. Here to Support supported this initiative, resulting in the creation of the Amsterdam City Rights App.

Amsterdam City Rights App:

Available on Google Play and Apple Store

Some participants in our focus groups cited the app as a helpful tool for accessing information about their rights.

"We Hear Your Voice, We've Got Your Vote"

In the Netherlands, people without a Dutch passport—including undocumented individuals, residence permit holders, international students—cannot vote. This excludes a significant portion of the population from the democratic process, even though political decisions greatly impact their lives.

To address this democratic gap, Here to Support organized a symbolic polling station at our office during national elections. People without voting rights were invited to share their views. On a specially designed ballot, participants could indicate what they would like to change in the Netherlands, whether they feel heard, which issues matter most to them, and what they would say to the new prime minister.

A diverse group of people came to participate. The responses offered powerful insights that contrasted with dominant political narratives. While refugees are often portrayed as passive or dependent, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed a desire to work and pay taxes rather than rely on government assistance. Many called for more dialogue with migrants and urged others not to give in to fear.

This initiative revealed how many people feel misrepresented in mainstream media and politics. It also underscored the widespread desire among undocumented people to gain the legal right to work—an outcome that aligns closely with the findings of this PAR project.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

3. Focus Groups

3.1. Participant search process

The first step in the research, was to find a peer-researcher to collaborate with Here to Support. We looked for someone who had experience working as an undocumented person, and now received their residency permit (this due to legal restrictions of not being able to hire someone who was still undocumented). We spread the vacancy around in our networks, and received multiple responses. Interviews were held with people who applied and met the criteria.

Hamo Salhein was eventually hired as peer-researcher. Hamo is originally from Sudan. He ended up becoming undocumented for a period of time, because he was rejected for asylum. He was always working and doing volunteer work, both when he was undocumented and during the asylum procedure. He has a network of people who also have work experience. He is a very social person, and interested to learn more about the context he lives in and how people experience life in the Netherlands. He is motivated to contribute to a society where human rights are respected.

Before reaching out to participants, we developed an outreach plan. The plan consisted of two phases:

a) Finding participants & preparing methodology (February–March)

During February and March, we focused on getting to know potential participants and building connections. We used the month of Ramadan as an opportunity to meet people and expand our network. On March 26, we hosted a community Iftar at the Here to Support office. Key networks we contacted included:

- Community savings groups such as the Gambian Community;
- Migrant worker organizations: IMWU, Migrante, Filmis, Kabalikat, and FNV Migrant Domestic Workers;
- FairWork's Latin American community.

b) Focus groups

The focus group sessions were designed as dinner events, involving collective cooking, eating, and open conversations. We began with informal discussions to help participants feel comfortable, then moved toward more serious topics.

We initially aimed for a balance across employment sectors and regions of origin, targeting:

- 3 participants each from the delivery, agriculture, and restaurant sectors;
- 6 participants each from Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Flyers were created in Arabic, Spanish, and English, and shared widely via WhatsApp groups and partner organizations. The flyer featured a photo of Hamo, to make the invitation more personal and trustworthy.

While Here to Support has strong networks among African and Asian undocumented communities, we found it more difficult to reach participants from Latin American backgrounds. We visited a nearby organization with connections in Latin American communities, but had limited success in engaging people from these groups for this project. One recurring challenge was finding "new"

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

participants—most of the individuals who eventually joined the project were already familiar to us through previous collaborations. The others:

Three participants had not collaborated with Here to Support before but were already connected through partner organizations or acquaintances.

Three Sudanese participants (Arabic speakers) came through Hamo's network. One had worked with him when both were undocumented and living in the same shelter. They had previously worked together on a fish cargo ship.

We initially attempted to ensure equal representation across employment sectors, countries of origin, and gender. However, we eventually let go of these quotas to focus instead on building a diverse and motivated group. Due to our base in Amsterdam, most participants had experience working in restaurants.

Our final group included individuals from a variety of national backgrounds and living across different cities, including Rotterdam, The Hague, Haarlem, Amsterdam, Dronten, and Heerhugowaard.

Before the focus groups, we met each participant individually for an informal conversation over coffee. These conversations served multiple purposes:

- To explain the project (PAR, Dignity FIRM, PICUM);
- To explore participants' work histories and labour-related experiences;
- To collect ideas for topics to explore during the focus groups.

A key insight from this first phase was the importance of Hamo and Here to Support's experience and networks for doing PAR. Without existing relationships and a foundation of trust, this project would not have been possible.

3.2. Composition and characteristics of the participants

We had two focus groups:

Focus group 1: seven men. One person from Ghana, one person from Ethiopia, one person from Uganda, three people from Sudan and one from Eritrea. All seven had experience working in restaurants, one person also had experience in hotels, and one person worked in a food processing factory and on a cargo ship with fish.

Focus group 2: three women, five men. Two people from Kenya, one person from India, one person from Ghana, one person from Indonesia, two people from Uganda, one person from Nigeria. All people had experience working in restaurants, one person also worked in the domestic work sector, and one person also worked in a factory.

The group included more men than women. Most of the undocumented women we know work in domestic labor, and were less available or less likely to participate.

We had a diverse group of people in our focus groups from different African and Asian countries. As mentioned before, we were unable to include participants from Latin America. Most people had work

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

experience in Restaurants. Some people participating had already received their residency permit. They spoke from their past experience of being undocumented.

3.3. Functioning of the Groups

As noted, we began with informal one-on-one meetings before the actual focus groups. To facilitate conversation, we organized the groups based on language:

- One group included four Arabic speakers (three from Sudan, one from Eritrea) and several English speakers. We provided an Arabic–English interpreter;
- The second group consisted entirely of English speakers.

Each focus group began with cooking and sharing a meal together. Some participants already knew each other; others got acquainted during these first informal moments. Everyone introduced themselves before the more structured part of the session began.

We then collectively discussed and agreed on group norms:

- We aimed for equal speaking time for participants: to let everyone contribute to the session;
- Confidentiality would be respected; what is said in the group stays within the group

Sessions would be recorded, but only Hamo and Fanny would listen to the recordings and transcribe them anonymously.

While several participants said they were comfortable being identified by name, we collectively decided that anonymity offered better protection for everyone. Consent forms were signed before we began the sessions.

We held two focus group sessions:

- The first session focused on labour conflicts;
- The second session explored solutions and claiming rights.

Each session was initiated with Hamo sharing a personal experience, which helped create an open and safe space for others to share their own stories.

In both groups, we observed that participants were very eager to speak and listen to each other. Many recognized their own experiences in the stories of others. While it was sometimes difficult or emotionally confronting to hear about each other's struggles, participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss these issues openly. The group dynamics were warm, supportive, and respectful.

For both Hamo and Fanny, these conversations were meaningful. We already knew most of the participants well, but we rarely take time to talk in depth about work-related issues. Because people are often afraid of being caught or reported, they usually keep this part of their lives private. Being able to openly reflect on these experiences together was deeply valuable—for all of us.

We also observed that participating in a project like this one gives people a sense of agency over their lives. Coming together to discuss challenges, share information about rights, and collectively explore solutions helped participants feel

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

more in control. Many feel that their lives are governed by immigration services rather than by themselves - especially within asylum procedures. Taking collective action helped shift that sense of powerlessness.

For the final focus group, we created a longer, more in-depth session in the form of a hackathon—a full-day event dedicated to dialogue and action planning. We started informally with coffee and breakfast, then moved into discussions about existing campaigns. Hamo and I presented several examples. Some participants had already been involved in these campaigns and shared their personal experiences.

After these discussions, we started with a lighthearted energizer to get to know each other better. Everyone took out their keys and explained what they were for. Hamo shared how, after living in 15 to 20 different locations across asylum centers in the Netherlands, he finally received his own home. Others shared similar stories—how meaningful it feels to have a door you can lock after living on the streets or sharing rooms. Some participants were still living in shared spaces and expressed hope for a residency permit in the future. This "key moment" broke the ice, built connections, and allowed participants with more experience to encourage others to keep hope and continue fighting for their rights.

Then came the most important part of the day: OUR ACTION! We first dreamed about the future, and then turned to a shorter time frame: What can we do in the next six months to move toward this vision? We began brainstorming concrete campaign ideas, asking: Who do we want to reach? How do we reach them? What do we want to do?

We also discussed the key components necessary for impactful action:

- **Community and movement** – building a strong group united around a shared cause
- **Action** – creating visibility and reaching a broader audience

Lobbying – communicating demands to politicians and advocating for institutional change

The campaign ideas developed during the hackathon are discussed further in Section 9: Proposal of Actions.

All participants expressed a strong desire to remain involved in the action phase. We saw a high level of motivation: not only to take action for themselves, but also to improve conditions for others in similar situations. For many, the project was both personally empowering and collectively hopeful.

4. Narrative analysis of results

4.1. Emerging issues

The most pressing issue emerging across all focus groups is the structural precarity created by undocumented status. Being undocumented in the Netherlands cuts people off from formal employment, banking, housing contracts, and basic services. This exclusion causes people to be vulnerable to exploitation, including underpayment, unsafe working conditions, and discrimination. Fear of detention or

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

deportation discourages many from reporting abuse or asserting rights—even when they are legally entitled to minimum wage or healthcare.

Employment insecurity was another dominant theme, with participants describing unstable, on-demand jobs that offered no security or sick leave. Many were paid cash-in-hand, often below minimum wage—or not at all. In the absence of contracts, workers lacked negotiation power, and were frequently forced to accept poor conditions. These patterns were intensified for those with limited language skills or smaller networks.

Discrimination also surfaced strongly in participants' accounts—from racial profiling by police and exclusion in the workplace to mistreatment by healthcare professionals. Finally, intersecting factors like gender, physical ability, and literacy further shaped people's ability to work, access support, and ability to organise or resist.

4.2. Patterns identified

Despite the diversity in backgrounds, clear patterns emerged across all focus groups. First, almost all participants navigated exploitation: they felt compelled to accept poor working conditions and avoid reporting abuse due to fear of being exposed. Even when individuals knew their rights, speaking up often felt too risky. Participants regularly chose to leave a job instead of confronting an employer.

Social networks emerged as a key source of resistance. Work was often found through word-of-mouth, and people with stronger or more organised communities—often based on shared language or country of origin—were generally better informed and more protected. Conversely, participants who lacked these networks had less work opportunities and were less resilient.

Individuals who had been in the Netherlands longer often developed coping strategies, such as learning new skills to expand work options, clarifying job conditions in advance, or participating in community saving schemes. Contact with NGOs or unions, like Fairwork or the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union, also played a crucial role in increasing awareness and confidence.

Participating in collective actions strengthens people's sense of agency. Those who have contributed to campaigns often become more aware of their rights and feel empowered to claim and defend them.

Throughout the focus groups, participants consistently expressed a desire to be recognised as workers who contribute to Dutch society. The participants in the focus groups all call for regularisation through work.

4.3. Narrative summary

From the moment they enter the labour market, participants described being underpaid, overworked, and routinely denied dignity and respect. The "linkage act" institutionalises exclusion by making access to rights conditional on legal residency, even as they work in essential sectors like cleaning, restaurants, and logistics.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Yet, all participants resist through collective organising and showing solidarity. They shared strategies —from building trusted networks and learning new skills, to negotiating with employers or avoiding injury to preserve their health. Grassroots organising, whether through community groups or unions, was central to their ability to resist exploitation.

The research process itself became a space for resistance. Many participants described the focus groups as an opportunity to speak freely and reflect. This culminated in a clear demand: regularisation through work. Participants envisioned a future in which they could access basic services, and be recognised for their contributions to society.

Beyond the national context, participants called for broader change across Europe: freedom of movement, less criminalisation, and equal rights for all workers—regardless of legal status. These voices offer a counternarrative to dominant political discourses.

5. Definition of problems

5.1. Migratory status

For our research, we have focused on people who are undocumented: without residency and without a work permit. All of the people in our focus groups were thus employed irregularly or 'illegally'. Some people were employed through agencies (irregularly), and others worked jobs that paid in cash (so-called 'black jobs').

Undocumented people cannot open a bank account, sign an official employment contract, or register with authorities. Most of the issues shared by participants relate back to this undocumented status, as one person clearly explained:

"The problem, in my view, is, for as long as there is this undocumented thing hovering above us, it will be like pouring water or whatever into a bottomless pit. They will always be taking advantage of somebody for as long as there is that undocumented hovering over them." (John, focus group 2.1)

Alex summarized a key consequence of being undocumented: the constant fear of deportation:

"So, I think we undocumented people, we just feel, we have a feeling, that maybe if you report something, something happens, maybe the police comes, you will be deported, something like that.." (Alex, focus group 1.2)

This fear leads to isolation. People often do not share their work experiences with others because they are afraid of the consequences. Many people shared that even though in some cases organisations or friends have offered to help them, they were too afraid to report any issues because they feel like they are doing something 'illegal' and are afraid of being placed in detention.

5.2. Employment insecurity

Employment insecurity was mentioned by almost everyone as one of the most pressing problems. Participants described a multilayered issue that affects financial stability, decision-making, and mental

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

health. The following issues were mentioned in the focus groups:

a) Temporariness: working on demand
People feel they must accept any job offered, even at the last minute, because saying no means risking not being called again. Violet described how she was always called last-minute, and she could not refuse any work because they would not call her again. She often did not earn enough because she was only employed by people who would call her last minute – she could not count on her income (Violet, focus group 2.1).

b) Lack of alternative
People often accept jobs they do not want—because there are no alternatives. Yusuf explained how he stayed with a job for a very long time, despite not getting paid enough and not liking the place. The alternative was not getting any income at all, so he had to persist. Charlene confirmed this: most people find jobs through their networks. If you leave a job, it's a struggle to find a new one.

c) Lack of negotiation power
Many people feel they cannot ask for fair pay or better working conditions, because they are easily replaceable by someone who will accept worse conditions. So many people do not ask for better work rights.
Most people in the focus groups worked in jobs that paid cash. Some people worked under an agency: they were employed through someone else, who made the arrangements with the place of work. The workplace would think that they were documented, because it was arranged officially and they paid invoices of the agency.
From the focus groups it became clear that people working under an agency had more negotiation power because the employer would think they were documented, and the agency had signed a contract.

Daniel explains how he often called the agency to check what was in their agreement, so that he would not be made to do jobs that were not agreed upon in the contract:

"Then I have to call the uitzendbureau [agency] hey, picking up cigarettes in the cup is it part of my job? He said no. And then I told the chef sorry, you cannot do that I cannot do it because before I signed the contract there is no picking up cigarettes in the cup" (Daniel, focus group 2.2).

5.3. Inadequate Payments
Many participants mentioned the lack of proper payment—not only in the form of low wages, but also cases where people were not paid at all. Some employers blocked their contacts after the job, making it impossible to follow up. This issue is compounded by fear of reporting and a lack of knowledge about legal rights, such as the right to minimum wage.

a) Income level & lack of payments
Many people always had inconsistent incomes. It was difficult to negotiate hourly wages with employers, and people

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

expressed often being underpaid in the work they did.

Daniel and Aaron explained how they never received payment, despite working for a period of time. Daniel explained how he worked at one restaurant for one week, and he never got paid. He tried asking for his money, but after a while he gave up on claiming it (Daniel, focus group 2.1).

Aaron explained how he worked at a warehouse for eight months, and a substantial amount of his wages was never paid. He reminded the employer multiple times: calling him, going to him, but after one year he was still not paid. The employer blocked his phone number. He eventually gave up, it cost him too much effort (Aaron, focus group 1.1).

Some were paid, but very little—often far below legal minimum wage. Someone described how they received 20 euros for a full day of work, and multiple people explained how their employer paid them only 5 euros per hour.

b) Inconsistency of income

People need to earn money to pay bills and support families, but undocumented workers are often on-call without contracts. Their work hours are unpredictable, and payment is inconsistent. The employer can determine how many days you work in the week, and when people fall sick there's often no payment.

5.4. Lack of Rights and Protection

Because of the *Linkage Act* (see Chapter 2), all undocumented people in the Netherlands lack access to basic social services and legal protections. This lack of rights is deeply intertwined with migratory status. In this section, we explore how undocumented people experience and access the rights they are, in principle, entitled to—such as medically necessary healthcare, labour rights (e.g. minimum wage, sick leave), and the right to report crimes.

a) Lack of awareness about rights: lack of organisation

Many undocumented people are not aware of their legal rights, or how to claim them. For example, people often don't know that they have the right to medically necessary healthcare, or that medical costs can be reimbursed through the CAK. This leads to people avoiding medical treatment, even in urgent situations.

In the focus groups, it was shared how someone was injured at work but didn't seek medical care, both due to fear and a lack of knowledge.

Most people get their knowledge from the communities they are in, and the NGOs they encounter. We notice that some communities are better informed than others. This has to do with the **size of the community, organising power, language.**

In our focus groups, we saw that people who could speak English or Dutch frequently had access to more information.

Also, people who were in contact with the Worldhouse, Here to Support or Fairwork, were better informed about their labour rights. We observed that, despite being in frequent contact with NGOs, many focus group participants still lacked knowledge

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

on key topics. Some individuals shared information about their right to healthcare and how to access it, based on personal experience. However, awareness varied. For example, not everyone knew they had the right to report to the police. Those who did often learned this through police-led information sessions at Here to Support or the Worldhouse. Others found the idea of voluntarily entering a police station unimaginable.
Similarly, those who were informed about their labor rights had typically attended sessions provided by Fairwork.

It is important to note that most undocumented people are not in contact with NGOs or community groups at all. The individuals NGOs or community groups reach tend to be people in legal limbo—those whose asylum claims have been rejected or who are actively seeking shelter or legal advice. If there is already a knowledge gap among people who have regular access to NGOs, that gap is likely even wider among those who are completely disconnected from support organizations.

Unions. An example of a well-organised community is the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union. One person in the focus groups was part of the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union (see chapter 6.2) - they have regular meetings to discuss work rights. FNV Migrant Domestic workers is a labour union for people working in the domestic sector. In other sectors, we are not aware of any labour unions for undocumented in which people organise themselves to discuss work rights.

b) Lack of social security
Because of the linkage act (mentioned in chapter 2), people do not have access to social services officially without a BSN number.
While by law people do have the right to basic healthcare and the right to report to the police, many people are still afraid to claim it. We also often see that professionals—such as medical workers, employers, and police officers—often do not know what rights undocumented people have. In some cases, they do know, but choose to ignore these rights or treat undocumented people differently.
This systemic lack of knowledge or willingness to respect legal entitlements further limits access and reinforces fear and inequality.

c) Workplace
Reflected in both focus groups is that people are treated at the bottom of the hierarchy at work: they get all the jobs no one else wants to do, are not allowed to take breaks, and are made to eat separately from the others. Many people do not speak up because they are afraid of losing work.
One example was named by Charlene: she worked from six o'clock in the morning, and wanted to have lunch at two o'clock. The chef told her she was not allowed to eat, while all the other staff had lunch already. She had to continue working.

Daniel has had a similar experience:

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

"Something also happened to me in this restaurant also. It was kind of like a lunch time. I went to the cafe to eat where everybody, the chef, everybody was sitting there to eat and then, I wanted to eat, the guy was like, oh, dishwasher don't, dishwasher don't eat here." (Daniel, focus group 2.1)

Charlene reflected on these kinds of moments in the focus group. She explained how hard it was for her to speak up to her colleagues and employers in such situations. She has experienced more often that she felt like others did not respect her at work, because she was working as an undocumented person. She told us how she felt like she lacked the voice to speak up. You do as you are told, because you know the position you are in, and are afraid to lose your job.

Finally, Peter explained what happened to him. He was called every time something dirty happened in the restaurant. When a table had left their child's diaper, they called him to clean it up. He felt like they did not treat him with dignity. The group responded in shock to this experience.

As previously mentioned, people stressed that they felt more negotiating power when being employed through an agency: the contract between the agency and the employer would protect them as employees. Being under contract is thus important for negotiating better treatment at work.

d) Fear of speaking up

Even when people are aware of their rights, they often don't dare to speak up. Participants described how they felt they couldn't ask for fair payment, sick leave, or breaks, because they feared losing their job or being exposed.

Joseph explained how deeply this lack of protection and respect affected him at work. He has often experienced being underpaid, or not sharing in the tips of the place he was working at. He experienced this as a lack of respect, yet he did not dare to say something.

5.5. Working and living conditions: psychosocial work environment

a) Schedule unpredictability

Abhay explained how it was easier for him in some seasons, and harder in others. From our experience at Here to Support we have noticed the pressure of accepting any work you are offered. Many people jump at any opportunity - and stop what they are doing at any time of the day to go to work.

"So you have no option because you just need work. What will sustain you? Because you know yourself. You know your sickness. You have no document. So you have no option. So they give you all the treatment that they want to give you." (Yusuf, focus group 2.1)

b) Lack of access to banking and digital payments

A major issue for undocumented people is that they cannot open a bank account. As cash is increasingly no longer accepted—especially in cafés, supermarkets, and public transport—this

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

leads to daily complications and exclusion from basic services.

c) Working below qualification level
Another recurring issue is that many undocumented people are doing work far below their skill or education level. The type of labor available to them is often degrading or physically demanding, which can be demoralizing for those with professional backgrounds. Most people in the focus groups had different professions in their home country: electricians, engineers, accountants, teachers. Yet, in the Netherlands most of them worked as dishwashers.

d) Housing conditions
In the final focus group, the hackathon, we all took out our keys, and shared insight in the stories behind these keys. Among the people present in the focus groups, multiple people had experienced homelessness, due to being rejected for asylum and then ending up on the streets.
There was variety within the groups in their current housing situation:
- 10 people in asylum seekers centers (some already with residency permit and waiting for their house, some still waiting for their interview in their second procedure/after their Dublin procedure);
- 5 people in their own networks in housing
1 person in a shelter for undocumented people;
- We have heard from many people that they had to pay a lot of rent - because they are undocumented. It's not possible for people to register and have a contract, and many home owners take advantage of this.

Exploitative recruitment in shelters. Some participants who live in shelters (e.g. within the POA programme for rejected asylum seekers in Amsterdam) shared that they are approached by individuals seeking cheap labor—often under exploitative conditions and without payment. People come to the shelters to look for undocumented workers.

LGBTQIA+ discrimination in camps and in shelters. Some of the participants in the focus groups are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This issue has not been discussed in the focus groups, but is often shared in meetings with only LGBTQIA+ people: many people feel discriminated against in big homeless shelters, shelters for undocumented people or in asylum seekers centers. This causes people to feel unsafe to express themselves. Some shelters now have separate LGBTQIA+ floors - which creates safer spaces for people.

Village or city. Because we mostly spoke to people who live in the city - because it's easier to find jobs in the city - the following issue was only mentioned once: the location in the country matters. For people living in villages, there are way less work opportunities. People also have a bigger chance of being ethnically profiled. Yet, housing is more expensive in the city than in the village

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

5.6. Healthcare and occupational safety

A key topic in both focus groups was the link between healthcare access and workplace safety. Many participants shared experiences of being injured at work and not receiving proper support—from either employers or medical professionals. The issue has multiple layers:

a) Lack of protection from employers after injury

Many participants felt abandoned by their employers after getting injured. Instead of providing support or guiding workers to healthcare services, some employers discouraged them from seeking medical help—fearing fines or legal consequences for employing undocumented people. Someone explained how they injured their hand. The employer told them to go to the hospital by themselves and told them that they fell off a bike. They did not pay him anything during his sick-leave, while he was injured at the work floor.

b) Fear of seeking healthcare

In addition to employer pressure, many people shared that they were afraid to seek medical attention themselves—worried that going to the doctor or calling an ambulance might result in police involvement or deportation.

"Let me tell you a story a quick story that happened to me myself I was riding a bike. Around Waterlooplein, down there, I fell down can you imagine it was in my front police car they came like, can we call an ambulance? I'm like: 'I am fine!'. I was broken, I pick my bike, I start moving. I don't want anything." (Daniel, focus group 2.2)

c) No sick leave or safety net after injury

If people get injured and can no longer work, they are usually dismissed. Most employers do not provide any sick leave or compensation, even when injuries occur on the job. This is particularly damaging for people who financially support family members abroad. Multiple people had experienced being injured at work, or colleagues being injured. Employers usually don't help – they send them away and don't pay them until they come back to work. Someone broke their leg once – which took very long to heal – and they experienced financial issues and risked losing their house.

Besides financial struggles, people also felt like they were treated inhumanely. They put all their efforts in their work; yet when something happened to them they were treated poorly by their employer and colleagues.

d) Discrimination by healthcare professionals or police

Even when people attempt to access healthcare, they are often met with discrimination or neglect. Many professionals are unaware of the legal rights of undocumented people, or consciously choose not to respect them. Charlene shared a particularly painful example of how she was treated after an accident:

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

"Let me tell you: I had an accident in 2019 and I remember, it was 2020 first of January. With a bike I was knocked by a scooter at the back and it was quite bad and the girl who knocked me at the back. I was in a bad state so they called the ambulance which I could not even wake up where I was. And when they came, and the police came, they took the lady. (...) So I told them I am undocumented and then they just said oh you don't have a document so we cannot take you. They just put me in the police car instead of the ambulance."(Charlene, focus group 2.2)

6. Resistance and response strategies identified

6.1. Individual and Collective Strategies in the Face of Disputes

Response to disputes with the employer

In both focus groups, we discussed labour disputes with employers and, through those examples, explored broader structural issues experienced by undocumented people. We asked participants how they responded to conflicts at work and what strategies they used.

We noticed that many people remained in jobs with low pay and poor treatment because they needed the income. Especially upon first arriving in the Netherlands, participants described having little knowledge of work rights or the NGOs that could offer support. They also lacked the personal networks needed to find better alternatives.

A common strategy in the face of conflict was de-escalation. People described trying to maintain a calm and friendly relationship with employers, to avoid provoking job loss or further mistreatment.

These reflections highlight a structural inequality: people with legal status can often assert their rights more freely, while undocumented individuals must choose a cautious approach to avoid the risk of being fired or exposed.

Hamo explained that this caution extends to physical safety at work. His strategy was to be very careful not to injure himself at work – by not lifting heavy things for instance.

Because access to healthcare is limited and employers do not provide sick leave, avoiding injury is a crucial part of staying employed.

When labour conditions became unbearable, most people shared that their response was to leave and try to find another job.

Daniel explained that with time, it became easier for him to find work in other sectors, thanks to his growing network and skill set. He also shared how past experiences taught him to clarify job expectations up front to avoid being exploited:

"You understand. Because tell me, what are you employing me for? If you tell me to wash the dish, please, I'm not going to wash toilets." (Daniel, focus group 2.2)

Other participants agreed that clearly discussing responsibilities before starting a job was a helpful strategy to avoid being surprised by tasks that weren't agreed upon.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Response to labour inspection or police

In restaurants and bars, undocumented workers are often placed in dishwashing or kitchen roles to avoid visibility. Participants described how painful it is to be forced to hide at work.

Aaron shared his experience with a workplace inspection. He worked under a big construction company, and had experienced controllers coming to their workplace. Seventy employers ran to the streets to avoid being caught.

In some cases, employers and employees work out informal plans to avoid inspections. For example, workers might leave through a back door, or employers might set aside money in case of fines. John shared that he had such an arrangement with his employer.

6.2 Forms of self-organization

The most important form of self-organization mentioned in the focus groups was referring each other to work. Since undocumented jobs—without contracts or formal payroll—cannot be advertised online, they circulate through word-of-mouth.

Another widespread strategy is to work through informal agencies that hire multiple people. This tactic creates a layer of protection: many employers are unaware that the person working is undocumented and treat them accordingly.

Participants also described how undocumented people self-organize through grassroots collectives to support each other in various ways: finding shelter in emergencies, accessing healthcare, negotiating for better working conditions, or taking collective political action.Here to Support offers these communities access to office space for their meetings and organizing efforts. On weekends, the office is used for gatherings, and the in-house podcast studio is regularly used to record audio.

Many migrant workers are also involved in the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union, which actively organizes protests, meets with politicians, and uses creative strategies—such as theatre—to push for change. Aishah from FNV Migrant Domestic Workers also participated in the focus groups. Aishah explained grassroots organising often begins by identifying shared struggles—across sectors and statuses. While her work within the Migrant Domestic Workers (MDV) network is central, she emphasizes the need to extend solidarity and campaigns to other undocumented workers, such as those in restaurants.

One important strategy not mentioned in the focus groups—but shared by people from the broader Here to Support network—is the use of community savings institutions. These informal financial alliances are built within migrant communities, where members contribute a set amount of money each month. The collective savings are made available to one person in the group at a time, often rotating based on need. These funds are used both for emergencies in the Netherlands and to support families back home. We know people from Gambian

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

communities and Filipino communities who engage in community saving strategies.

6.3 Community or institutional supports and external factors

For people who had contact with fellow workers or NGOs and gained knowledge about their rights, it became easier to negotiate better labour conditions. Simply knowing one's rights increased confidence and capacity to resist injustice:

Charlene shared how she stood up for herself when she was denied a break at work. The supervisor and colleagues eventually all apologized. This shows that speaking up can work, especially when someone feels empowered to act.

Workshops and information sessions by organisations such as FairWork have helped individuals understand how to protect themselves, particularly when it comes to documentation and evidence-gathering in case of wage disputes:

"No, but they can collect some proof. Where you work, make some photos, selfies yourself. You don't need to go directly to the police. You can go to the Fairwork." (Abhay, focus group 2.2)

However, in practice, only a few people end up reporting to FairWork or the police, mainly out of fear of drawing attention to themselves. The need to remain "under the radar" remains a central concern for undocumented individuals.

At the same time, participating in this research was itself described as a form of resistance. Speaking collectively feels safer than confronting employers alone. Through these focus groups, people used their voice to advocate for systemic change.

One proposal that emerged from the group was to advocate for a City ID, similar to the IDNYC in New York, which allows all city residents to identify themselves regardless of their migration status. Another idea was to expand the City Rights App across the Netherlands, to ensure that more people are informed of their rights.

7. Intersectional factors - Relevant identity markers identified

7.1. Relevant identity markers identified

Within our focus groups, a diverse group of people shared their perspective. In this section we reflect shortly on the different identity markers of the participants in the focus groups. We will explore these factors in labour exploitation and agency and self-organisation below.

Some of the identity markers of influence on people's experiences and participation are:

Country of origin & networks - In our focus groups, we spoke with a diverse group of participants from India, Indonesia, Kenya, Sudan, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Most individuals find work through personal networks, which are often organized around shared countries or regions of origin. We observed notable differences between these networks in terms of

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

self-organization, access to employment, and the ability to share information about rights and available support.
We notice great organising power among some communities: forming unions and having regular meetings to support each other and provide information about rights (see 7.3 for additional information). For some communities this is harder: some people don't know anyone from their country of origin. Other communities have more trouble accessing information and organising themselves within the Netherlands. This causes greater precarity.

Language - Language is closely linked to country of origin and plays a critical role in both accessing support networks and securing employment. Language barriers can significantly impact a person's ability to navigate services or find work, especially in environments where English or Dutch is essential. English- or Dutch-speaking undocumented individuals have broader networks and more access to information, which facilitates finding work and community. For people who only speak other languages, such as Arabic or Javanese, the barriers are steep.
Hamo explained how he experienced this within his community of Arabic speaking people. It's harder to find a job in the first place. When you have a job, it's also difficult to operate on the work floor:

"Then you go, you get the job and you go to the kitchen and then there they say, do this or give me the spoon. You don't know which is the spoon it will be like, spoon, spoon – 'what the fuck, give me the spoon!'" (Hamo, focus group 2.2)

Hamo summarizes well what issue many people experience in the Netherlands. As an English or Dutch speaker, it is easier to expand your networks and find places to work. For people who speak other languages, it is way more difficult. Their networks are smaller.
Connected to language is literacy. One person in the focus groups is illiterate. For him it's very complicated to find work: most employers communicate with their employees through WhatsApp and expect them to be able to respond. On the work floor, literacy is frequently also crucial for understanding assignments from the employer and communicating with colleagues and customers.

Gender - Our focus groups included more men than women. Within the broader network of Here to Support, we observe gendered patterns in employment: more women are active in domestic work, while more men work in the food industry.
In our focus groups, most participants were men. At Here to Support, we also encounter more men than women. We think there might be multiple reasons for this: Women may feel less safe or comfortable speaking in group settings with men present.

We notice that men often dominate conversations and feel more comfortable taking space.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Statistically, there are more male than female refugees in the Netherlands - and thus more male than female rejected asylum seekers. We don't have access to any numbers of undocumented people who did not go through an asylum procedure.

Gender and work:
We notice that more women work in the domestic and care sector, rather than in kitchens or logistics. This has multiple reasons: domestic work and care work are still more seen as female domains - we notice that men often do not want to work in these sectors. Also, jobs perceived as being more physical, are often executed by men.
Many undocumented women carry the sole responsibility over their children. This limits them in their possibilities to find work. The possibility to bring kids to the workplace makes domestic work a more compatible option with childhood care.
Risk of sexual abuse: we frequently hear from cases of women being (sexually) abused at home and in work settings (at times men also report abuse, but less frequently).

Religion - Religion intersects with gender and participation. In some Muslim communities, for instance, women are more comfortable engaging in women-only spaces. Religious beliefs can also influence the types of jobs individuals are willing to do—for example, some people avoid serving or handling alcohol.
Additionally, religious institutions such as churches and mosques often play a vital role in providing access to housing, employment, and community support.

Ethnicity, ethnic profiling and discrimination - Ethnicity is often intertwined with country of origin and language. People frequently rely on regional or ethnic networks to access work, support, and information. However, participants also shared experiences of discrimination and racial profiling, which were often linked to their ethnicity (see section 7.2).
Participants shared that people from African backgrounds are more frequently assumed to be undocumented, leading to discriminatory treatment and targeted inspections:

"They also connect, you don't have paper to you are African. So if you work there and you're African, there's a chance you don't have paper." (Hamo, focus group 2.2)

Pressure from family & home country networks - Many individuals face intense pressure from family members and communities in their home countries who depend on them financially. For some, supporting their families is a primary motivation for migration, and this ongoing obligation adds to the emotional and financial stress of living undocumented.

Many undocumented people are responsible not just for themselves but also for family members or children in their country of origin. This adds immense

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

pressure to remain employed, even under exploitative conditions.

Physical ability - Physical ability significantly affects employment opportunities. Many jobs available to undocumented people are physically demanding, and those with physical disabilities often find themselves in highly precarious situations. This issue will be explored further in section 7.2.

Abhay has been suffering from back pains, and because of this was not able to work for a longer period of time. This caused him to be in a precarious situation: he could no longer earn an income to pay his rent. There are no social services undocumented people can rely on in such a situation. Abhay finally approached the Worldhouse in The Hague, and has approached us (Here to Support) to support him. Through support from the Red Cross we were able to help him cover his rent for a while.
Multiple people have shared how they got injured at work, and how this caused them to lack income for a period of time.

Age - Age also plays a role in employment discrimination. Because much of the available work is physical, employers often prefer to hire younger people. Older individuals may therefore face additional barriers when trying to find work.

Intersectional markers in coping mechanisms - See chapter 6 for more information about responses of workers. We notice that people with larger networks and organizing power are often better informed about their rights, can find work easier, and are thus more resilient in the labour field. This has to do with language/literacy, country of origin, networks & digital abilities.
An important strategy identified by Daniel within the focus groups: he developed different skills. He noticed that he could more easily find work with experience in restaurants and experience in painting/renovation. Because he could more easily switch jobs, he was less prone to be exploited by his employer, because he was less dependent on one workplace.

7.2 Intersectional analysis as factors in agency and self-organization

Awareness of rights and real accessibility to the rights: as previously mentioned, people who are in self-organising networks or who have contact with NGOs frequently have more knowledge about their rights (chapter 5). Having support from others in accessing rights also makes it easier: going to the police by yourself might be dangerous, and being accompanied by someone feels safer.
See chapter 6 for more information on unionizing and collective coping strategies such as community savings systems.

8. Learning and reflections

8.1. Methodological difficulties and challenges

Understanding the project - During our initial contacts with networks of undocumented people—through WhatsApp or in person—we realized that not everyone understood the aim of the

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

project. Some people approached us hoping we could help them find work. Others were in asylum procedures and therefore legally allowed to work. Several people who initially showed interest withdrew once they understood the project involved speaking openly about their work experiences in a group setting. Fear of being exposed remains a strong barrier to participation.

Financial compensation - Due to legal restrictions, we were unable to financially compensate participants in this research, as this could be interpreted as formal employment—a risk that could result in fines. Instead, we chose to compensate participants with supermarket vouchers.

Diversity in the focus groups - Before recruiting participants, we aimed to compose a diverse group for each focus group: three people from Africa, three from Asia, and three from Latin America. We also hoped to include participants from different work sectors—such as restaurants, agriculture, and delivery—and to achieve gender balance.
This turned out to be more difficult than expected. Most participants came from communities we already had contact with, either through Here to Support or partner organisations. Despite extensive outreach to Latin American communities, no one from these groups chose to participate. A likely reason is that they had not previously worked with us on advocacy projects and were reluctant to share their work-related experiences.

Scheduling - Scheduling was another challenge. Since most participants were working, it was difficult to find a time that worked for everyone. In the end, we decided to host evening sessions and provide dinner, allowing participants to join directly after work.

Translations - One of the focus groups included both Arabic and English speakers. With the help of a translator, the conversation went well, though we noticed that translation slowed down the discussion. For future research, it might be more effective to conduct focus groups in a single language.

Activism - During a discussion about possible actions, one participant, Hamo, suggested going on strike. However, this idea was met with immediate resistance from others. Hamo was criticized for thinking like this, because he has his residency permit. Multiple people responded that due to the pressure of earning an income, and lack of alternatives – most undocumented people would not go on strike out of fear of losing their jobs.
The quote reflects a central tension: it is difficult to engage in activism or long-term planning when your daily life is focused on survival.

Lack of agency - Another participant quote reflects how being undocumented affects one's sense of agency and ability to imagine a future. He was not able to dream positively about the future, yet only able to see negative scenarios.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

8.2. Aspects to be modified or incorporated into the PAR

Having informal one-on-one meetings before the focus groups - Before each focus group, we held informal one-on-one meetings with all participants. This approach proved to be valuable and could be included as a best practice in future participatory research guidelines.

These informal conversations created a space to build trust, better understand each participant's work experience, and allow space for personal stories. They also gave participants time to reflect on their experiences and begin thinking about the themes we would discuss in the group setting. This preparation helped participants feel more confident and comfortable sharing during the focus groups themselves.

Involvement - Undocumented people should always be included not just as subjects of research, but as active participants in the process. Research should be grounded in mutual respect and accountability—moving away from extractive practices and instead focusing on sharing results, co-creating knowledge, and involving people meaningfully at every stage. This approach acknowledges their expertise and lived experience, and ensures that the research serves the communities it engages.It is equally important to maintain connection with participants even after the research concludes.

9. Proposal of Actions

9.1. Identification of problems that can be addressed through the action(s)

In the final focus group dedicated to action, we began by imagining where we would like to be in 10 years. Participants were invited to come up with newspaper headlines dated 5 July 2034. Although we expected a range of visions and perhaps disagreement, the opposite occurred: there was strong consensus. The key message was clear—the goal of our campaign should be regularization through work.

Daniel dreamed of all immigrants having equal rights to Dutch citizens, and being able to get documents by working in the Netherlands. Aaron agreed, undocumented people should get their permit through the purpose of work. Also Charlene, Peter, Abhay and Praise agreed: equal rights, access to society, and a permit through work is what should exist in the future.

Participants consistently emphasized that regularization through work would resolve many of the structural challenges they face: lack of access to banking, fear of speaking up or reporting abuse, limited access to healthcare, and the inability to rent housing. Alongside this was a strong desire to be recognized as workers. Many participants pointed out that the media and political discourse in the Netherlands often portray refugees and migrants as a burden to society. What remains invisible are the contributions undocumented people make every day.

As Daniel explained:

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

"Because narrative that a lot of Dutch people feel like immigrants are the people who are bringing problems to the country. But we want to change the narrative from now to the next six months."
(Daniel, focus group 3.1)

The conclusion was clear: we want a change in narrative. We want to be recognized for the work we do. We want regularization through work.
Reflecting on this collective dream, Hamo noted how modest the goals actually were. No one expressed a desire to be rich or do something crazy. No one mentioned flying to the moon or owning a luxury car. Instead, the collective dream was to attain basic rights and dignity—the ability to work legally and be safe.
The structural inequality that undocumented people face is severe. While Dutch citizens move across borders freely, others must travel dangerous routes, often arriving only to find themselves locked out of society. People who are willing to work hard still face precarious conditions, marginalization, and constant risk of deportation.

9.2. Actions Suggested by the Participants

After discussing our collective vision for the future, we explored concrete steps we could take toward that goal. We structured the conversation around three questions: WHO do we want to reach, WHAT do we want to say, and HOW do we want to say it?

WHO do we want to reach?

- **Dutch society:** In the final focus group, participants agreed that the most important group to reach is the general public. Changing the narrative around undocumented people means shifting public perception.
- **Popular media:** Media play a crucial role in shaping opinion. Participants highlighted the lack of representation of undocumented people in mainstream narratives, and stressed the need for their voices to be heard directly.
Policymakers: In light of the campaign for regularization, lobbying was identified as a necessary strategy.

WHAT do we want to say?

- **Undocumented people are working and contributing:** The campaign should highlight that undocumented people provide essential labour and contribute to
- **Dutch society every day.** We want to regularize through work: Participants expressed a collective demand for a pathway to legal residency through employment. They want to be recognized as workers and to have their labour rights respected.

HOW do we want to say it?

- **Social media content:** To reach Dutch society, participants proposed creating social media content with broad appeal. One idea was to make cooking videos that incorporate political messages about migration and labour. The inspiration came from Abarka, a Spanish initiative where people cook, share stories, and discuss global inequality and migration while preparing meals.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

- **Manifesto:** For policy impact, a written manifesto was suggested—addressed to political decision-makers.
- **Food-centered content:** Given the focus on the food sector in this project, many ideas revolved around food as a way to engage people. Initially, a cookbook was proposed, combining recipes with personal stories and information about work rights. However, since there are already two cookbooks by undocumented people in the Netherlands, the group decided instead to produce video content centered on food and labour rights.

9.3. Recommendations for Public Policies, Organizations, and Academia

a) Intersectional markers and systemic measures

Migrant workers in the Netherlands, particularly those who are undocumented, are especially vulnerable to undignified working conditions due to the intersection of legal status, socio-economic marginalization, and identity markers such as race, gender, and language barriers (see chapter 7.2). Their lack of legal residence status excludes them from basic rights and protections, making them highly dependent on informal and often exploitative labour arrangements in face-to-face sectors.

To improve working conditions, changes in legal and policy frameworks are not sufficient. Systemic measures are required, with priority given to dismantling the linkage act (koppelingswet), which institutionalises exclusion by tying access to rights and services to legal residence. Undocumented status is the most significant factor contributing to exploitation; regularisation schemes—not only asylum procedures—are essential to reduce vulnerability.

Recent political developments have intensified these risks: a majority in the Dutch House of Representatives has voted in favour of criminalising undocumented status, as well as criminalising those who provide support to undocumented individuals. The proposed legislation is still awaiting a vote in the Senate.

Some municipalities, like Amsterdam, are resisting these trends by initiating inclusive local pilots and refusing to cooperate with national exclusionary policies. These city-level initiatives show the importance of local action in challenging systemic injustice and offering protection and dignity to undocumented workers.

b) Rights under EU legislation

In general, irregular migrant workers in the Netherlands are not aware of, nor able to effectively access, the rights they are entitled to under relevant EU legislation. The only known exception is the Migrant Domestic Workers Union, which actively campaigns for recognition under ILO Convention 189. Their efforts show that awareness and mobilisation around rights frameworks are possible but remain limited to a small, self-organised segment. Aishah is part of the FNV – she wants to focus not only on people in the domestic sector, but also in the hospitality branch and other sectors.

Some undocumented people compare national contexts and are aware that regularisation through employment is

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

possible in countries like Spain. These comparisons lead individuals and collectives to explore possibilities in other EU countries, seeking more favourable legal environments. However, as far as we know, people are not familiar with EU-level legislation specific to the agri-food sector

c) Informed about rights

Most undocumented migrant workers in the Netherlands are not sufficiently informed about their rights under existing legal frameworks. A lack of accessible and reliable information severely limits their ability to negotiate with employers, access healthcare, or report crimes. This structural knowledge gap contributes to their vulnerability and exploitation. In communities that organise within unions or engage with NGOs, there is greater awareness and empowerment.

Another obstacle already mentioned in this report is that even when migrants do have access to information about their rights, many professionals are not aware of the rights of undocumented people. We often see discrimination by police officers or healthcare institutions.

d) Frameworks concerning hiring and exploitation

Most irregular migrant workers in the Netherlands are not aware of the existence of legal frameworks concerning their hiring and protection from exploitation. A notable exception is the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union, which organises around labour rights and international conventions (see chapters 2, 6 and 7), and Fairwork, which structurally informs people about their rights.

The broader undocumented population often lacks information about basic rights due to legal exclusion, language barriers, fear of authorities. These challenges significantly hinder awareness of and access to protections under current frameworks.

With regard to back pay, the Dutch government does not systematically inform migrant workers of their right to recover wages before enforcing return decisions. In cases of voluntary return, some NGOs like IOM or VluchtelingenWerk (Met Opgeheven Hoofd) may inform individuals about possible entitlements. However, for those detained and forcibly returned, the situation is much more precarious. People in detention centers are often not adequately informed about their rights, are pressured to sign "voluntary" return forms, and may be subjected to isolation or psychological coercion. These conditions create an environment where access to justice and recovery of unpaid wages is virtually impossible.

e) Access rights - complaints mechanisms and legal proceedings

Irregular migrant workers in the Netherlands face significant barriers in exercising their rights through complaints mechanisms or legal proceedings. The main challenges are a lack of knowledge about existing rights and procedures, and a pervasive fear of speaking out due to their undocumented status.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Fairwork is one of the organisations that supports undocumented workers in recovering unpaid wages, by connecting them with lawyers who can formally address employers.
In our focus groups, three participants were familiar with Fairwork, and none had pursued wage recovery, despite widespread experiences of unpaid labour. While third parties such as Fairwork can support and intervene on behalf of workers, the broader structural barriers continue to prevent most undocumented migrants from accessing justice.

f) Minimum wages

In the Netherlands, migrant workers—including those without legal status—officially have the right to receive at least the minimum wage. However, awareness of this right is limited. In our focus groups, only three participants knew they were entitled to minimum wage, while most were unaware. Even when informed, irregular migrant workers rarely report underpayment; instead, they often choose to leave exploitative jobs and seek new ones, avoiding formal complaints out of fear or mistrust. While referencing the minimum wage can help in negotiations—some employers respond positively—this is not guaranteed. As a result, many undocumented workers are systematically underpaid, which has direct consequences for their wellbeing. Limited income leads to poor and unstable living conditions, lack of access to healthcare, food insecurity, and chronic financial stress, reinforcing their vulnerability and dependence on informal, exploitative labour arrangements.
Current Dutch immigration policy grants work visas primarily to "knowledge migrants"—people with high education and income. At the same time, there are labour shortages in many essential, low-wage sectors. Yet hiring people from outside the EU remains extremely difficult due to strict regulations.

In the Netherlands, employers are only allowed to hire someone from outside the EEA (European Economic Area) or Switzerland if they have not been able to find a suitable candidate within the EEA, and the vacancy has been open for at least **5 weeks, or 3 months** if the job is considered difficult to fill.
As a result, it's nearly impossible for most people to migrate to the Netherlands on a work permit unless they are highly educated. For those already in the country without legal status, there is no route to regularization through work.
This legal bottleneck contributes to a system in which people who want to work end up undocumented. As elections approach, we will lobby **for a new regularization route based on work.**

9.4. Proposals for Supranational Action / Possibilities for Replication or Extension

The demand for change extends beyond national borders. Participants expressed a desire for broader European reforms: more freedom of movement, recognition of low-skilled work, and regularization policies that reflect the lived realities of migrants across Europe.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

This campaign—centered on regularization through work and recognition of undocumented workers—could be replicated in other European countries with similar immigration challenges. International collaboration among grassroots organizations, labour unions, and human rights advocates will be essential to achieving systemic change.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Deliverable information

Deliverable factsheet	
Title	**Participatory action research case studies. Migrant workers in food supply chain sectors. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Here To Support**
Work Package, Task and Deliverable	WP7 Participatory Action Research (PAR) Task 7.2
Publication date	29.01.2026
Authors	Hamo Salhein, Fanny van der Vooren
Publication identifier	10.5281/zenodo.18401541
Dissemination Level	PU
Deliverable type	Report

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652

Participatory action research case studies

Migrant workers in food supply chain sector

Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Here To Support

About DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

www.dignityfirm.eu

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652