



Participatory action research case studies

Migrant workers in food supply chain sectors

Wroclaw, Poland

Nomada association

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Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Context of the study: Wroclaw, Poland	3
3. Focus Groups	7
4. Narrative analysis of results	12
5. Definition of problems	14
6. Resistance and response strategies identified	29
7. Intersectional factors – Relevant identity markers identified	31
8. Learning and reflections	36
9. Proposal of Actions	38



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 Wrocław](#) (Legarda, I., 2025);
- [Participatory Action Research \(PAR\). Migrant organisations led actions](#) (PICUM, 2025).

2. Context of the study: Wrocław, Poland

2.1 Analysis of systemic challenges – temporary work agencies

In recent years, Poland has become not only a transit country but also a destination for a growing number of migrants who choose to settle for the longer term. However, the administrative and legal system has not been adapted to the scale and nature of these changes.

2.1.1. Systemic shortcomings

The current administrative and legal framework regulating the service for foreigners has not kept pace with the rapidly evolving migration landscape in Poland. Institutions responsible for servicing and monitoring incoming migrants, including migration offices and labour inspection bodies, remain underfunded and understaffed. The excessive workload, lack of specialised training, and insufficient substantive competence result in inadequate and ineffective services for the growing migrant population.

2.1.2. Problematic legal areas

Definition of human trafficking

Although the legal definition of human trafficking in Poland formally includes a broad range of exploitative practices, in practice it is interpreted very narrowly by Border Guard officers, the police, and prosecutors. These institutions are not sufficiently trained or equipped to properly identify cases of trafficking or forced labour, especially when such situations are

not clear-cut and require analysis within a broader social and legal context. In practice, identification is usually limited to cases involving physical violence, confiscation of documents, or direct restrictions on a person's freedom of movement.

As a result, two key components of the legal definition of trafficking are often overlooked:

1. deception for the purpose of exploitation,
2. abuse of a person's particularly vulnerable life situation.

Failure to account for these elements allows employment agencies to create complex systems of dependency and exploitation that fall outside of the binary interpretation of trafficking. These systems often rely on the gradual deepening of economic, informational, and administrative dependency, beginning with recruitment in the country of origin and continuing through to employment and daily life in Poland.

Criminalisation of irregular work

People engaged in undeclared work – even when doing so unknowingly or against their will – are subject to administrative penalties and may receive decisions ordering them to leave the country. These decisions are often accompanied by an entry ban to Poland and the Schengen Area for a period ranging from 6 months to 5 years. Although the law requires the employer to initiate the work permit procedure, many migrants mistakenly believe this process has begun. Temporary

work agencies frequently charge fees for supposed administrative services and deduct taxes and health contributions, yet fail to initiate any formal procedures.

A similar pattern applies to the residence legalisation process. While, in principle, it is the responsibility of the migrant, many employers claim they will handle it themselves, again charging fees. When no action is taken or information is withheld, migrants often lose the opportunity to legalise their stay in time and unknowingly fall into irregular status.

As a result, these individuals are deprived of basic rights and refrain from reporting abuses out of fear of legal repercussions. The obligation of the National Labour Inspectorate to report cases of irregular work to the Border Guard further increases the risk of receiving an obligation to return order.

2.1.3. Mechanisms of dependency

Temporary work agencies in Poland have developed complex systems of dependency that, in many cases, bear clear features of human trafficking.

This process often begins in the country of origin, where Polish agencies collaborate with local intermediaries who recruit workers for a fee. This creates a transactional arrangement: individuals are sent to Poland under agreements between agencies.

Dependency begins at this early stage: migrants frequently take out loans to

cover travel costs and, upon arrival, are sometimes intimidated by recruiters from their home countries—especially if they attempt to assert their rights or contact the police. After arrival, they are handed over to Polish agencies, which frequently fail to initiate the legally required procedures for employment or residence. This leads to irregular status, which is then used as a tool of coercion: workers are threatened with being reported to the Border Guard in order to prevent them from reporting abuses or seeking help.

Dependency is further exacerbated by a lack of formal transparency – contracts are often written in languages incomprehensible to the workers and include clauses that are illegal under Polish law, such as:

- fees for supposed “service costs”,
- financial penalties for lateness, illness, or minor mistakes,
- obligations to pay for damage to tools and equipment, even if this results from normal use.

These contract conditions further entrench the imbalance of power between workers and agencies, leaving migrants with limited ability to defend their rights or understand the terms under which they are employed.

Although contracts often state a standard 8-hour workday and a 5-day workweek, in practice people work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week—usually on a piecework basis, with no real rest.

This working pattern leads to exhaustion, deteriorating physical and mental health, and a higher risk of workplace accidents. Even though health insurance contributions are deducted, these workers are not formally insured. As a result, they are denied access to healthcare, and any loss of health often results in the loss of their job.

The situation is particularly difficult for pregnant women or those caring for newborn babies—who lose their jobs, income, housing, and legal basis for residence.

Accommodation is tightly linked to employment. People are housed in isolated areas with limited access to public transport, healthcare, or social support. Losing one's job means immediate eviction. No savings means no ability to survive outside the agency system.

All of this creates a closed loop of dependency—people lacking information and support are trapped in a system with no real path out. Even if they leave one agency, they are quickly absorbed by another, which replicates the same exploitative practices.

Legal changes and their potential impact on migrant workers

On June 1, 2025, amendments to Polish immigration law came into force which, according to experts and organisations supporting migrants, are expected to significantly worsen their situation in the labour market. The new regulations

increase the risk of falling into irregular status and push more people into informal employment, particularly those without access to stable jobs or legal protections.

One of the most impactful changes is the new obligation for employers to notify the Office for Foreigners of the termination of a migrant's employment. From that moment, the migrant has only 30 days to find a new employer and obtain a new work permit to continue their regularisation procedure. Given that the process of obtaining a work permit (outside of temporary work agencies) usually takes several months, fulfilling this obligation is nearly impossible in practice. Previously, many migrants relied on administrative delays and deliberately did not report job termination to buy time to find a more trustworthy employer. The new law closes off this option.

Additionally, certain nationalities will be excluded from the right to work while in Poland under visa-free entry. Although the official list has not yet been published, Colombia is almost certain to be included. This means that people from Colombia will no longer be able to work regularly without first obtaining a work visa.

The changes also affect migrant students—regular employment will now only be possible after completing their studies and obtaining graduate status. This prevents students from earning an income while studying, posing a serious financial burden for many.



Another controversial provision is the suspension of applications for international protection in the border region with Belarus. Although this violates the Geneva Convention, it effectively prevents people who crossed the border irregularly from accessing the regularisation process or the right to work.

Additional obstacles have also been introduced for undocumented migrants due to the reinstatement of border checks between Poland and Germany. This restricts mobility and, in the context of the Dublin Agreement, increases the risk of deportation back to Poland—or prevents people from leaving it.

The only change perceived as potentially positive is the increase in fines for work agencies that violate laws—up to 50,000 PLN. However, experts note that this may still be too low to serve as a real deterrent for large agencies.

2.2. Track record of the organisation in the subject

In response to the growing scale of exploitation of people employed by temporary work agencies in Poland, the NOMADA Association launched intensive activities to counter this phenomenon. Aware that the number of people coming to Poland for work purposes would systematically increase and that the issue of safeguarding labour rights would become one of the key social challenges, we identified this area as a strategic direction for the development of our work.

A turning point was the employment of an activist who had themselves experienced exploitation in the workplace and had in-depth knowledge of the problems faced by the Latin American community in Poland. Thanks to their involvement, we initiated a wide-reaching diagnosis of the situation: mapping Latin American communities, identifying temporary work agencies responsible for employment, analysing working conditions, and attempting to understand the mechanisms of exploitation and dependency.

We developed a system of direct support for people seeking to break free from the closed loop of dependency created by agencies. We offered accommodation in our emergency shelter or in partner hostels, provided legal and financial support, assistance with administrative and medical procedures, and accompanied people in dealings with public institutions – such as the Border Guard, Police, or the Migration Office. NOMADA's lawyers also represented individuals who had the chance to be recognised as victims of trafficking. Within six months, nearly 300 people accessed various forms of support.

Since only a small number of individuals meet the formal criteria to be recognised as victims of trafficking – which grants them state protection, open access to the labour market, and exemption from penalties for irregular work – NOMADA created an alternative support system for those excluded from this legal framework. In doing so, we filled a significant gap in





the support ecosystem offered by the NGO sector, as no other organisation in Poland had so far provided such comprehensive assistance to people experiencing labour exploitation who are not formally recognised as victims of trafficking.

We also initiated advocacy efforts aimed at presenting the practices of employment agencies as a system with characteristics of forced labour, in the sense defined by the Polish Penal Code. Our goal was to raise awareness among state institutions and the general public about the complexity and scale of the issue.

NOMADA strives to build a nationwide network of civil society organisations engaged in the protection of migrant workers' rights. At this stage, we work closely with the Integration-Port Association in Słupsk and the Polish Migration Forum in Warsaw. Within the framework of the international Community Sponsorship pilot, we also provided support to one family as part of the International Pathways programme.

At NOMADA's initiative, the Environmental Committee of Workers from Latin America in Poland was established within the National Trade Union Workers' Initiative. The aim of this autonomous union structure is to raise awareness of labour and residence rights among those employed by agencies, especially newly arrived workers. One of the key issues we have identified is the late timing of seeking help – often only after a person has lost

their migration status. As part of a mini-grant, the Committee developed a graphic, multilingual manual explaining step by step how to regularise residence and employment in Poland.

The Committee is also engaged in advocacy activities. The testimonies of Latin American people in Poland were published in an artistic booklet aimed at raising awareness among Polish society and became the foundation for a theatre performance – a renowned director, Krzysztof Kopka – illustrating the system of dependency created by employment agencies.

Thanks to the experience gained, members of the Committee are increasingly participating as experts in consultative and educational events – including meetings with representatives of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, as well as events organised by national trade union federations. Cooperation has also been established with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Both the Committee and the NOMADA Association declare their readiness to collaborate with other migrant communities and work to build solidarity among people employed by work agencies – regardless of their origin.

3. Focus Groups

3.1. Participant search process

The recruitment process was made more difficult by the necessity to change our





peer researcher during the course of the project. This case serves as a telling example of the absurdities within the Polish system for regularising the stay and employment of migrants.

Due to the requirement of obtaining a new work permit every time a migrant changes employer, the initial activities involving the initial peer researcher were delayed by two months.

This was not the end of the complications. They had worked for over a year and a half in a regular job, paid taxes, and was registered in the public health insurance system. Nevertheless, they were unable to obtain clear information from the Migrant Office regarding their residence status. It was later revealed that their residence procedure had been discontinued due to a failure to appear at a scheduled appointment – a result of not reporting a change in their correspondence address in time. Official letters were sent to the address of their previous employer. This information only came to light after the intervention of the Ombudsman.

As a result, the peer-researcher voluntarily reported themselves to the Border Guard, and was issued an obligation to return order, along with an eight-month ban on entry to the Schengen area. Their role was taken over by Rocio, the current chair of the union committee, whose residency status is regulated.

During recruitment, we focused on individuals employed by temporary work

agencies. This choice was motivated by two key factors. Firstly, the situation in Poland, described in detail in the earlier part of the report, and secondly – the phase of participatory action research (PAR) we considered most crucial: transforming research findings into real actions.

We concluded that in order to develop shared strategies among people from different migrant communities, we needed to build on a foundation of shared experiences that could foster mutual understanding and solidarity. Additionally, in order to maximise the potential impact of project activities, we focused on areas with high concentrations of migrant workers – particularly those employed by large agencies subcontracting workers to large industrial plants. This thematic narrowing enhanced both the precision and effectiveness of our conclusions and recommendations, and allowed for the development of a coherent advocacy narrative.

Consequently, we intentionally did not include people employed individually in small restaurants or family businesses – although, of course, when participants had such experiences, they were treated as valuable and enriching perspectives.

To ensure future action effectiveness, we focused on individuals holding leadership roles in their communities. These individuals were both more engaged and influential within their social circles, making them natural advocates and





representatives in further advocacy efforts.

We decided to create two focus groups: one Colombian and one “international” (English-speaking). Firstly, this was due to the fluidity and quality of discussion – we believed that conducting the focus groups in a language understood by all participants would significantly improve their effectiveness. The use of interpreters, even high-quality simultaneous interpretation, could have disrupted the dynamics of the meetings. Secondly, the groups differed in their levels of organisational maturity. The Colombian group had some experience with collective action and deeper understanding of the system than the “international” group, who had not previously been organised and generally came from more individual, often isolated backgrounds.

Gathering the Colombian group was relatively easy. The main challenge was selecting participants to reflect a wide range of experiences.

In contrast, assembling the “international” group – consisting of migrants employed by agencies from communities whom we had not worked with before – proved much more difficult. Attempting to reach beyond the Latin American community revealed numerous barriers: closed ethnic networks, mutual distrust and stereotypes, and varying levels of comfort, trust, and willingness to speak – both between and within groups.

There were cases of people who initially confirmed participation but withdrew without notice. It is worth noting that such distrust was often directed not only at the system but also at NGOs, which are sometimes seen not as allies but as part of the broader structure. These situations required consistent trust-building and a clear emphasis on NOMADA’s independence and commitment to migrants.

Ultimately, the “international” group was formed through “friends and friends of friends,” and through the contacts of the peer researcher and NOMADA. Despite the challenges, we succeeded in forming a diverse group willing to work together during the following stages of the study.

3.2. Composition and characteristics of the participants

Colombian group: The Colombian group consisted of 10 people, including 4 women. **All participants in this group had experienced irregular employment through temporary work agencies.** These situations most often occurred immediately after arriving in Poland on a visa-free basis. In this context, it was irregular work – not the visa-free entry itself – that increased the risk of falling into undocumented status.

Most of the participants eventually managed to find regular employment and begin the process of regularising their stay. However, some still remain in limbo – despite working formally, they have no



access to clear information about their migration status.

International group: The international group consisted of 6 people. Initially, more participants were expected, but some withdrew at the last minute due to personal reasons. Each person represented a different nationality: Turkey, Ukraine, Angola, Zimbabwe, and two participants from Morocco. The group was evenly split between men and women.

The presence of a participant from Ukraine was particularly important due to tensions between different migrant communities. Ukrainian workers, often placed in supervisory roles, are seen as those enforcing exploitative conditions – being on the front line of interaction with other workers. This creates negative associations and tension in inter-community relations.

All group members had experienced irregular employment, although not always via employment agencies. Three participants had worked irregularly in restaurants run by other migrants. The Turkish participant had worked in a business owned by a member of their own community. Several participants also had experience working in food delivery.

Two participants held student status, which granted them access to the open labour market. One of them temporarily lost this status, leading to a period of irregular employment.

The migration status and access to the labour market of the remaining participants was as follows:

- One participant arrived in Poland from Ukraine before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 and does not hold “UKR” status functioning within the EU temporary protection framework, which provides access to the labour market under preferential terms.
- One participant entered Poland on a work visa issued by a fictitious agency and had no contact with the agency after arrival. After a period of exploitation in a restaurant, they eventually began the process of regularising their stay.
- Two participants entered Poland irregularly via the Belarusian border. Both applied for international protection. One received three negative decisions and fell into undocumented status, excluding the possibility of regular employment. The other is still in the process of seeking protection, which grants them the right to work regularly.

At the time of the study, most participants from the international group were in the process of regularising their stay – as students or employees.

Each group was invited to two focus group meetings, each with a different format and objective. The first meetings had a

more open-ended form, aimed at creating a space for spontaneous sharing of problems related to life and work in Poland, without prioritising specific issues. The second meetings were more structured and task-oriented – their aim was to identify the root causes of the problems previously mentioned. These required more facilitation and participant focus.

3.3. Functioning of the groups

The Colombian group

The Colombian group functioned in a very cohesive and intensive way, often sharing difficult migration experiences and mutual support. They were also familiar with the peer researcher and the project coordinator, which translated into a high level of trust. The participants had similar experiences related to irregular employment. These shared reference points created an atmosphere of openness and trust during the meetings, which resembled conversations among friends.

For some participants, the meetings were emotionally intense, but none of them wanted to interrupt the process – on the contrary, there was a need to further explore the issues. However, we noticed that some topics were not raised during the group meetings, even though they had come up in individual conversations. It is possible that the strong interpersonal ties within the group influenced a desire to maintain a certain image in front of others.

The first meeting required almost no moderation – after posing the initial question, the conversation unfolded naturally, and the role of the researchers was largely observational. The second meeting followed a more structured and disciplined format, which may have resulted from the participants' union experience. The discussion remained focused and goal-oriented, contributing to the clarity and coherence of the material collected. An additional asset was the research team's good understanding of the group's background.

The international group

In the case of the international group, the organisation of meetings and the workflow looked quite different. Out of the nine people who had initially expressed interest in participating, four were already known to the peer researcher from previous work, although not all of them knew one another. There was a risk that participants would not feel comfortable opening up in front of others for image-related reasons. Three other participants were previously known to the project coordinator, but only two of them knew each other. The remaining participants were recruited via acquaintances – one through a participant, one through an activist, and one through a Moroccan contact. Some participants may therefore not have felt sufficient trust toward the facilitators.

Despite being aware of these risks, we chose to proceed with participants and communities we had not previously worked with in the context of the labour

market. We hoped that this research project could serve as a starting point for building relationships and a way of "opening the door."

For various reasons — partly due to limited trust, and partly due to scheduling constraints (as mentioned by participants themselves) — we were unable to bring the entire group together for joint meetings. Some individuals withdrew at the last moment (Pakistan, Philippines, India), while others were only available at times that conflicted with the schedules of the rest. As a result, it became necessary to change the meeting format: instead of two group sessions, we held smaller meetings, both group and individual. In some cases, two sessions were conducted, while in others, a single extended session covered both the identification of problems and their underlying causes.

In total, we conducted:

- one three-person meeting,
- two two-person meetings,
- two individual interviews

The participants also varied in their level of openness. Some shared deeply personal and even intimate experiences, while others presented their situation in a more favourable light during group sessions than in individual conversations. The meetings were also more chaotic than those with the Colombian group and required more frequent moderation.

3.4. Cross-checking information between groups

Since we worked with two distinctly profiled groups — the Colombian group and the international group — their role was primarily to compare different experiences rather than to cross-check information.

4. Narrative analysis of results

4.1. Emerging issues

The narrative analysis of the focus group interviews revealed a wide range of interconnected and mutually reinforcing issues, forming **a complex system of dependencies and exclusions**. The key problem identified was the general insecurity of migrant life in Poland, which takes particularly severe forms in the context of **temporary employment organised by work agencies**. Migrants' lives and work are closely intertwined — not only due to financial dependence but also because of formal ties: residence status, the right to work, and the right to housing are all closely linked to a specific place of employment.

Migrant labour in Poland is characterised by **systemic instability**: lack of predictable working hours, on-call jobs, pressure on productivity, and absence of social protection. Work takes place under **precarious and risky conditions** — both physically and emotionally. Migrants are **treated instrumentally**, with no basic rights or support. Many participants also reported experiencing **symbolic violence** (discrimination, prejudice) and **structural**

violence (multi-level dependency: on the employer, on the job, on the agency, and on migration status).

One issue that stood out particularly strongly was the **language barrier**. Lack of Polish language skills – rather than racial or gender background – proved to be one of the main factors reinforcing marginalisation and exploitation. A lack of communication resulted in lack of awareness of one’s rights, inability to respond to abuse, and deeper dependency on intermediaries or co-nationals – which in some cases was deliberately exploited.

4.2. Patterns identified

The participants’ narratives revealed the following recurring patterns:

- **Employment through temporary work agencies as the dominant model** – leading to lack of stability, frequent changes in employment conditions, and absence of real protection or formal security.
- **Overwork** – long working hours, often 12–14 hours per day, without paid overtime and no possibility to refuse.
- **Dependence of private life on employment** – especially in cases of agency-provided housing, where losing a job means immediate risk of losing shelter.
- **Lack of Polish language skills as a risk factor** – increasing vulnerability to abuse, institutional

and social exclusion, and deepening isolation.

- **Unequal treatment at work** – not always based on race or gender, but more often on linguistic and status differences between employees.
- **Structural discrimination within work agencies** – through systems of dependency, lack of transparency, and repressive supervision.

4.3. Narrative summary

The participants shared complex experiences of working as migrants in Poland. These narratives collectively paint a picture of a system based on insecurity, exploitation, and status dependency. Migrants often lacked real agency over their own lives – being dependent on intermediaries, migration status, specific workplaces, and the agencies providing employment.

Many did not know their rights, were unable to communicate with institutions effectively, and had no means to resist abuse. In the best-case scenarios, they received support from informal networks or, less frequently, from trade unions. A few participants with longer migration experience tried to support others, but even they could not change the structural inequalities in place.

These experiences shared a number of common features regardless of the participants’ countries of origin: temporariness, lack of protection,

unpredictability, and dependency. At the same time, there were important differences — in residence status, language ability, gender, or racial background — which shaped the intensity of exclusion. These complex configurations are explored in detail in Chapters 5–7.

5. Definition of problems

5.1. Migratory status

Introduction

The residence and employment situation of participants was shaped by migration regulations tied to their country of origin, type of visa, and entry pathway. Of particular importance were access to the labour market and the ability to regularise their residence.

- **Ukraine** – Ukrainian citizens can enter Poland under a 90-day visa-free regime and benefit from simplified access to the labour market: they are not required to obtain a work permit, and the employer only needs to submit a declaration of employment. However, this applies only to those who arrived before 24 February 2022, prior to the full-scale Russian invasion.

Persons who arrived later may obtain UKR status (Temporary Protection for Ukrainians in Poland), granted under the Act of 12 March 2022 on assistance to Ukrainian citizens. The Act is temporary and has been extended several times; it is currently valid until 4 March 2026. UKR status provides immediate access to the

labour market, healthcare, social benefits, and other rights largely equivalent to those of Polish citizens, but does not constitute long-term protection. Unlike international protection, it is granted through local registration rather than an asylum procedure, allows travel to Ukraine, but limits absence from Poland to 30 days. Recent amendments have linked eligibility for the child benefit programme (800+), a universal monthly allowance granted for children regardless of parents' employment status, to labour market participation in the case of UKR status holders, which may increase their dependency on employers.

The Ukrainian participant in the study **did not hold UKR status**, as they had arrived in Poland before 2022.

- **Colombia** – Colombian citizens also benefit from the 90-day visa-free regime but do not have simplified access to the labour market. They are required to obtain an individual work permit, which is often a significant barrier to timely employment.

Many participants from the Colombian group encountered additional difficulties due to a lack of reliable information and exploitative practices by agencies or employers.

- Three participants entered Poland with either student or work visas, which must be obtained prior to entry.

- Two participants entered Poland irregularly and applied for international protection to regularise their stay. During the mandatory six-month waiting period before being allowed to work, they were held in a guarded detention centre for foreigners. This period was counted toward the eligibility for work. As one participant recalled:

“After six months I could get a work permit, and I got it.”

“If you have protection, you can work. But if they deny it, you have nothing again.”

5.1.1. Both residence and work permit

Some participants had formally regulated residence status and access to the labour market — for example, as students or university graduates. This status granted them open access to employment, meaning they were not required to obtain a new work permit with every change of employer. Nonetheless, even with a regulated status, some encountered limited access to jobs due to employers’ reluctance to engage in “paperwork” related to new hires.

“I was still regular after my studies, but I didn’t have the new card yet. Employers said they preferred not to wait for the permit.”

Among the Colombian group, residence procedures were often initiated only after experiencing exploitation by initial

employers. Participants were assured that all procedures were underway, while in reality, neither work permit applications nor residence procedures had been filed.

“Everything was supposed to be arranged. But then it turned out that nothing had been submitted. I didn’t even see any letters from the office.”

Some individuals realised that the employer was taking no action and left the job to find new employment that would allow them to initiate the regularisation process. They also took the initiative to submit their temporary residence applications by themselves. This included a participant who — before their one-year visa expired — left an abusive employer, found a new job, and started the residence process.

“I worked at a kebab place, had no contract. In the end I left and started doing everything myself. I found regular work.”

“I only managed to get the permit after I changed employers and handled everything on my own.”

“I quit the agency when I saw they just kept making promises and weren’t doing any paperwork.”

In one case, a participant was able to remain in Poland regularly only due to special post-COVID regulations, which suspended the obligation to leave the country during the state of epidemic threat. Once that period ended, and after facing a lack of cooperation from

subsequent new employers, they were unable to submit a temporary residence application. They decided to return to Colombia, received a six-month re-entry ban, and despite holding a job offer, was not granted a work visa:

“I waited seven months just for the appointment. Then they rejected my application because one field in the form was in Polish, not in Spanish. But the entire form was in Polish...”

Eventually, they returned to Poland under the visa-free regime, secured regular employment, and independently initiated their new residence procedure.

5.1.2. Residence permit without work permit

Some participants were staying in Poland regularly— based on a visa, visa-free entry, or a pending residence application — but were working informally. This means they worked without a valid work permit, without a contract, without registration with the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), and outside the oversight of public institutions.

This was especially common among participants, who entered under the 90-day visa-free regime and started working before the employer completed the necessary formalities — or in some cases, never did so at all.

“I trusted the company that invited me to Poland, but they didn’t do

anything. They never started the process. I worked for three months before someone told me that nothing had been done.”

“I was here on the 90-day visa-free stay. I started working, but I had no documents. Then I found out the company hadn’t sent anything to the office. I didn’t even know they were supposed to.”

A similar situation occurred with a participant who entered Poland on a visa (likely a student or work visa), but worked without any contract or protections, until she took matters into their own hands — finding a new employer and initiating the residence regularisation process before their visa expired.

“I worked at a kebab place, had no contract, no documents.”

“I didn’t even know what kind of visa I had. The papers from the school were fake. I never met anyone from the agency.”

A participant, although staying in Poland regularly, also worked for a time under unregulated conditions. Employment agencies failed to complete the required paperwork, and she had no clarity about their migration situation:

“There was a contract, but only for a month. After that, nothing. They kept saying the documents were being prepared.”

5.1.3. Work permit without residence permit

Among the participants in the study, there were cases in which individuals were working in a formally regulated manner (with a contract, registration with the Social Insurance Institution, and tax contributions), but had no clarity regarding their residence status. These were most often individuals from Colombia who, after negative experiences with dishonest agencies or employers, found a new employer and entered into regular employment. However, they did not know whether the residence procedure had ever been properly initiated or whether it remained valid after changing employers.

This state of limbo — regulated employment but potentially irregular residence — caused stress, uncertainty, and fear of engaging with public offices. These individuals had no access to official correspondence (e.g., when the address listed on their application belonged to an agency), and some were unaware of the obligation to update their address details. As a result, they may have missed a request for additional documents, which could lead to the termination of the residence procedure as unresolved without their knowledge

“I thought everything had been submitted, because that’s what the agency said. Then my new employer told me I had a ZUS number and everything was fine. But when I tried to check at the

office, they said they couldn’t tell me anything because I had no confirmation.”

In another case, a participant was aware of the risk but chose not to contact the authorities out of fear of the consequences:

“I have a contract, I work regularly, the company pays ZUS. But I don’t know if I’m in the procedure. I’m afraid to go to the office, because if it turns out I’m not, they’ll make me leave.”

Although these individuals were regularly employed according to labour law, their residence status may have been irregular. This “limbo” was further deepened by the lack of information about foreign nationals’ rights and the overall opacity of the system — especially in cases involving agency mediation or frequent changes of address.

5.1.4. Without residence nor work permit

Some of the participants had, for a certain period, stayed and worked in Poland entirely without regular status — lacking both a valid residence title and a valid work permit or even general access to the labour market. In many cases, this was not the result of conscious action, but rather the consequence of lack of information, being misled by employers or agencies, and systemic barriers.

In the Colombian group, some individuals — unaware of applicable procedures or directly misled by employers — began working without a work permit and continued after exceeding the 90-day visa-free stay limit, thus also losing their lawful residence status. Some were unaware that the employer had never initiated any regularisation process. They only learned about their irregular status during inspections by the Border Guard, which issued orders to leave Poland.

“I didn’t get any letters. I didn’t even know I was supposed to sign something or go somewhere.”

In one case, a participant from Colombia, after a period of staying and working in Poland without any permit, decided to return to Colombia. They received a six-month entry ban for the Schengen area.

Particularly difficult was the situation of two participants who crossed the border irregularly through the Poland–Belarus route, which — according to their testimonies — was marked by systemic abuses by the Polish Border Guard. One participant described having to hide multiple times in water and bushes to avoid detection, and the confiscation of personal belongings:

“They took our shoes, our money. Left us with nothing. We had to hide in the water so they wouldn’t catch us.”

“It was cold, we had nothing. It was a game to break you.”

One of them had additionally been returned from Germany under the so-called Dublin Regulations.

Both individuals were placed in a secure detention centre for foreigners, where they stayed for six months. At the end of this period, they applied for international protection, which allowed them to leave the centre and stay, for a while, with regular status.

According to applicable regulations, the time spent in the centre was counted toward the required waiting period, after which they became eligible to work regularly. As a result:

- One of the individuals, after receiving three negative decisions, is now undocumented in Poland and cannot access the official labour market. They can only work irregularly.
- The other is currently staying in Poland regularly, as their asylum application procedure is still ongoing. However, from a systemic perspective, it must be noted that the chances of receiving a positive decision are low — Morocco is not on the list of dangerous countries maintained by the Border Guard, which means that nationals of this country rarely obtain refugee status. There is therefore a high risk that this

person will also become undocumented in the future.

“After six months I could get a work permit, and I did.”

“If you have protection, you can work. But if they refuse, then again you have nothing.”

5.1.5. Intra-EU mobility

The ability to move freely and work in other EU countries was significantly limited for most study participants, as they did not hold EU citizenship or a residence card. Possessing such a document (or refugee status) is a prerequisite for entering another EU country and working or staying there regularly for more than 90 days.

The lack of a residence card prevented one participant from crossing the border into the Czech Republic:

“In the Czech Republic they didn’t let me in. They said I didn’t have the card.”

A similar situation applied to participants who – despite having lived in Poland for several years – still did not hold a residence card, and in some cases were unsure whether their residence procedure had ever been properly initiated. This completely blocked their ability to make use of intra-EU mobility, even if they wanted to travel to countries like Spain or Germany for work.

One participant noted that the waiting time for a residence card in Poland could

take several years, effectively trapping migrants within the borders of one member state:

“Once you get the card, you can leave. But before you get it, it takes years. I’ve been waiting for two already.”

An additional barrier to intra-EU mobility is the so-called Dublin Regulation, which states that a person seeking international protection should remain in the first EU country in which they were registered. One participant experienced this directly – after crossing the border irregularly and attempting to continue to Germany, they were stopped by the German police and deported back to Poland.

According to their account, the detention process was violent. The officers did not explain the grounds for their detention, did not provide an interpreter, and the whole process was arbitrary and abusive:

“The German police stopped me at the station. Took me to a place where they held me. I didn’t have an interpreter. They held me for 10 hours. They yelled, pushed me. Explained nothing.”

“They said I had to be sent back to Poland, but I was never checked in Poland. They had no proof I’d been there.”

“It was illegal. I should have been able to apply in Germany.”

According to their account, they were never registered in Poland nor subjected

to any border control there. The absence of such evidence means that under EU law, they should have been allowed to apply for asylum in Germany. Their deportation to Poland was therefore — as they put it — illegal and a violation of their rights as an asylum seeker.

Mobility issues also affected situations in which migrants were misled by agencies or intermediaries who made false promises of jobs in other EU countries. One example is a participant who received a job offer in the Czech Republic, but upon arrival found themselves in Poland, where the agency never showed up:

“They said I would work in the Czech Republic, but then I was in Poland. No one from the agency ever came.”

5.2. Job insecurity

5.2.1. Dominance of Mandate Contract

The most common form of employment among study participants was the *umowa zlecenie* — a **civil law contract that falls outside the scope of the Labour Code and does not provide basic protections** granted to regular employees.

All participants who engaged in any form of regulated employment encountered this type of contract, particularly during the initial stages of their stay in Poland. None of them initially received a standard employment contract (*umowa o pracę*), which would have guaranteed a basic workers’ rights.

The *umowa zlecenie* was also widely used by temporary employment agencies, and its nature contributed significantly to employment instability. People signing these contracts often did not understand their content, as they were not translated into their native language or English. Typical problems associated with this form of contract included:

- the ability to **terminate the contract at any time** without justification,
- **lack of entitlement to sickness or maternity benefits,**
- lack of **protection from the State Labour Inspectorate**, which has limited capacity to intervene in civil law relationships.

Participant statements confirmed that *umowa zlecenie* was a source of confusion and insecurity:

“I got sick and couldn’t go to work. When I came back, they didn’t want me anymore.”

“They just stopped calling.”

Although often presented to foreigners as a “legal form of employment,” the *umowa zlecenie* in practice failed to protect their rights or ensure employment continuity. For many, the termination of such a contract meant not only a loss of income but also a threat to their residence status, particularly if that status was tied to a specific job.

5.2.2. Directly employed

Direct employment — meaning a job obtained without the involvement of a temporary employment agency — was a rare but possible situation among the study participants. It typically occurred:

- after an extended period of agency work,
- among those with a regularised residence status,
- or in informal arrangements.

In the Colombian group, one participant described the possibility of direct employment after 18 months of working via an agency. This transition is consistent with regulations that prohibit an agency from supplying the same worker to the same user company for more than 1.5 years. Sometimes, the user company chooses to directly hire the employee if they particularly value them. In practice, however, this happens infrequently, as companies tend to prefer looser commitments with the agency.

In the international group, a participant transitioned to working in a café — most likely in a regular and direct arrangement, although still burdened with delays in paperwork — after previously working informally in a kebab shop. It is worth noting that even this initial job, despite lacking a formal contract, was a form of direct employment.

“And he said he could take me to work there. [...] But I worked there

a very long time and without any money.”

A similar situation applied to a participant, who worked in various food establishments, also without formal regulation.

These employment arrangements were often presented as a support — with local business owners offering a "favor" — but in practice, they deepened dependency and lacked legal protection. Employers took advantage of the fact that the workers:

- did not know the language,
- were undocumented,
- feared contact with authorities,
- and felt a sort of moral debt toward the employer.

The informal nature of the work made it impossible to enforce any rights — lack of pay, long working hours, or no access to medical treatment in case of injury were common experiences.

Meanwhile, another participant described the difficulty of finding direct employment with a “regular” employer, despite holding regular status as a graduate:

“No, I'm still regular but I'm waiting for the card, for the new card. [...] They said they don't want to wait for the paper.”

In summary, the benefits of direct employment depended on whether it was regulated or not.

5.2.3. Employment through temporary work agencies

Employment through temporary work agencies was the most common experience across both focus groups. Participants reported that agency-based work was characterised by a lack of transparency, limited control over their professional situation, and a high level of dependency. Issues included incomplete or delayed contracts, failure to register with the social insurance system (ZUS), arbitrary decisions regarding task assignments, and delays in wage payments:

“There was a contract, but only for a month. After that, nothing. They kept saying the documents were in progress.”

“The agency said – just work, the paperwork will come later. But then it was too late, because we had nothing in writing.”

“I felt like a commodity being traded between companies.”

Participants also pointed to the lack of control over their schedules, pressure to accept day-to-day assignments, and difficulty in refusing work:

“If you don’t show up, they won’t call you again.”

Many participants noted that most temporary work agencies and their coordinators were Ukrainian, which affected power dynamics in the workplace:

“Almost all the agencies are Ukrainian. The coordinators too. If you’re from another country, you’re already below.”

Although tensions and a sense of unequal treatment emerged, participants stressed that the problem stemmed primarily from the system of dependency created by the agencies, rather than the nationality of the workers themselves.

Agency work was perceived as particularly precarious and difficult to regularise. Participants often did not know who their formal employer was or what rights they had.

5.2.4. Self-employment and unregistered activity

Some participants, particularly during periods without other employment, opted for self-employment—most often in informal forms, without registering a business. While this type of work offered greater flexibility, it did not guarantee social protection and could not serve as a basis for regularising one’s stay unless accompanied by a valid residence status. It was also associated with significant income uncertainty.

“I started a business myself because I was tired of waiting.”

“I don’t know if there will be students next month.”

One participant turned to informal self-employment after graduating from university, which gave them open access to

the labour market. They chose to become independent from agencies and employers, citing previous experiences of exploitation:

“I decided to work on my own, I was tired of being used.”

“I work in construction, finishing apartments. I’m not registered. I just go job to job.”

“They don’t treat you well, you work so hard, but they always find a way to take advantage.”

5.3. Contractual temporariness

5.3.1. Fixed-term contracts

Participants were most often employed on temporary contracts, usually lasting several months. The issue was not only the short duration but also the lack of certainty regarding renewal. Short contracts meant frequent job changes, which for migrants involved the need to obtain a new work permit each time. Even participants who were formally employed experienced a constant state of limbo:

“I had a six-month contract, then again uncertainty if they would renew it.”

“After three months, it was over and I had to start looking again.”

“The contract was for a month. After that, they didn’t give anything.”

While some participants had longer contracts, the absence of job security was a common source of stress and instability.

5.3.2. On-demand work

In many cases, work was assigned on a day-to-day basis—participants would receive a call in the evening informing them whether they were needed the next day. No call meant no work and no income:

“They called in the evening and said – come tomorrow. Sometimes they didn’t call at all.”

“It was like a lottery – sometimes they called, sometimes they didn’t. I couldn’t plan anything.”

This system made it impossible to plan daily life and deepened dependence on intermediaries.

5.3.3. Seasonal employment

No cases of typically seasonal work were identified in the focus groups, although it is known that such cases exist (e.g. in agriculture), where people face employment shortages outside the season.

5.3.4. Permanent contract

Permanent employment was rare. It applied only to individuals with a stable residence status, usually after a long period of temporary work:

“I got a permanent contract after three years – it was a relief.”

“After graduation, I got a proper contract. It was the first time I felt safe.”

5.4. Irregular working hours

Participants frequently experienced a significant mismatch between the formal terms of employment and the actual

number of hours worked. This irregularity affected not only the number of hours but also forced many to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet. It had a negative impact on job stability, the ability to rest, and the capacity to plan everyday life.

5.4.1. Full-time work

There was often a discrepancy between what the contract stated and the real workload. Those employed full-time frequently worked much more than their contract stipulated, with no additional pay. They were also often forced to work very long shifts (up to 12–14 hours), without the option to refuse, for fear of losing their job:

“On paper, 40 hours – in reality, 60, but no extra pay.”

“Sometimes I worked 12 hours. We couldn’t say no because we were afraid they’d fire us.”

“If you don’t show up, they won’t call you again.”

5.4.2. Part-time work

Many migrants were offered part-time contracts, even though they worked full-time in practice. This arrangement was often used by employment agencies to cut costs and bypass obligations toward workers. At times, people formally employed part-time actually received too few hours or days of work to survive.

Another major issue was the complete unpredictability of work schedules: employees were not informed in advance about planned overtime or whether they

would be needed on a given day. Some remained on standby without any guarantee of being assigned work:

“I had a half-time contract, but I worked like everyone else.”

“Sometimes only two days a week, sometimes nothing.”

5.4.3. Multiple jobs and working across sectors

Many participants reported holding several jobs simultaneously—often in different sectors (e.g., cleaning, gastronomy, construction)—to cover basic living costs. For many, this was the only way to secure even minimal income.

Regular multiple employment was severely limited by the requirement to obtain a new work permit for every additional job. As a result, some people resorted to undeclared work to avoid burdensome and costly procedures.

Others limited themselves to one job for health or legal reasons (e.g., due to documents being tied to a specific employer):

“In the morning I cleaned, in the afternoon I washed dishes in a restaurant.”

“New job – new papers, new problems.”

“It was hard to find even one stable job, let alone two.”

“You can’t change employer, because everything is tied to the documents.”

5.5. Income inadequacy

5.5.1. Income level

Hourly wage

Migrant workers' wages hovered around the minimum wage level. In Poland in 2024, the minimum hourly wage was approximately PLN 26 net (acc. 6,50 EUR), and a full-time monthly salary was around PLN 3,500 net (acc. 830 EUR). However, most participants reported receiving lower wages, especially when working through agencies, under piecework systems, or after deductions. Wages were also sometimes arbitrarily changed.

“Maximum 20 zł per hour, but they didn't always pay on time.”

“18 zł per hour... sometimes less, sometimes more, but without any guarantee.”

“I got 15 zł per hour, sometimes less when there were no tasks.”

Monthly salary

Monthly income was irregular and often did not reach the legal minimum. After deducting housing, transport, and food expenses, many participants were left with less than PLN 2,000 a month.

“I earned about 2,200 zł per month, but I had to pay for my room and food out of that.”

“I was left with maybe 1,000 zł a month after expenses.”

“Sometimes 2,200, sometimes 1,500, sometimes less. Depends on whether there was work.”

Annual income

Participants were unable to save money, even after working for a year or several months. Some regularly sent money to family members, which made saving impossible.

“One year of work and I saved nothing. Everything went to living costs.”

“I sent money to my little daughter in Colombia. Nothing was left for me.”

5.5.2. Income volatility

Instability

In both focus groups, participants experienced high income instability. Employment – especially through agencies – was often interrupted, tasks were assigned on a day-to-day basis, and not receiving a phone call meant no work and no income:

“Sometimes only two days a week, sometimes nothing.”

“If the agency didn't call, there was no money.”

“I didn't know whether I would even have a job next week.”

“I had a job for three weeks, then nothing for a month.”

“There was work, but sometimes a lot of hours, sometimes only two a week.”

Inconsistency

Participants' earnings were also inconsistent – often not reflecting the actual hours worked. Wages were delayed, split into installments, and overtime

ignored. In some cases, the pay system was changed without notice – from hourly to piecework:

“I never knew how much I would get. Sometimes they deducted something without explanation.”

“Pay came on the 10th, or the 20th, and sometimes you had to wait over a month.”

“They paid little by little, 200–300 zł at a time. You couldn’t plan your life.”

“They switched my wage from hourly to piecework. They just said that’s how it is now.”

Some people stated that they had no means of claiming their rights – they had no signed contracts, no proof of employment, and no access to legal assistance.

A participant described not receiving any wages for work done for a relative, under the pretext of covering regularisation expenses:

“I had no money. He didn’t pay me. My uncle said it would all go toward the papers.”

5.6. Lack of rights and protection

5.6.1. Lack of social security

Social benefits

In both the international and Colombian groups, none of the participants reported using social benefits – such as welfare, family support, housing benefits or any public assistance. The reasons were similar:

- lack of knowledge about their rights,
- irregular residence or employment status,
- employment under civil law contracts,
- informal work or unregistered self-employment.

“I didn’t know if I had the right to anything. The agency didn’t say anything.”

Social protection

Employment almost exclusively on civil law contracts deprived participants of access to:

- paid vacation,
- sick leave,
- maternity leave,
- health insurance.

A break in work – due to illness, accident or pregnancy – resulted in immediate loss of income, and often also of employment.

“I got sick and received nothing. If you don’t work, you don’t get paid.”

“I was working, but no one registered me. If you get sick – it’s your problem.”

Some agencies encouraged or pressured workers to opt out of pension contributions, offering a small increase in pay in return.

There were suspicions that part of the funds might have been misappropriated by the agencies, and that not paying into the pension system could have serious consequences for migrants planning to settle in Poland permanently – depriving them of future pension entitlements or access to social security.

5.6.2. Lack of institutional support

Regulatory protection

None of the participants had used institutional protection mechanisms – such as the National Labour Inspectorate. The main barriers included:

- fear of losing residence status,
- lack of awareness of rights,
- lack of Polish language skills,
- the fact that civil law contracts fall outside the scope of labour inspections.

“No one helps. You don’t even know how to ask, and they don’t understand Spanish.”

“I didn’t have the strength to fight, I didn’t know where to go.”

Labour policy

The residence regularisation system in Poland creates a strong dependence on a specific employer. Changing jobs during the residence application process requires quickly (within 30 days) finding a new employer, or the application is cancelled.

“If you change job, you must have a new employer fast. If not, the paper you are waiting for is cancelled.”

Work agencies also hold a privileged position – they can obtain work permits much faster, reinforcing their dominance in the labour market.

“Agency can get the permit in two weeks. A normal company needs four months. So if they want someone fast, they go to agency.”

5.6.3. Lack of Workplace Rights

Workers’ rights

Most participants were unaware of their rights or had no access to them – particularly those working under civil law contracts. The most common violations included:

- lack of written contracts,
- forced unpaid overtime,
- delayed or reduced wages,
- financial penalties,
- arbitrary changes to employment conditions,
- switching from hourly to piecework pay.

“If I don’t meet the quota, I get less. Even if I’m sick – I can’t rest.”

“I didn’t know I was entitled to anything. The agency just said if I didn’t show up – I’d be fired.”

“I broke my arm and I didn’t have a job anymore. No money, no help.”

5.7. Working and Living Conditions

5.7.1. Psychosocial Work Environment

Schedule unpredictability

Participants from both groups reported extreme unpredictability in their work

schedules. Information about shifts was often shared the evening before or just a few hours ahead. Schedules could suddenly change—either with longer shifts or cancellation of work altogether.

"They called in the evening and said I have to be there in the morning. Or that today is free, and tomorrow there are two shifts."

"We were supposed to work 8 hours, but they kept us for 12 or more, because there was a 'target to meet'."

"You don't know when you'll be back. Or they won't call at all and you have nothing."

This made it impossible to plan family life, childcare, or studies, and created permanent stress.

High work demands

Migrants were exposed to physically exhausting work, often under pressure to perform and without breaks. Attempts to rest could lead to reprimands or losing shifts.

"Even when you're tired, you have to stay. Otherwise, the next day they won't take you."

"No time for toilet. They counted the packages. If you didn't keep up, they threatened you."

"They said we're not robots, but they treated us like that."

Skill discretion

Most participants performed routine work under strict supervision, with no autonomy or influence over their tasks.

"Everything was pre-determined. If you did something differently, they yelled."

"I couldn't ask why I was doing something – I just had to do it."

Hazardous physical environment

Working conditions were often physically demanding and potentially dangerous – low temperatures, no breaks, lack of training, noise, overload.

"All day on my feet, cold, noise. You can't say anything."

"They gave only thin gloves. Frozen food, -20 degrees."

"I didn't know how to use the machine. No one explained, they just yelled."

Supervisor relations

Participants experienced shouting, humiliation, and lack of respect – both in Polish-run companies and those run by migrants.

"My uncle yelled at me, said I was lazy. Said if I tell someone, he'll fire me."

"The coordinator was Polish. He only yelled at us, not at Polish people."

Discrimination and prejudice

Although not always explicitly named as racism, participants experienced unequal treatment – such as worse shifts, greater pressure, and lack of information.

"They always gave us the worst shifts. Because they know we won't complain."

"Polish workers could say they won't come. We couldn't. They'd say: 'go back to your country'."

"With Polish people, at least you work like a human. In the kebab places, they shout, they don't pay."

5.7.2. Housing conditions

a) Dependent on Work

Many migrants lived in accommodation provided by agencies. Conditions were very difficult – overcrowding, low standard, dependency on having a job.

"Seven people in one room. If you don't go to work – you have to move out."

"They deducted 800 PLN for a room shared with five other people."

"I lost my job and had to move out the same day."

Housing was often located in isolated places far from basic infrastructure, which hindered access to shops, pharmacies, or public transport and deepened isolation.

"We were in the middle of nowhere. No shop, nothing."

"No bus, no pharmacy. Only forest and factory."

"I didn't know anyone, no phone signal. Like in prison."

b) Independent of Work

People with a more stable status attempted to rent independently, which gave more autonomy but came with high costs and discrimination.

"After 4 months I found something myself, but I pay a lot. At least I'm not afraid of eviction."

"People don't want to rent to foreigners. When I say I'm not from Poland, suddenly the flat is gone."

c) Group Housing

A common form of accommodation was shared flats with bunk beds, shared bathrooms, no privacy, and frequent conflicts.

"You can't sleep. Someone comes back at 2 a.m., someone leaves at 4."

"There were eight of us, one bathroom. We slept in shifts."

"No way to rest. Someone always coming back from a night shift."

6. Resistance and response strategies identified

6.1. Informal organisations

In both the Colombian and international groups, informal self-organization was dominant. Migrants built support networks based on personal contacts – WhatsApp groups, coworker relationships,

acquaintances from their home country, or religious communities.

These structures were mainly ad hoc and informational – helping with housing, jobs, and practical advice, but they did not offer protection from employers or agencies.

A participant described their role in helping newly arrived migrants:

"Yes, now I help people from Morocco and Algeria too. They call me when they arrive and don't know what to do or where to go. I try to explain how it works here."

6.2. Union coverage

In the Colombian group, nearly all participants were members of a trade union organizing Latin American migrants. This union provided language, legal, and informational support, and was seen as the only real source of workers' protection:

"They were the only ones who explained what to do. We knew what we were entitled to thanks to them."

Even those who were not members received help:

"I wasn't a member, but they helped me when I had a problem with the agency."

In the international group, the situation was different – no one belonged to a

union. Many did not know that migrants could join such organizations at all:

"I think unions are for people who have papers. Like, if you don't have documents, what can you do?"

Although unions were virtually absent in workplaces, participants – especially from the international group – expressed a need for such structures and their accessibility to migrants:

"I've never seen a union in these places. But we need them. Especially people like us. We are always on our own."

"I heard about the Latino union in another city. They help each other, share jobs, defend rights. I wish we had something like that here."

"Maybe if someone told us we could join, people would do it. But no one says anything."

7. Intersectional factors – Relevant identity markers identified

7.1. Racial background

Some participants in the study experienced specific tensions and prejudice related to skin color, regardless of their nationality, ethnic origin, or language. This manifested through stereotypes, implicit accusations, or heightened suspicion.

One participant, an Afro-Latino woman, described a situation at work:

"She said: 'you work like an African woman'. Then she said she didn't mean anything. But I know what it means."

A participant reported feeling increased suspicion in the workplace:

*"Sometimes when they see you're Black, they check you more. Or stare at you longer. But pretend not to."
"One woman said I probably don't have papers because I'm from Africa."*

At the same time, not all black participants reported experiences of racism. An African participant did not mention discriminatory experiences and suggested that knowledge of Polish influenced how they were perceived:

"People were surprised that someone from Africa speaks Polish. It helped. It's easier to connect when you say something in their language."

7.2. Ethnic origin and community belonging

Although the other participants did not report systemic racial profiling, their social and occupational position was clearly shaped by their status as foreigners. Many experienced unequal treatment – not due to skin color, but due to the lack of Polish citizenship, limited language skills, or belonging to a specific nationality.

Double-standard regarding non-Polish people

Participants noted that non-Polish workers were more likely to be penalized, dismissed, or denied information compared to their Polish colleagues. Employers often treated them as second-class labour.

"Polish workers could say they won't come in. We couldn't. Because they'd say: 'go back to your country'."

Perceived privilege of Ukrainians

Several people – especially from the Latin American group – pointed to the dominant position of Ukrainians in employment agencies. Coordinators were often Ukrainian, which intensified imbalance within international teams and made communication or seeking justice more difficult.

"Ukrainians were the bosses, so if you said something, they just looked at their own people."

"In the agency, everyone spoke Ukrainian, we didn't know what was happening."

Exploitation within ethnic communities

In smaller national communities – such as Moroccans or Turks – participants described intra-group exploitation. Employers from the same country took advantage of their compatriots' lack of alternatives and dependency, sometimes resorting to intimidation and abuse.

"People from my country, they take advantage. In the kebab places, they don't pay, they shout."

"That man had connections. When the inspection came, they told me to pretend to be a client. I was scared. They threatened that if I said anything, it would be bad."

Contrast with Latin American communities

Testimonies from Colombians suggested a different dynamic – their community tended to be open and supportive. Despite isolated cases of abuse by Colombian recruiters, relations of mutual help, information sharing, and solidarity prevailed.

"Colombians can exploit you too. The recruiter was Colombian, and still made sure they paid you less. Because he earned from it."

7.3. Language skills as a protective tool

Lack of language and workplace risk

Not knowing Polish made it difficult to understand instructions and safety procedures, exposing workers to accidents and penalties.

"I didn't know how to operate the machine. No one explained, they just yelled."

Language knowledge as protection

Good Polish language skills helped some participants protect themselves from exploitation and unequal treatment.

"If you speak Polish, they don't treat you like an idiot. They can't trick you so easily."

English as a tool of communication and integration

Participants noted that even basic English could help with communication with some supervisors or recruiters, and facilitate integration.

Barriers in accessing institutions

Lack of Polish was a significant barrier to legal aid, public institutions, and offices – even those dedicated to migrants. English or Spanish often did not help either:

"No one helps. You don't even know how to ask, and they don't understand Spanish."

"At the foreigner's office, no one spoke English. Only Polish."

Spanish as a support language

Some Latin American participants noted that many people in Poland surprisingly spoke basic Spanish or were sympathetic to the language, making it easier to connect:

"People here like to speak Spanish. Sometimes when you try Polish, they say: speak Spanish!"

7.4. Gender

Gender was a significant factor influencing the experiences of migrant women, both in the workplace and beyond. From the participants' perspective, the most common issues included:

- Difficulty combining work with childcare, especially with unpredictable schedules:
"You have to go to school, the kids go to school, and then work, night shift... very difficult."
"I have children. It's hard. But I have to work."
- Being assigned physically demanding tasks not suited to their abilities:
"They gave me those heavy crates to lift, and I'm a small woman. I said I couldn't do it, and they said if I can't, someone else will come."
- Psychological, economic, and physical violence in the workplace, sometimes within their own communities:
"My uncle said he wouldn't pay because it's all going for papers. But there were no papers. Then he

said if I tell anyone, I'll have problems."

"Only when my dad called, everything changed."

Additional observations from organisational work with migrant women:

Beyond the focus group testimonies, from our organisational experience supporting migrant women, we know that women – especially from marginalised communities – are exposed to specific forms of violence and exclusion:

- **Lack of sexual education and access to contraception:** In some communities, there is a general lack of knowledge about contraceptive methods and resistance from men to use them. Women often experience unplanned pregnancies without legal or health protection.
- **The exclusion spiral of pregnant women:** Migrant women in late pregnancy or just after childbirth are often unable to perform physical work. This leads to job loss, followed by the loss of housing and residence status. Without ZUS registration, they have no access to medical care or prenatal support. The system contributes to growing undocumentedness among women and their children.
- **Lack of access to legal abortion and support in cases of violence:** Access to abortion in Poland is

extremely restricted. Only a few migrant women manage to reach organisations that support people seeking to terminate a pregnancy.

- Cases of violence, including:
 - sexual harassment and coercion by labour intermediaries (including against underage Ukrainian girls),
 - domestic violence by partners on whom the women are completely dependent,
 - rape survivors from the country of origin with unresolved trauma,
 - mothers forced to give birth in the forest while crossing the Polish-Belarusian border, subjected to pushbacks and bounced between Belarusian and Polish services.

These experiences – although not directly mentioned in the focus groups – are important in the broader diagnosis of migrant women's situation in Poland.

7.5. Residence status and documentation

As described earlier in the report, migrants' residence status in Poland differs significantly depending on their country of origin, which translates into varying levels of legal security and ability to respond to abuse:

- visa-free entry, possibility of obtaining UKR status or simplified access to the labour market (employment notification without needing a permit).
- visa-free entry, but work requires a permit, often tying migrants to employment agencies.
- entry only possible with a work or student visa, followed by the need for further regularisation of stay.

7.6. Irregular border crossing

Some participants reported experiences of irregular border crossing, both at the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-German borders. This applied especially to individuals unable to obtain visas or any regular entry form to Poland, yet wishing to reach the Schengen area.

For them, the only option was to cross the border irregularly and apply for international protection. However, this process carries many risks, and the chances of success – especially for nationals of countries considered “safe” by Polish authorities, like Morocco – are very low.

Participants reported violence, push-backs, and inhumane treatment at the borders:

“They caught me in the forest, took everything, put me in a car and threw me back behind the wire. Over and over again.”

“I wanted to go to Germany, but they caught me and sent me back

to Poland. They didn't want me there either. No one wants me."

Such experiences often lead to months of undocumented life, without the possibility of working, without resources, and with no realistic prospects of regularising their status:

"I have no papers, no job. Nothing. I'm just waiting."

7.7. Migration experience and length of stay

New arrivals to Poland were more vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation, and dependency on employers or agencies. Lack of language skills, knowledge of procedures, and understanding of local realities made them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse.

In contrast, participants with longer migration experience reported greater independence and community involvement. One participant who had previously faced difficult experiences themselves, now supports newcomers from Morocco and Algeria:

"Yes, now I help people from Morocco and Algeria too. They call me when they arrive and don't know what to do or where to go. I try to explain how it works here."

These grassroots actions show that over time, it is possible to move from being exploited to supporting others – though it

requires time and resilience. At the same time, these stories suggest that the situation of migrants can improve gradually – with increasing experience, language skills, and familiarity with the system.

7.8. Possibility of returning to the country of origin

For many participants, returning to their country of origin was not a viable option – due to lack of resources, political instability, lack of prospects, or the reasons that had forced them to leave. This was particularly true for those from countries with economic hardship or social repression, but also for those who simply had nothing to return to.

Some expressed directly that they saw no future in their home country:

"I have no job, no house, nothing there. Why go back?"

"There's nothing for me in Morocco. At least here I can try something."

Others feared that returning would mean failure – in the eyes of their family and themselves. This pressure made it difficult to give up on staying in Poland, even when life here involved hardship and exploitation.

7.9. Health condition and access to healthcare

Lack of real access to healthcare had a significant impact on the consequences of participants' health issues. Migrant work was typically physically demanding and

performed under difficult conditions, yet without basic protection in case of illness, injury, or pregnancy.

Many lacked health insurance or knowledge about voluntary enrolment options. Even minor health problems could lead to job loss, loss of income, and consequently – loss of residence status:

“I broke my arm and I didn’t have work anymore. Zero money, zero help.”

“If you don’t come to work, you don’t have a job.”

Lack of insurance often resulted from unregistered employment or civil-law contracts:

“I was working, but nobody registered me. If you get sick – it’s your problem.”

For women, the situation was particularly difficult – pregnancy, accidents, or poor health directly led to job loss:

“I didn’t know I was entitled to anything. The agency just said if I don’t come – they’ll fire me.”

Working conditions also negatively affected health: low temperatures, physical strain, lack of breaks, and lack of protective gear:

“All day on my feet, cold, noise. You can’t say anything.”

“They only gave thin gloves. Frozen goods, -20 degrees.”

Lack of language skills and formal employment discouraged people from using medical services – participants feared the costs, being misunderstood, or sometimes even detection of their irregular status.

7.10. Supporting family and sending money abroad

For many participants, supporting loved ones in their country of origin was an additional burden. Regularly sending money home created intense pressure to maintain employment – even under exploitative conditions, without contracts, or when facing health risks.

Participants reported:

“I send money back to Angola. My mother and sisters need help.”

“I have to help my mom in Colombia. She doesn’t work, only me.”

“Everything I have goes back home. They’re waiting for me there.”

“I can’t quit my job – my family in Colombia is waiting for money.”

Such economic dependence of others on the migrant's work in Poland deepened their vulnerability to abuse and limited their ability to seek better conditions or protect themselves.

8. Learning and reflections

8.1. Methodological difficulties and challenges

The short duration of the focus group sessions did not allow sufficient time to

fully discuss all the important topics or to explore them in adequate depth. Many issues required further development or individual elaboration, which was difficult to achieve within the group format.

Due to participants' irregular working hours and other life commitments, gathering the whole group at the same time and place was a significant organisational challenge. One of the focus group meetings could not be conducted with the full group present, and during the formation of the Action Group, several individuals whose perspectives we particularly valued were unable to participate.

We also noticed that some individuals did not share certain issues during the group discussions, although they did mention them in individual conversations. Sometimes this resulted from a lack of comfort, and at other times simply from lack of time or forgetting the topic during the session.

8.2. Aspects to be modified or incorporated into the PAR

In the future, it may be worth considering the inclusion of alternative communication channels, such as secure messaging apps, which would allow participants to pause on specific topics and engage in deeper, asynchronous discussions. Such a solution would also enable the inclusion of individuals who, for various reasons, are unable to participate in live meetings.

Another possible modification is to introduce an option for individual follow-up interviews after the group sessions – with full anonymity and informed consent of the participants. Actually, we implemented it experimentally during the research. In the case of the international group, due to difficulties in gathering all participants at once, a series of meetings was conducted in smaller sub-groups or individually. For some participants in the Colombian group, an additional follow-up session was also organised, as we felt that certain important topics had not been sufficiently expressed during the group meeting.

Based on this experience, we also reflected on the need to consider compensation not only for participation in focus groups, but also for involvement in action-based activities. Many participants' time is closely tied to the need to earn a living – even if they are highly motivated to engage, economic conditions often prevent their participation. As a result, those in the most difficult situations are often excluded from the process.

If we recognise that, in the PAR approach, participants are not merely recipients of support but co-creators of the process, their involvement should be treated on par with that of the coordinators – including through fair compensation. Without such recognition, participants could feel being informally burdened with a moral obligation to act on behalf of their

community in the form of unpaid volunteer work.

9. Proposal of Actions

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

Participants of the focus groups themselves identified key areas requiring urgent action. They pointed to the following issues:

- systemic exploitation in temporary work agencies and the lack of effective state control over their activities,
- fear of reporting abuse due to residence status, language barriers, and lack of knowledge about available forms of protection,
- workplace discrimination – both from employers and other employees,
- lack of access to reliable information about the legal and administrative system, rights, and how to exercise them,
- exploitation by individuals from the same national or language communities,
- isolation and lack of contact and cooperation between different migrant groups.

9.2. Actions suggested by the participants

Based on the workshop process, an action plan was developed for the next six months. It includes three overlapping stages:

I – Formation of an expert team and community mapping

- Identification and involvement of leader persons from various migrant communities who would be willing to act as support and advocacy figures within their groups.

II – Training for a migrant-led support group

The training program would cover, among others:

- basics of the legal and administrative system and residency procedures,
- taxes and health insurance,
- labor law and how to report violations,
- rental and housing rights,
- practical skills for conducting interviews and collecting testimonies,
- developing advocacy materials – informational videos, video storytelling.

III – Advocacy and awareness-raising activities

- organizing a campaign to collect testimonies of abuses – establishing cooperation with the academic community to produce a report,
- creating and publishing short informational videos (info-videos) shared through social media and media networks,

- establishing cooperation with local media and trusted journalists to raise awareness of the issues and disseminate information.

These activities will be re-evaluated in terms of available resources and time, after which a detailed action plan will be jointly decided with the participants.

9.3. Recommendations for public policies, organizations and academia

- Ensure effective protection by state institutions for people working in agencies and workplaces employing migrants,
- Increase penalties for temporary work agencies that violate labor law,
- Strengthen supervision and control mechanisms over the operations of employment agencies,
- The obligation of the National Labour Inspectorate to report irregularly employed workers to the Border Guard should be abolished, as it undermines access to labour protection mechanisms.
- Persons whose employment became irregular due to labour agencies' failure to register contracts, and who were neither aware of nor consented to working in an irregular manner, should not be penalised or subjected to return decisions.
- Build cooperation between the State Labour Inspectorate and migrants' trade unions,

- Provide official services in languages spoken by migrants (e.g. English, Spanish, Arabic),
- Translate official forms and instructions into the most commonly used migrant languages,
- Ensure access to free and accessible language courses,
- Support the creation of referral networks by NGOs for assisting migrant workers in various regions of Poland,
- Encourage academic institutions to conduct research on the situation of migrant workers,
- Collaborate with the media sector to raise awareness and expand public understanding.

9.4. Proposals for supranational actions / Possibilities for replication or extension

At the stage of research and workshops, no proposals for supranational actions or ideas for replicating developed solutions in other countries emerged. The participants' needs were focused on local activities and systemic support in Poland.

However, we believe that the actions we propose can be effectively adapted to the local contexts of other European Union countries.



Deliverable information

Deliverable factsheet	
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Participatory action research case studies

Migrant workers in hospitality

Wroclaw, Poland

Nomada association

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.

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