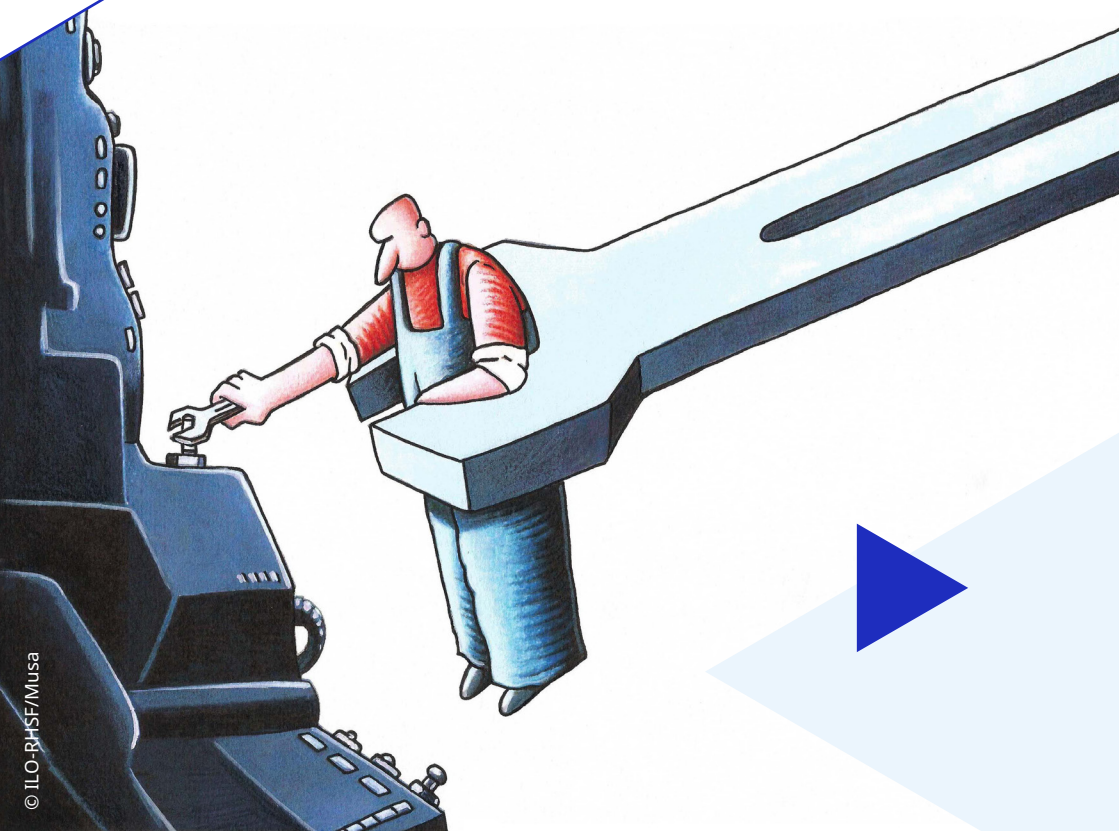
International Labour Organization

ILO indicators of forced labour

2025 revised edition



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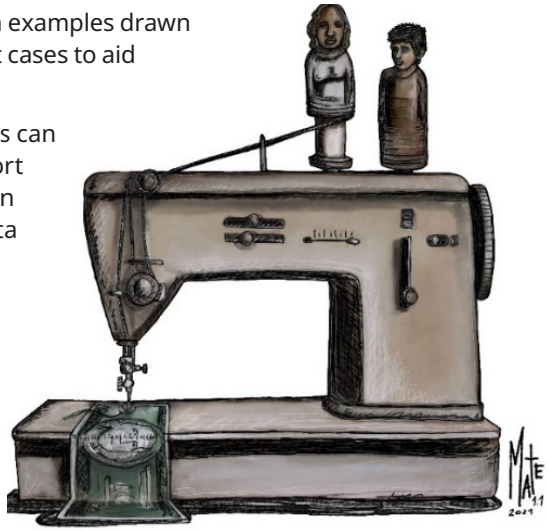
Introduction

This booklet is designed to support frontline actors in detecting potential victims of forced labour, prompting further investigation. By highlighting the most commonly observed indicators in such cases, it aims to draw attention to red flags that may signal a risk of forced labour. The list of indicators is grounded in decades of ILO research and experience in combating forced labour across regions and sectors. While not exhaustive, it reflects the most frequent signs encountered and can be adapted to suit specific contexts, sectors and legal frameworks.

Each indicator is illustrated with examples drawn from real testimonies and court cases to aid practical understanding.

Beyond detection, the indicators can serve as valuable tools to support referral and formal identification processes, prosecution, and data collection.



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1 In 2021, the ILO and Human Resources Without Borders (RHSF), in partnership with Cartooning for Peace, co-organized a cartoon competition on forced labour, entitled *"What if your pencil was a tool against forced labour"* to raise awareness, inspire action and emphasize the urgent need to eradicate this severe violation of human rights. This booklet features some of cartoons from that competition.

1. What is and what is not forced labour?

1.1. Definition of forced labour

Forced or compulsory labour is defined by the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) as *"all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered themself voluntarily."*

This definition involves three key elements:

1. **Work or service** – Encompasses all forms of work, service or employment, whether in the public or private sector, formal or informal, with or without a contract. It also includes activities that may not be legally recognised as "work" in some national contexts, such as prostitution or begging.
2. **Menace of any penalty** – Refers to the wide range of threats or penalties used to compel someone to work, including direct or indirect coercion, legal or financial sanctions, and the loss of rights or privileges. Importantly, the threat must be assessed from the perspective of the person experiencing it.
3. **Absence of voluntary consent** – Refers to the lack of free and informed consent to undertake work and/or the inability to withdraw that consent at any time. In other words, the worker's freedom to leave the job.

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▶ 2. Introducing the indicators

2.1. Purpose

Translating international standards into operational indicators is critical to detecting forced labour in practice. These indicators can be applied during routine inspections to identify potential cases, and also serve to screen individuals who may be victims, enabling their referral for formal identification, protection and potential prosecution of perpetrators. They can be used by law enforcement officers, labour inspectors, trade unionists, employers or legal professionals to recognize and report suspected forced labour cases. They are equally valuable for others who may come into contact with victims, such as healthcare providers, labour attachés, social workers or teachers. Their use is not limited to workplaces; they are relevant in immigration or detention centres, border checkpoints, employer-provided accommodation, transport hubs, religious or community spaces, prisons and migrant centres, essentially, anywhere exploitation might occur.

2.2. Important considerations

The list encompasses the most common indicators observed in forced labour cases. However, it may need to be tailored to specific sectors, such as fishing or domestic work, or adapted for specific forms of forced labour, such as sexual exploitation, bonded labour, vestiges of slavery or compulsory work imposed by a State. Adaptation should also consider national legislation, persons in vulnerable situations, and be developed in collaboration with social partners and relevant NGOs.

It is important to understand that indicators must be interpreted from the victim's perspective: A child, for instance, may be more easily deceived or unable to return home even if taken only a short distance. A migrant worker (national or international) may face greater isolation than a local worker. Someone with limited literacy may be more vulnerable to deception. Threats that seem implausible to

an outsider, such as religious coercion, may be deeply persuasive and terrifying to the victim.

It is also essential to interpret indicators without bias or discrimination. For example, the view of one labour inspector that, *"I wouldn't accept these working conditions, but it's fine for these workers because it's better than what they have in their home country"* must be explicitly challenged.

Last but not least, the presence of a single indicator does not confirm forced labour, but it signals risk and should lead to further inquiry and investigation. Not all indicators will be present in every case, and conversely, their absence should not rule out forced labour. A worker may appear to enjoy decent conditions and free movement, yet still be under coercion. Ultimately, it is the combination of indicators, especially evidence of coercion and the absence of free and informed consent, that point to a situation of forced labour. This list of indicators is not exhaustive and should be treated as a flexible, evolving tool.

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▶ 3. The ILO indicators of forced labour

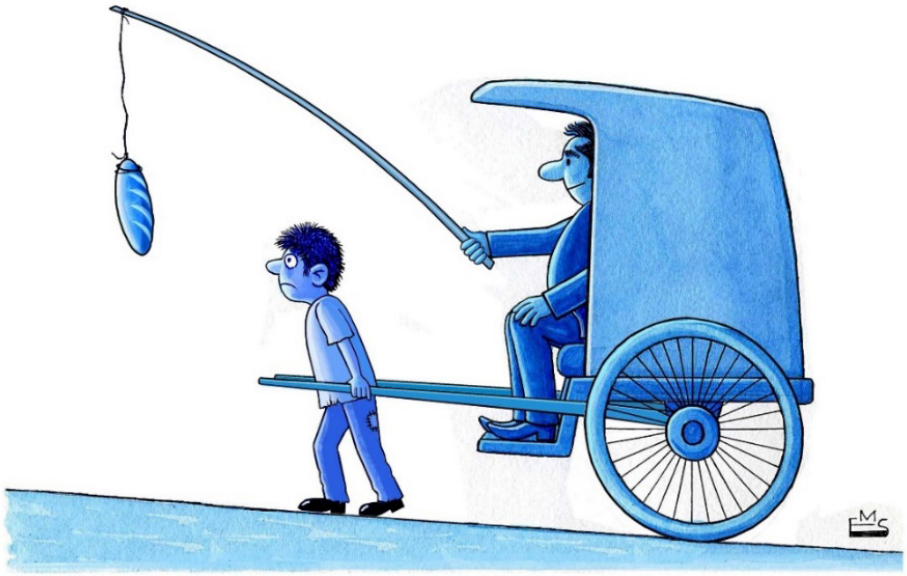
3.1. Abuse of vulnerability

> I had no choice – I didn't know anyone, didn't speak the language, and they knew my immigration status was irregular. I slept on a mattress on the floor of the restaurant, and they only gave me leftovers to eat. I worked long hours every day for a wage that wasn't even enough to survive.
>
> Pakistani waiter, working in Luxembourg
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming)*

Anyone can become trapped in forced labour. However, some people are more likely than others to find themselves in situations of vulnerability. For instance, migrant workers are three times more at risk of being in forced labour.

Abuse of vulnerability occurs when an unscrupulous employer or recruiter intentionally **takes advantage of a worker's vulnerable position**, for example irregular work or residency status, to impose abusive working conditions or tasks the worker would otherwise never accept. In certain cases, they may even deliberately create a situation of vulnerability, for instance by providing drugs or alcohol to workers to induce addiction.

Other factors that increase vulnerability to forced labour include physical or mental disabilities, illiteracy or innumeracy, and systems that tie work or residency permits to a specific employer. Vulnerability can also arise from fraudulent practices that create multiple dependencies, where workers rely on the same employer or recruiter not only for their jobs, but also for housing, food or even the employment of family members.



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3.2. Deception

> They promised we'd work in households nearby and see our families, but instead we were taken far away and couldn't leave. We worked every day, got no pay, and were told we'd be killed if we went outside.
>
> A 13-year-old girl in the Philippines
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming)*

Deception refers to the failure to deliver what has been promised to the worker, either verbally or in writing.

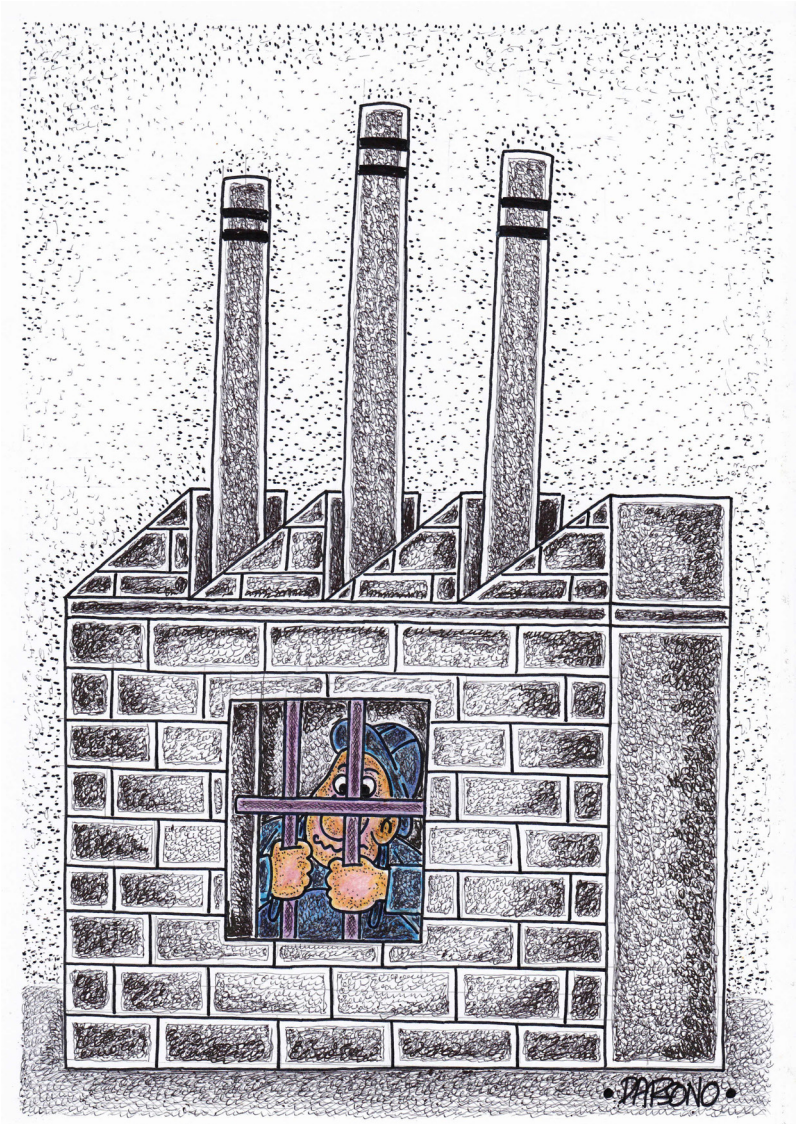
Victims of forced labour are often recruited with promises of decent, well-paid jobs. Once they begin working, however, the promised conditions do not materialize, and they find themselves trapped in abusive situations with no real possibility of leaving.

False promises may concern not only wages and working conditions, but also the nature or location of the job, housing and living conditions, acquisition of regular migration status, the identity of the employer, or even access to education. In such cases, workers have not given informed consent, had they known the truth, they would never have accepted the job.

Children may also be deceived, or their parents misled, with assurances that they will be sent to school.

The risk of deception is heightened in the absence of written contracts or when terms and conditions are poorly defined. It may be more difficult to prove in the informal sector.

Deception can also occur even when a contract has been signed. For example, migrant workers may sign a contract with the agreed conditions before migrating and, once at destination, be compelled to sign a "substitute" contract as a precondition to starting work. This replacement contract may be written in a language they cannot understand, contain far worse conditions, or even assign a completely different job than originally agreed.



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3.3. Restriction of movement

> I wanted to leave but I was always being monitored and they were always locking me in.
>
> A Togolese domestic worker in Lebanon
> (ILO, *I couldn't stand living like a slave*, 2017)

Workers can have their movements restrained during recruitment (e.g. while being transported) and/or at their workplace or employer-provided accommodation.

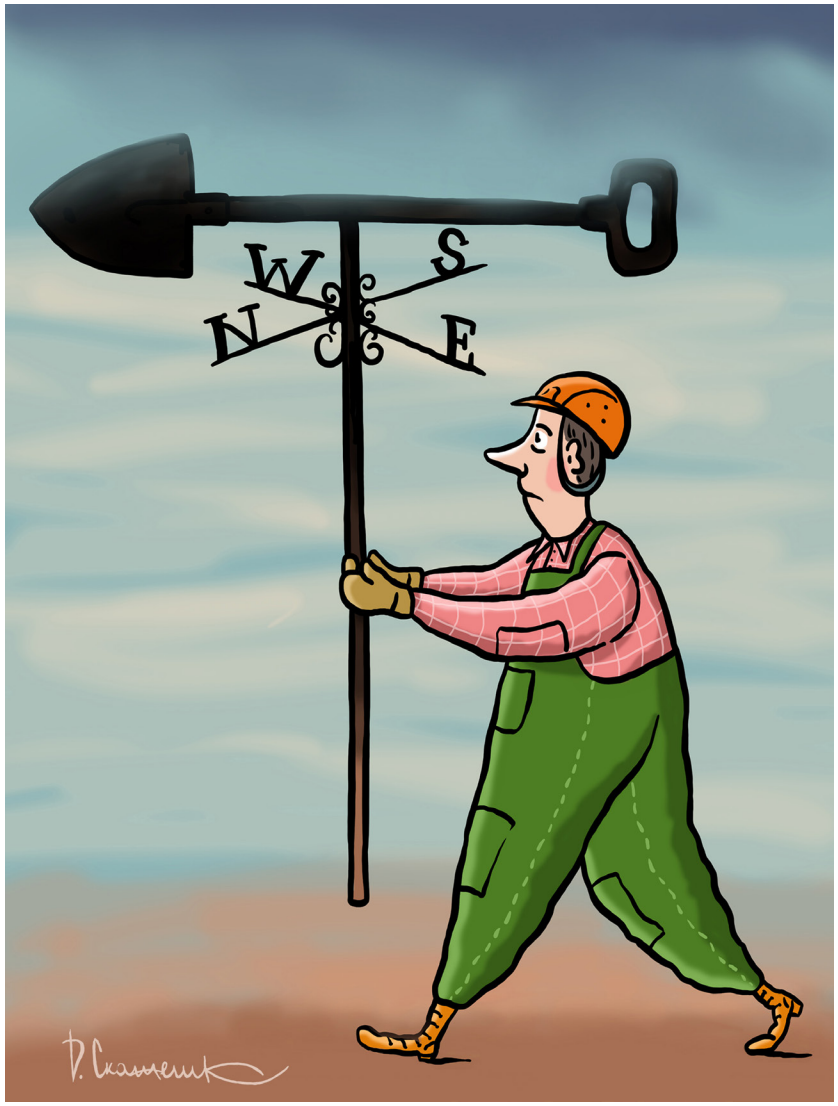
A clear example is when workers are locked inside the workplace. This not only violates their freedom of movement, but can also put them at serious risk in the event of a fire or other emergency.

There are many other ways to restrain worker's movement, for instance:

- when workers cannot leave the work premises without being accompanied;
- when their absence from the workplace is timed;
- when transportation is arranged from dormitories to the workplace;
- when a curfew is in place;
- when laws prevent migrant workers from leaving the country without permission from their employer.

All of the above circumstances may also make it difficult for workers to seek assistance.

Some legitimate concerns may justify specific measures, such as the presence of surveillance cameras or guards to protect high-value goods or ensure safety at hazardous worksites. However, these measures should be reasonable and proportionate.



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3.4. Isolation

> The only way out from the estate was by airplane, it was impossible on foot. The supervisor said that the plane would only leave when we had completed our job. Until that time we couldn't get out.
>
> A Brazilian farm worker in the Amazon region
> (ILO, *Fighting forced labour: the example of Brazil*, 2009)

Victims of forced labour are often kept secluded to better control them and prevent them from escaping or seeking help.

Isolation can take different forms. Victims may be placed in **remote locations**, unaware of their exact whereabouts and with no means of leaving. The worksite may be far from the nearest village, with no transportation available. This can happen, for instance, in rural areas or in activities such as illegal logging.

Workers can also be isolated within populated areas, for instance, by having their mobile phones or other **means of communication confiscated** to prevent contact with their families or seeking help. Families can also be directly threatened to discourage them from trying to reach the worker. Restricting access to religious services or community centres is another way to maintain social isolation and prevent access to support or advice.

These risks can be especially acute for **live-in domestic workers**, who reside in their employers' homes, settings where movement, communication and visitors can be tightly controlled, and where external oversight is limited.

> They took my passport and told me I was illegal. I was always watched, never allowed to go out alone, hidden from visitors and forced to stay in the basement during social events.
>
> A Filipino migrant in the U.S.
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Informality deepens workers' isolation: unregistered business premises often escape labour inspections, and workers may be beyond the reach of trade unions.

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3.5. Physical and sexual violence

> When I couldn't meet their target, they beat me and shocked me with electricity. Sometimes they forced me to do push-ups until I collapsed or even strangled me to make an example.
>
> An Indonesian worker in a scam centre in Cambodia
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Subjecting workers to physical and sexual violence is not acceptable under any circumstance and constitutes a strong indicator of forced labour. In some cases, workers may be threatened with violence against their relatives if they disobey, or be forced to witness violence against co-workers as a way to deter complaints, escape attempts or requests for help.

Sexual violence can be used as a tool of control and humiliation. In cases of commercial sexual exploitation, rape is often used to "break" victims' resistance, instil shame and silence them from seeking help or disclosing the abuse.

Workers subjected to violence may show visible signs such as bruises or untreated injuries. They may also exhibit psychological effects, including anxiety, fear, submissiveness, stress, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Repeated pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases can be further warning signs of sexual violence.

Abduction or kidnapping is an extreme form of violence that can be used to "recruit" individuals into forced labour.

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3.6. Intimidation and threats

> He said if I stopped working for him, he'd show videos and photos of me to my parents and everyone I knew. He threatened to harm my family, to beat me and to throw me out on the highway. I lived in fear – of what he'd do to me or the people I love.
>
> A woman in forced sexual exploitation in Croatia
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Victims of forced labour may be subjected to intimidation and threats, either when they complain about their conditions, try to leave their jobs, or even pre-emptively to instil fear and enforce submission. Workers may even face intimidation or threats to coerce them into accepting a job in the first place.

Beyond threats of violence, common forms of intimidation include:

- **Irregular work or migration status:** *"I will denounce you to the authorities and you will be deported."*
- **Ignorance of laws and rights:** *"The police will arrest you if you leave the house,"* fostering distrust of law enforcement.
- **Economic dependency:** Threats of harsher working conditions or withheld wages.

Threats may target the workers directly or extend to their relatives or co-workers: *"See what happens if you disobey."*

Intimidation can be part of a broader scheme of psychological violence designed to deepen vulnerability and compliance, for instance, through constant insults, undermining and humiliation.

Importantly, threats must be assessed from the worker's perspective and beliefs. Even if based on superstition (*"You will be cursed"*) or misinformation (*"You will be fired if you speak to a trade union"*, *"You cannot trust labour inspectors here"*), they may still appear credible to the worker and therefore serve as powerful means of coercion.

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3.7. Retention of identity documents

> They took my passport right after I arrived and refused to return it. Without it, I couldn't go to the authorities, couldn't leave the country, and couldn't prove who I was. The employer repeatedly threatened to report me to immigration authorities if I didn't repay the amount of my journey. I was not allowed to rest or to speak to others in my native language.
>
> A Filipina woman working in Peru
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Retention of identity and/or travel documents is a very common means of control, especially for migrant workers.

Without their documents, workers often feel unable to approach the authorities for help, fearing deportation. They may also find it impossible to change jobs, access essential services or leave the country.

Some unscrupulous employers or recruiters withhold workers' identity documents indefinitely, citing alleged security concerns or ongoing administrative procedures, such as visa applications.

What matters in assessing this practice is whether workers can freely access their documents at any time, without needing prior approval.

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3.8. Withholding of wages

When I arrived in Seychelles, I expected a good job and fair pay, just like we were promised back home. But everything was very different. I worked every day for four months, doing hard construction work, but I never received any of the money they promised me. When I asked about my wages, he threatened me with a knife. I felt scared and powerless. Without my pay, I had no way to support myself or send money back to my family. They kept my passport and forced me to keep working without any payment.

A construction worker from Bangladesh in Seychelles.
(ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Irregular or delayed payments of wages do not automatically amount to forced labour. Withholding of wages occurs when payments are deliberately and systematically withheld to compel workers to remain in their jobs and prevent them from leaving. As a result, workers may feel forced to stay with an abusive employer rather than lose the wages owed to them.

The key issue to assess is whether wages are intentionally withheld to restrict workers' freedom to terminate employment or change employer.

Unscrupulous employers may use a range of false justifications to avoid paying workers, such as:

- claiming poor job quality, or under-reporting quantity of work delivered;
- setting impossible production targets;
- paying wages "in kind" instead of money;
- imposing penalties for absence or alleged mistakes;
- making illegal or arbitrary deductions for working tools, food, accommodation or recruitment fees.

Proving wage withholding can be challenging. Payslips and records may be falsified, or workers' bank accounts controlled by employers. In some cases, wages are deposited into workers' bank accounts but are then forced to return the money in cash to the employer or a third party, creating the illusion of compliance.

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3.9. Debt bondage

> We were working for the landlord to pay off our debt… All we received from the landlord was a sack of rice and a pair of clothes for a whole year of work. We did not have the freedom to leave him.
>
> A woman previously held in bonded labour in Nepal.
> (ILO, *A future with hope, free from bonded labour*, 2021)

Debt bondage arises when people are coerced into working against their will to repay a debt to an employer or recruiter, or when the debt is deliberately manipulated to ensure it cannot be repaid.

This can occur when repayment terms are not clearly defined, when workers are forced to pay inflated prices for food and accommodation, when illegal wage deductions are imposed, when accounts are falsified, or when extremely high interest rates are illegally applied.

The result is that workers become tied to an employer or creditor for an indefinite period, ranging from a single season to many years, or even across generations. In some cases, debts are inherited, with children recruited to work in exchange for repayment of their parents' loans.

Debt can initially arise from wage advances or loans to cover recruitment fees or medical expenses in the absence of social protection. **No recruitment fees or related costs should be charged to, or otherwise borne by, workers or job-seekers** (ILO, *General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and definition of recruitment fees and related costs*, 2019).

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3.10. Abusive working and living conditions

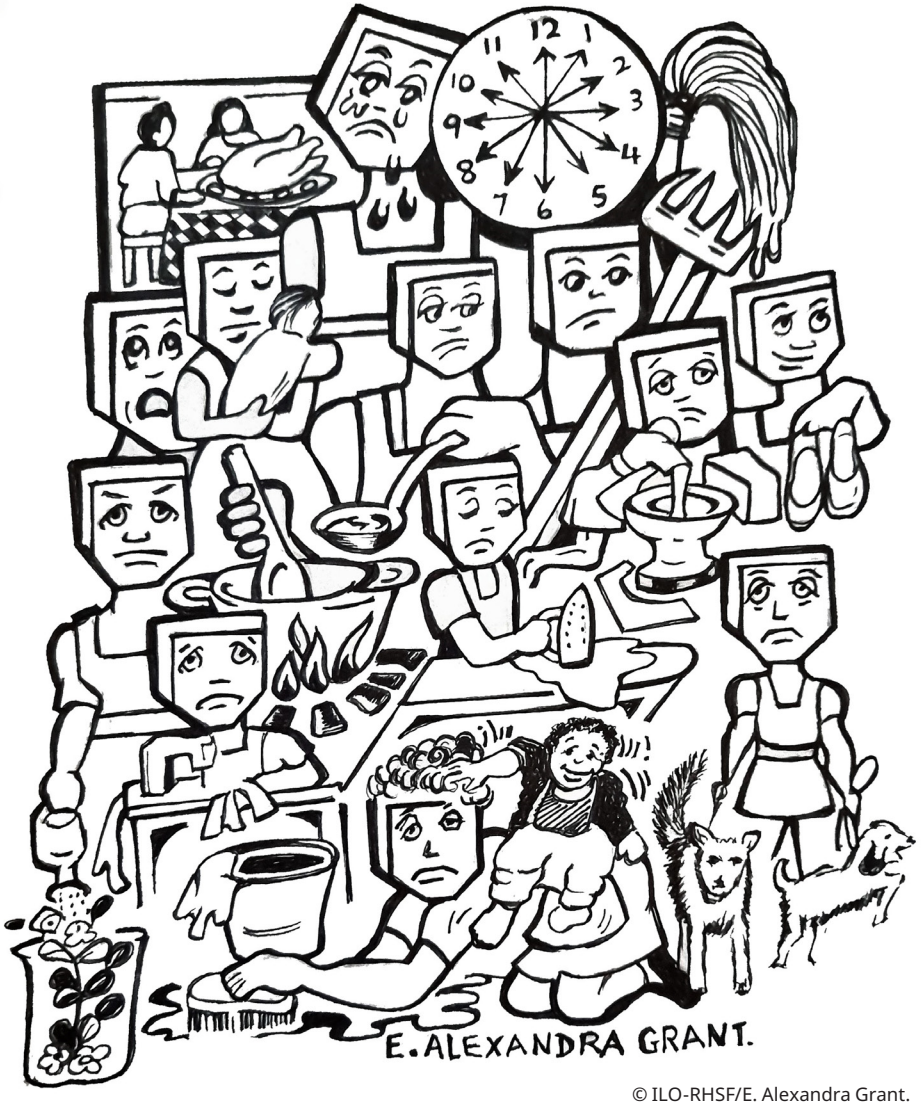
> I was recruited to take care of the animals, but I never got any money. I worked outside in the freezing cold with just a thin coat and gloves, and I only got one meal a day. I lost multiple fingers to severe frostbite.
>
> A 56-year-old herdsman in Mongolia.
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Victims of forced labour may be subjected to degrading working conditions (humiliating, unsanitary of demeaning) or hazardous ones (difficult, dangerous, or lacking adequate protective equipment), in clear violation of labour law and human dignity. They may also be forced to live in substandard conditions, which are overcrowded, unhygienic and without privacy.

While poor living and working conditions alone do not automatically constitute forced labour, they are often present in such cases.

This is why further investigation is needed whenever workers face risks, such as inadequate protective gear or training, insufficient sanitation, lack of heating, running water or adequate food, or any other circumstance endangering their health.

The key issue to assess is whether **workers have been coerced into remaining in conditions that others would refuse to endure** and investigate the means through which this was achieved.



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3.11. Excessive overtime

> I worked over 15 hours every day, with no days off, no rest, and I could only sleep after midnight.
>
> Zimbabwean woman working in a household in Kuwait.
> (ILO, *Forced Labour: Casebook of court decisions, forthcoming*)

Excessive working hours alone do not automatically constitute forced labour, but they should trigger closer scrutiny, particularly when they exceed limits set by national law or collective agreements.

Determining whether overtime amounts to forced labour can be complex. The ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations has noted cases where workers accept excessive overtime (beyond what is permitted under national laws) out of fear of dismissal, or where piece-rate and productivity systems oblige workers to work long hours just to reach the minimum wage.

Key factors to assess include whether workers face penalties for refusing overtime, such as dismissal, blacklisting or exclusion from future overtime opportunities.

Forced overtime is especially prevalent in certain sectors. Domestic workers and fishers may be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no rest days or breaks. In manufacturing, forced overtime is often linked to unrealistic production targets. The risk increases where working hours are poorly defined or written contracts are absent.

Excessive overtime not only raises concerns of coercion, but also endangers health and safety, exposing workers to higher risks of injury, illness and even premature death.

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▶ 4. How to use the indicators

Indicators can support the detection of potential victims of forced labour and should trigger further investigation to confirm a case. In practice, this means recognizing early warning signs or red flags. For instance, locked doors, barred windows or fenced areas may raise concerns and key questions should be asked, like whether workers are free to leave the premises. If concerns arise, further inquiry is needed to understand the reasons behind any restrictions and assess their legitimacy. Gathering evidence is essential and may involve separate interviews with workers and employers, inspections of work and living spaces, and searching for additional signs, including during unannounced visits. While some indicators are objective, like physical injuries, others, such as fearful or submissive behaviour, are more subjective and harder to document.

Disseminating the list of indicators can be useful and should be tailored to the audience. Concise formats like pocket cards, may be suitable for migrant workers, while more detailed versions are appropriated for law enforcement officials.

Furthermore, indicators can support data collection efforts in line with ILO guidelines.

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▶ 5. Particular case: State-imposed forced labour

State-imposed forced labour arises from national laws, policies or practices, and can be more difficult to identify. Unlike in private settings, the obligation is imposed directly through legislation or by State authorities and their agents. As a result, many of the indicators of forced labour, such as deception, retention of documents, or threats by employers or recruiters, may not apply in the same way. Instead, compulsion is embedded in official rules or orders that individuals have no real ability to refuse, making it harder to distinguish.

The challenge is to assess whether the State's requirement to undertake work or provide services goes beyond what ILO Conventions permit, or corresponds to conduct that is prohibited under ILO Conventions.

State-imposed forced labour can take various forms, including:

- compulsory labour as a form of political coercion or punishment for persons expressing political views or views opposed to the established political, social and economic system;
- mobilization of labour for economic development purposes;
- use of forced labour as a means of labour discipline;
- punishment for participation in strikes;
- discriminatory practices involving compulsory labour on racial, social, national or religious grounds.

State-imposed forced labour may also arise when authorities exceed or misuse the narrow exceptions to compulsory labour permitted under ILO Convention No. 29:

- **Compulsory military service:** Convention No. 29 allows compulsory military service only for work of a purely military character. Anything beyond that raises compliance concerns.

- **Normal civic obligations:** Limited civic duties, such as jury duty, are permissible. Using this exception to justify broader public works or economic projects would, however, be a breach.
- **Prison labour:** Prison work may be required, but only from convicted persons under the direct control and supervision of a public authority, and never to produce goods or services for private individuals or enterprises. Extending it to detainees prior to conviction, using privately run prisons, or directing the work to benefit private individuals or enterprises breaches this exception, except if it is guaranteed that the convicted persons express their free, formal and informed consent to the work.
- **Emergency work:** In a genuine emergency, such as war, major disasters (fire, flood, famine, earthquake), serious epidemics or dangerous pest outbreaks, authorities **may** require people to help. However, this exception is narrow. Any compulsory work required in case of an emergency must be strictly necessary, limited in scope and duration, and tied to the emergency. Stretching the definition of "emergency" or continuing compulsory work after the emergency ends, violates the exception and would constitute forced labour.
- **Minor communal services:** Small community tasks that directly benefit the community, like the occasional upkeep of shared spaces, can be acceptable provided that community members are consulted on the need for the services. If the work becomes **substantial** or interferes with regular jobs, the exception no longer applies.

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