



UNEQUAL EXCHANGE AND LABOUR EXPLOITATION: INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN TAIWAN'S FISHING INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the structural exploitation of Indonesian migrant fishers [anak buah kapal (ABK)] in Taiwan's fishing industry through the lens of Marxist political economy and world-systems theory, drawing on Marx's theory of value and Emmanuel's concept of unequal exchange. Based on fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, it reveals how ABKs are incorporated into global capitalism as a hyper-precarious labour force, subjected to wage suppression, contract manipulation, and debt-based recruitment. Recruitment agencies sustain cycles of dependency, restricting worker mobility and reinforcing economic vulnerability. As a semi-peripheral economy, Taiwan extracts surplus value from peripheral labour while remaining subordinate to core markets within the global seafood supply chain. The article argues that legal exclusions, jurisdictional fragmentation, and delegated coercion underpin a vertically integrated system of transnational labour control. By situating ABKs labour within global production networks, the analysis highlights its foundational role in capital accumulation and calls for a structural critique of transnational labour governance.

Keywords: Migrant exploitation, unequal exchange, Indonesian fishers, transnational labour governance, jurisdictional exclusion

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses Indonesian labour migration through the lens of unequal exchange, focusing on how labour mobility sustains capital accumulation under global capitalism (Piore 1979; Sassen 1991; Bélanger and Wang 2007). It centres on Indonesian migrant fishers, commonly referred to as *anak buah kapal* (ABK), employed in Taiwan's fishing industry, a key site of transnational labour shaped by capitalist imperatives, state brokerage, and market demands. The term ABK, literally meaning ship crew member in Indonesian, refers in this context specifically to Indonesian migrant fishers working aboard Taiwanese offshore and distant-water vessels. While the term is broadly used in Indonesia to denote maritime labour in general, in the context of transnational migration it has come to designate a distinct category of workers who are systematically subjected to precarious legal protections, debt-financed recruitment, and exploitative labour regimes within global fishing economies.

This article asks how is the capitalisation of Indonesian migrant labour operationalised in Taiwan's fishing sector, and what structural mechanisms sustain their exploitation?

Migration is often framed as a personal choice (Manning and Trimmer 2020), yet this obscures the structural forces underpinning labour mobility (Gattinara and Morales 2017; Zelinsky 1971; Castles and Miller 2003). Rather than a response to wage differentials, migration is embedded in capitalist expansion, labour commodification, and surplus extraction (Massey and Espinosa 1997). Using Marxist and world-systems theory, this article shows how recruitment practices, state policy, and global markets jointly devalue migrant labour. Taiwan's fishing industry exemplifies these dynamics. As one of the top twenty-five global seafood producers [GLJ–ILRF (Global Labor Justice–International Labor Rights Forum) 2020; FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) 2022], it relies heavily on Indonesian ABKs, who experience wage suppression, contractual precarity, and exploitative recruitment. Since the 1980s, Taiwan has sourced low-cost labour from Southeast Asia, with Indonesians comprising a significant portion of its distant-water fleet (Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia 2023). As shown in Figure 1, Indonesian ABKs represent over half of all foreign crew, revealing their central role in sustaining seafood exports while remaining structurally vulnerable under a bifurcated labour regime.

Migrant labour in Taiwan spans multiple sectors, construction, domestic, care-giving, and fishing, but across all, it is governed by legal restriction and employer dependency (Tsay 2016). While human rights reports highlight abuses, fewer studies explore the economic structures that normalise this exploitation. This article fills that gap by situating Indonesians within the global capitalist system. More than employees, ABKs are hyper-exploited labourers a reserve army of labour (Marx [1867] 1992; Jonna and Foster 2016; Basu 2013), whose disposability suppresses wages and weakens collective agency, essential to Taiwan's seafood exports but lacking protections. Their exploitation is amplified by unequal exchange (Emmanuel 1972), as Taiwan profits from global seafood exports while ABKs earn poverty-level wages. Meanwhile, Indonesia plays a facilitating role through a labour brokerage model (Rodriguez 2010) that sustains a remittance economy while externalising surplus labour. Migration is not incidental; it is a structural function of capital accumulation. This article offers a critical framework for understanding how cross-border labour systems entrench global inequalities and extract surplus value from peripheral labour.

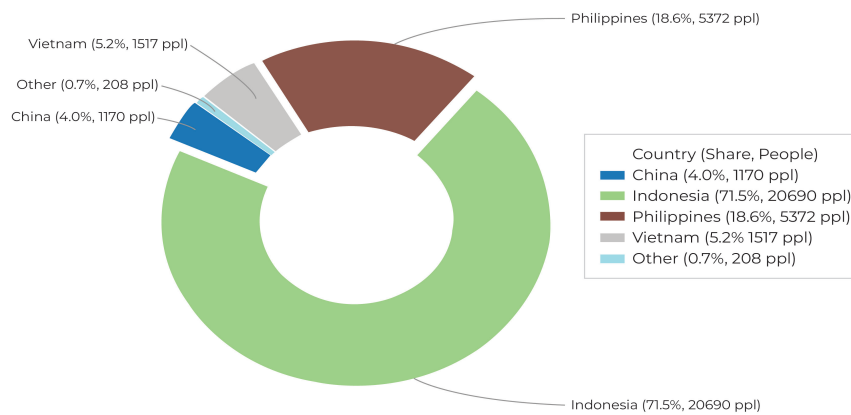


Figure 1: Enhanced distribution of foreign crew members by country in Taiwan.
Source: Taiwan Fisheries Agency (2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policy Context, Migrant Labour, Capitalist Control, and Structural Exploitation

Since the 1990s, Taiwan has formalised its reliance on foreign labour through bilateral agreements with Southeast Asian countries, particularly Indonesia (Chang 1989). Indonesia's zero-cost migration framework was intended to reduce placement fees, but, in practice, workers remain entangled in hidden costs, informal brokerage fees, and debt obligations (Tsay 1992; Yuniarto 2016; Setyawulandari and Satino 2024; Yamanaka and Piper 2005). These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by Taiwan's legal system, where migrant fishers are governed by the Fisheries Agency (FA) under the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) rather than the Ministry of Labour (MoL), excluding them from protections such as minimum wage standards, labour inspections, and grievance mechanisms (Li 2011; Komarudin et al. 2023). Migrant workers form the backbone of Taiwan's distant water fleet, operating in harsh conditions with minimal oversight. Their labour is essential to national and global seafood supply chains, yet they are treated as disposable, underpaid, and politically invisible. This contradiction intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers were subjected to lockdowns, denied healthcare access, and framed as health threats rather than rights-bearing subjects (Gusman 2021). These dynamics reflect a central paradox of global capitalism: labour is essential yet structurally excluded.

Migration is not merely a demographic trend but a structural component of the global capitalist economy (Sassen 1989; Wise and Marquez 2013). It redistributes labour from peripheral to core regions as a mechanism of surplus extraction (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Lauesen 2021; Ness 2023). Drawing from Durkheim and Mauss's notion of migration as a "total social fact" (Sayad 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000; Boudou 2023), contemporary research emphasises how migration intersects with political economy, state power, and segmented labour markets (Czaika and de Haas 2014; Anderson et al. 2024). In this framework, Indonesian migration to Taiwan is shaped not simply by individual aspirations, but by structural asymmetries linking rural poverty and state brokerage in Indonesia with Taiwan's demand for cheap, regulated labour (Piore 1979; Sassen 1991; Komarudin et al. 2023).

Building on these insights, scholars have examined the recruitment of Indonesian migrant fishers through Marxist critiques of labour commodification and surplus extraction. Yuniarto (2016) and Bharata (2024) highlight how remittance dependency and informal debt cycles perpetuate labour precarity and exclusion. Taiwan's refusal to ratify International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 189 reinforces a dual labour regime that differentiates between citizens and foreign workers (Komarudin et al. 2023). Harvey (2004) describes these dynamics as forms of accumulation by dispossession, wherein erosion of labour rights underpins capital preservation.

A key theoretical contribution is Cheng's (2020) concept of the mobility regime, in which Taiwan's guest worker system structurally denies migrant autonomy over employment, movement, and political agency. Through employer-tied contracts and spatial confinement, migrants, especially in care and maritime sectors, are rendered disposable and depoliticised. Cheng's framework is particularly relevant to distant water fishers, who are legally excluded from core labour protections and physically isolated at sea. This article extends her analysis by linking immobility and legal invisibility to surplus value generation in a semi-peripheral capitalist economy.

Loveband (2009) and Li (2011) further illustrate how Taiwan's migration policies cultivate dependency by restricting job mobility and discouraging union participation. These practices apply across nationalities, reflecting a systemic rather than nationality-specific architecture of exclusion. Wallerstein's (1974a) world-systems theory helps locate this within broader structures of global labour exploitation wherein peripheral labour sustains accumulation in both core and semi-peripheral zones. Despite a growing body of literature, critical gaps remain. Much existing research focuses on legal frameworks or bilateral agreements without linking micro-level precarity to macro-level capitalist reproduction. Few studies analyse Taiwan's guest worker regime, especially in distant-water fishing (DWFs), as a mechanism for surplus value extraction via legal exclusion and labour immobilisation. While migrant resistance is occasionally documented (Kim 2025), it is rarely theorised through Marxist or world-systems approaches. This article addresses these gaps by offering a political economy analysis grounded in theories of unequal exchange, legal servitude, and transnational labour control. The article contributes to the literature by reframing Taiwan's DWFs industry not as a site of regulatory failure, but as a structurally embedded system of surplus extraction. Rather than attributing exploitation to enforcement lapses (Hodgson 1980), it shows how exclusion is institutionalised. Drawing on Marxist political economy and world-systems theory, the article argues that the legal, economic, and social mechanisms governing Indonesian migrant fishers constitute a vertically integrated labour regime. This regime sustains capital accumulation through institutional immobility, debt dependency, and layered forms of exclusion, most notably legal exclusion, referring to the absence of formal labour protections, and jurisdictional exclusion, which places fishers outside the reach of national enforcement mechanisms by assigning them to regulatory grey zones such as international waters or non-labour-focused agencies like Taiwan's FA. These interlocking mechanisms normalise the disposability of peripheral labour.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Reserve Army of Labour: A Marxist Perspective on Migration

This article employs a qualitative methodology, combining field observations, semi-structured interviews with Indonesian ABKs, and documentary analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in January and February 2025 in Kaohsiung, Keelung, and Su'ao, major hubs for Taiwan's DWFs. These interviews, alongside non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports (GLJ–ILRF 2020; EJF [Environmental Justice Foundation] 2023), provide insight into the working and living conditions of migrant fishers. Workers' narratives consistently reveal how debt cycles, coercive contracts, and commodification shape their experiences. Recruitment fees, often exceeding USD1,500–4,000, leave many ABKs in debt bondage. Deductions for mandatory items such as National Health Insurance, alongside, housing, and placement exacerbate their precarity. These patterns, corroborated by NGO findings, illustrate how legal exclusion and economic dependence sustain the vulnerability of migrant fishers.

The analysis is grounded in Marxist political economy and world-systems theory. Central to this is Marx's concept of the reserve army of labour, which helps explain the precarious status of ABKs (Collins 1984). Their surplus position depresses wages and guarantees a disposable workforce for capital accumulation in Taiwan's fishing sector. Migration is not individual mobility but a structural response to capital's needs (de Haas 2010; Gebrial 2024). Precarity reflects the commodification of labour (Ness 2023). Core and semi-peripheral economies extract value from peripheral labour (Wallerstein 1974b; Amin 1976; Agnew 2021), a dynamic rooted in wage repression. As Marx argued, full employment threatens profits by raising wages (Beveridge 1944; Kalecki 1983; Green 1991; Jonna and Foster 2016). Marx divides the reserve army into three categories. The floating reserve includes workers shifting in and out of employment. The ABKs fit this model, drawn in during growth, discarded during downturns. The latent reserve refers to rural labour not yet absorbed by capital. Many Indonesians from coastal area migrate abroad, bypassing domestic industry, entering labour circuits where poverty wages prevail. The stagnant reserve includes workers in permanent precarity. In Taiwan's fishing industry, this reserve is legally constructed through mechanisms of legal servitude (Lan 2007).

As Tseng and Wang (2013) show, Taiwan's guest worker system delegates control to private brokers, who extract value through contract manipulation, debt enforcement, and restricted mobility. This governance model enables coercion while minimising state accountability. It creates a labour force that is cheap, immobilised, and denied meaningful rights. Taiwan's fishing sector is embedded in the global capitalist hierarchy. Operating as a semi-peripheral (as shown in Figure 2) economy (Wallerstein 1974a), it extracts labour from Indonesia while exporting seafood to core markets [United States (US), Japan, and European Union (EU)]. Emmanuel's (1972) unequal exchange theory explains how profit is made by underpaying peripheral workers while pricing outputs at global market rates (Love 1980). Testimonies from three Indonesian ABKs interviewed during fieldwork, Bagus, Mula, and Rio (pseudonyms) illustrate the lived effects of this model: debt cycles, wage theft, and legal invisibility. Their exploitation sustains seafood supply chains while reinforcing dependency between peripheral labour exporters and semi-peripheral capitalists.

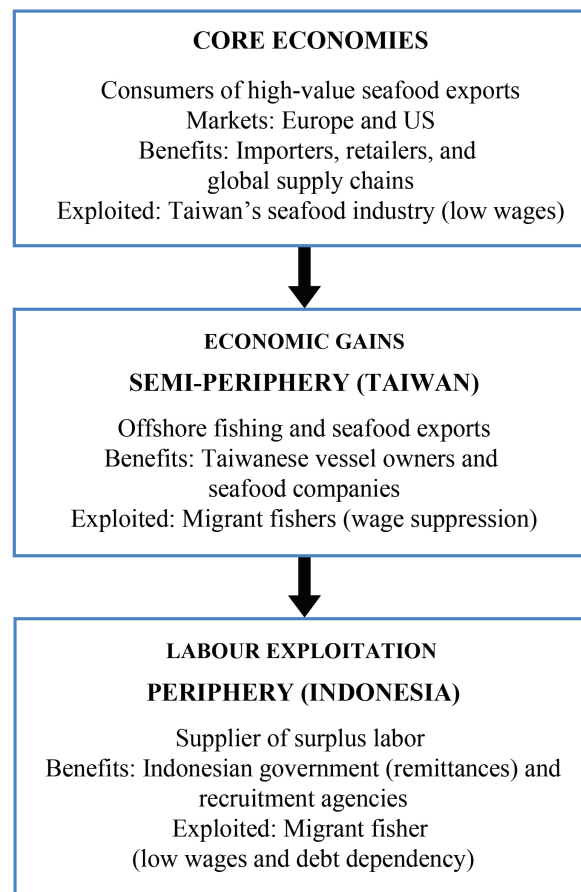


Figure 2: Labour exploitation and unequal exchange in Taiwan's fishing industry.

Marx's theory of value illuminates how Indonesian ABK labour is commodified and exploited within Taiwan's fishing industry (Lee 1993). Under capitalism, the value of commodities derives not from labour itself, but from surplus value—produced when labour generates output exceeding its compensation (Marx 1992 [1867]; Mohun 1984; Bellofiore 1998). This surplus is extracted through alienated, measurable, and exchangeable labour, whose exploitative foundations are obscured by the commodity form (Skotnicki 2020). As Marx (1976) and Saad-Filho (2002) argue, capital functions as a social relation, an ongoing process of value accumulation through labour exploitation. In Taiwan, fish circulate as valuable market goods, while the ABK labour that sustains them remains invisible, reified, and disposable within transnational value chains. Migration, though often framed as voluntary, operates as a coercive mechanism of accumulation (Harvey 2004; 2005), especially when debt ties workers to employers and short-term contracts erode bargaining power (Palmer et al. 2023). The ABKs occupy a structurally precarious position: they are recruited from peripheral economies, denied full legal protections, and immobilised within a dual legal regime that facilitates surplus extraction while shielding capital from accountability (GLJ–ILRF 2020; Tseng et al. 2023; Chen et al. 2024).

Capitalising Migrant Labour Through Legal Architecture and Unequal Exchange

The capitalisation of Indonesian migrant labour in Taiwan's fishing industry is deeply embedded in the legal and economic architecture of its guest worker regime (Kwak and Wang 2022; Kaur 2010). As Lan (2006, 2007) demonstrates, Taiwan's migration governance operates through

a system of legal servitude, in which disciplinary authority is delegated to employers and recruitment brokers. This arrangement is exclusionary by design particularly within the fishing sector, where DWFs fall under the jurisdiction of the FA rather than the MoL. This bifurcated governance structure systematically removes migrant fishers from the protections afforded by Taiwan's core labour laws, thereby, enabling conditions of structural exploitation.

From a Marxist political economy perspective, these migrant workers become vehicles of intensified surplus value extraction, via wage suppression, excessive working hours, and the denial of social reproduction. Their labour is rendered invisible through commodity fetishism (Molyneux 1995; Morris et al. 1966), wherein the global market value of seafood conceals the exploitative social relations underpinning its production. This dynamic reflects broader world-systems processes (Frank 1967; Emmanuel 1972; Wallerstein 2004), in which Taiwan, positioned as a semi-peripheral economy, extracts value from peripheral labour sources such as Indonesia. The participation of migrant fishers in global value chains is predicated on their disposability, legal precarity, and the asymmetrical distribution of economic gains.

Empirical data drawn from fieldwork conducted between January and February 2025 in Taiwan with Indonesian ABKs and civil society actors like the Taiwan Labour Front (TLF) illustrates how these mechanisms operate on the ground. Most fishers arrive in Taiwan already indebted, having paid recruitment fees, resulting in conditions of debt bondage. Further deductions for accommodation, and placement fees are routinely applied, often arbitrarily and with minimal oversight. These exploitative practices are well-documented by advocacy organisations such as the EJF (2023), and are consistently corroborated in worker testimonies that describe a lack of legal recourse, frequent contract manipulation, and the absence of formal grievance mechanisms. The Indonesian government's labour export policies further institutionalise this exploitative arrangement, prioritising remittance flows over the protection of migrant workers' rights (Ratner et al. 2014). This mutual complicity between sending and receiving states sustains what Salazar and Schiller (2014) conceptualise as a mobility regime: a transnational system of governance that regulates and contains migrant labour to facilitate capital accumulation.

As a critical node in the global seafood supply chain, Taiwan's fishing industry relies on this hyper-precarious labour force to maintain its competitive position. The combined effects of legal exclusions, debt-financed migration, and brokered transnational labour reinforce a system in which the costs and risks of production are externalised onto the most vulnerable workers—while the conditions of their exploitation remain obscured from consumers and global regulators.

Marxism, Guest Worker Regimes, and Jurisdictional Exclusion in Taiwan's Fishing Industry

The regime operates through four interlocking dynamics: (1) the commodification of migrant labour as surplus population; (2) the legal construction of labour immobility; (3) the delegation of state authority to private actors; and (4) the jurisdictional exclusion of DWFs. These dimensions are not incidental but part of a coordinated architecture of capitalist extraction. Indonesian migrant fishers emerge as a transnational proletariat: mobile enough to be recruited, but immobilised once captured by the legal and economic machinery of Taiwan's labour governance. Drawing from Marx's theory of the reserve army of labour, migrant workers constitute a structurally surplus population deployed to suppress wages and weaken collective power. Indonesian ABKs in Taiwan illustrate this logic: economically indispensable, yet systematically disposable. Their role is to absorb the pressures of capital accumulation while remaining

politically invisible. This condition of hyper-exploitability is not informal coercion, but what Lan (2007: 253) defines as “legal servitude”, a regime where domination is embedded in law and disciplinary power is outsourced to employers and brokers, legalising migrant disposability.

The Employment Service Act of 1992 institutionalised this by designating migrant labour as temporary and supplemental (Liu et al. 1996). As Tseng and Wang (2013) explain, the Act created a dual labour market excluding foreign workers from core protections and full civic participation. These are not regulatory gaps but deliberate mechanisms of immobilisation to ensure a compliant, low-cost labour force. This immobilisation is reinforced through delegated authority. Rather than managing labour directly, the state assigns brokers and employers daily control, outsourcing coercion while avoiding accountability (Tsai and Chen 1997). Cheng (2020) frames this as a mobility regime: a governance model designed to produce fixed, immobile bodies in zones of maximum capitalist control. Through debt bondage, wage theft, and document confiscation, the migrant becomes a managed subject of economic utility, rather than a rights-bearing worker.

A sector-specific layer of exclusion intensifies this for DWFs. Land-based migrants are under the MoL and nominally protected by labour law; DWFs, by contrast, are regulated by the FA, which exercises weaker oversight. Many DWFs work aboard flags of convenience (FoC) vessels registered outside Taiwan’s jurisdiction, creating legal vacuums where labour protections vanish (Chen et al. 2024). This spatial and legal detachment is not anomalous, it is a structural feature of maritime capitalism, used to evade scrutiny and intensify exploitation. As synthesised in Figure 3, legal servitude, labour immobility, delegated coercion, and jurisdictional exclusion converge in a vertically structured system of transnational labour control. While the figure illustrates ideological and economic effects, surplus value extraction and unequal exchange, these outcomes are sustained by legal-political scaffolding. Indonesian ABKs are not merely precarious; they are structurally immobilised, legally disposable, and economically essential. They exist within capitalism not as full subjects, but as commodified labour segmented by race, nationality, and geographical origin, particularly coastal regions in Indonesia where economic vulnerability drives transnational migration. Indeed, this work reframes the state not as a passive actor, but as a co-conspirator in surplus extraction. The exploitation of Indonesian migrant fishers is not a regulatory failure; it is the logical outcome of a labour regime designed for flexibility, deniability, and control. By embedding exclusion in law, delegating coercion, and manipulating spatial jurisdiction, Taiwan’s guest worker regime exemplifies the political economy of global migration, where capital accumulation depends not only on wage repression, but on the systematic immobilisation of racialised, peripheral labour.

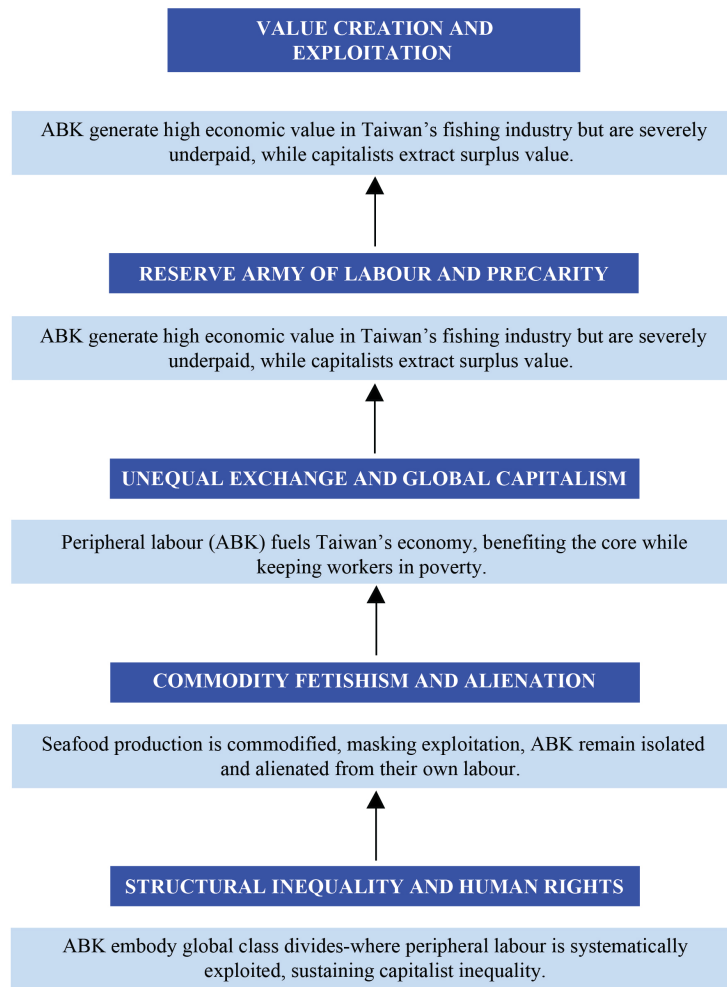


Figure 3: Marxist dimensions of migrant labour exploitation in Taiwan's fishing industry.

Migrant Labour Exploitation in Taiwan's Fishing Industry

Taiwan's labour migration regime has evolved through executive regulations (Lin 1988) and key legislation, particularly the Employment Service Act of 1992, which remains the cornerstone for managing foreign labour. Instead of fixed caps, Taiwan employs a flexible quota system, adjusted by the MoL according to sectoral needs. Over time, labour agreements expanded from Indonesia and the Philippines to include Thailand and Vietnam (Li 2011; Komarudin et al. 2023), reflecting efforts to manage domestic labour shortages through regional diplomacy (Tsai 2008).

Although attention has focused on manufacturing and domestic work (Deng et al. 2021), Taiwan's fishing industry, heavily reliant on Indonesian workers, remains understudied. Migration to this sector mirrors broader capitalist trends of labour extraction and commodification (Wise and Marquez 2013). While migration policy was initially shaped by protectionist concerns (Wang 2011), industrialisation in the 1980s prompted a shift toward importing cheap labour. Before 1992, the absence of formal policy led to widespread use of undocumented workers (Selya 1992). The 1992 Act legalised recruitment but curtailed mobility and rights, aligning Taiwan's regime with Singapore and Hong Kong's guest worker models (Cheng 1996; Tseng and Wang 2013; Ng 2022; Tan 2023). The Act also created a dual governance structure. Land-based migrants in caregiving

and manufacturing fall under the MoL, with limited protections (Chen 2020), while DWFs are governed by the FA and excluded from labour laws (Weaver-Lee 2024). This jurisdictional divide entrenches wage disparities and sector-specific vulnerabilities (Vandergeest and Marschke 2021).

Taiwan's economy depends on migrant labour to counter demographic decline (Huang et al. 2019), including ageing and low birth rates (Lin et al. 2010; Chang 1989; Thomas et al. 2023). Migrants, primarily from Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, are formally assigned "3D" jobs: dirty, dangerous, and difficult (Tseng and Wang 2013; Rich et al. 2023). Indonesian fishers form the backbone of the distant-water fleet but face persistent exploitation, including lack of legal coverage, recruitment fraud, and precarious contracts (Yen and Liuhuang 2021). A core driver of this exploitation is the brokerage system. DWFs relies on third-party agencies charging USD1,500–4,000 in recruitment fees (EJF 2019), often with hidden charges that plunge workers into debt bondage (Lan 2006; Ku 2013; Soulina and Yovani 2020). Agencies frequently confiscate passports and identity documents, severely limiting mobility (Vandergeest and Marschke 2021). Contracts are often misleading, and resigning can result in blacklisting (Yen and Liuhuang 2021). These coercive conditions match the ILO's definition of forced labour (Liu et al. 2024a), while wage theft and arbitrary deductions deepen precarity (EJF 2023). Migrant fishers endure 18–20-hour workdays, limited rest, and poor medical access (Vandergeest and Marschke 2021). Despite a 2017 minimum wage of USD450–500/month, deductions can reduce earnings to USD150 (Parhusip 2023). Abuse includes verbal threats, physical violence, and, in some cases, death (EJF 2019; 2023; Migrants and Refugees Section 2021).

NGOs have played a key role in documenting abuses and advocating for change. Organisations like Stella Maris Kaohsiung provide legal support and shelter (Parhusip 2023), while civil society groups push for compliance with international standards like the ILO's Work in Fishing Convention (C188) (Liu et al. 2024a). Yet, industry interests often override reform, and structural exclusion persists (Weaver-Lee 2024). The dual governance model and broker-based recruitment continue to drive exploitation. While advocacy has brought limited improvements, deeper reforms are needed. Evidence-based policy grounded in field research on recruitment debt, wage theft, and contract fraud is essential to reshape Taiwan's migration governance toward labour justice over economic expediency.

Taiwanese Fishing Industry

The Taiwanese fishing industry has a deep historical legacy. According to Chen (2009), its development began during the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945), when Taiwan became a strategic gateway to China and Southeast Asia. During this era, industrialisation in the fishing sector advanced significantly through Japanese influence. The post-war period further expanded the sector, with seafood production and export rising from the 1960s to the 1980s, eventually accounting for nearly 45% of Taiwan's agricultural output and reaching almost USD1.4 million by the late 1990s (Sillers 1983; Jaffee and Gordon 1993).

Today, Taiwan maintains the world's second-largest DWF fleet, with 414 legally registered vessels operating in non-adjacent exclusive economic zones (EEZs) as of 2017 (Yozell and Shaver 2019). Including vessels under FoC, Taiwan controls over 1,100 vessels (Greenpeace Southeast Asia 2020). This FoC strategy enables Taiwanese enterprises to circumvent regulatory constraints while maintaining dominance in the global seafood market. The fishing industry, valued at approximately USD1.38 billion, contributes substantially to Taiwan's economy and global seafood exports (FAO 2022; Fisheries Agency [FA] 2020). Between 2016 and 2019, the sector contributed

0.640% to 0.804% of national gross domestic product (GDP), with primary fishing activities accounting for the largest share (Liu et al. 2024b).

Taiwan's ability to negotiate bilateral access to EEZs in around 30 countries underlines its strategic position. Operating within a semi-peripheral economic framework, Taiwan utilises labour from peripheral economies while supplying seafood to core markets such as Japan, the EU, and the US. Migrant labour, particularly from Indonesia and the Philippines, is central to this dynamic, reducing labour costs and maximising capital accumulation for Taiwanese firms. Thus, Taiwan's DWF industry is not merely a national economic asset but a crucial part of the global division of labour. Through the dual use of Taiwan-flagged and FoC vessels, Taiwanese capital sustains its competitiveness while externalising the costs of labour exploitation. In 2019, there were 22,302 foreign crew members in Taiwan's distant-water fleet; as shown in Figure 4, 57.4% were Indonesians (Migrants and Refugees Section 2021).

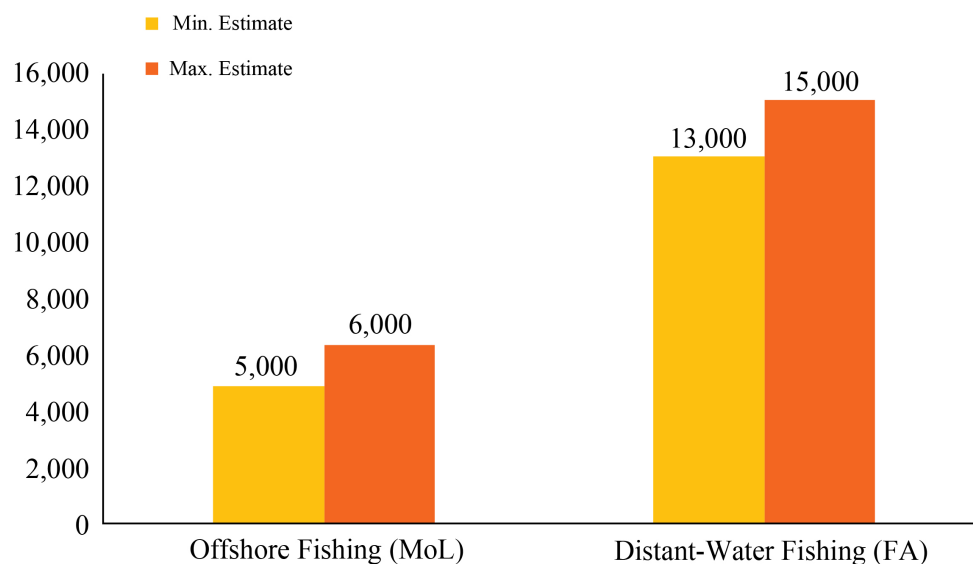


Figure 4: Estimated number of Indonesia fishers in Taiwan by sector.

Source: Taiwan Fisheries Agency (2023).

The GDP contributions from the fishing industry and related sectors have varied. In 2011, fishing accounted for under 0.30% of GDP, but including related industries increased its contribution to 2.96%, peaking at 3.11% in 2014 before stabilising around 2.84% by 2018 (Yang et al. 2022). Between 2011 and 2018, these sectors generated over NTD520.9 billion (USD16.67 billion) in added value. Primary fishing contributed the most, followed by transport and sales services. While fish processing is often viewed as secondary, its true value may be underreported due to uncompensated labour, including extra hours worked by fishers (Liu et al. 2024b).

Mechanisms of labour exploitation, such as placement fees and wage deductions, obscure real wage data and reveal a disconnect between fishers' compensation and the value they generate in the global seafood supply chain (Harvey 2005). The economic significance of this sector is inseparable from the contributions of Southeast Asian migrants, especially Indonesians, who often endure hazardous and abusive conditions. Forced labour and exploitation are widespread aboard Taiwan-owned or flagged vessels (Hung et al. 2022). Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Filipino fishers frequently face passport confiscation, debt-based coercion, contract fraud, withheld wages, and threats of physical and financial harm (Liu et al. 2024a). These abuses occur in domestic and international waters.

Migrant recruitment is split between two state agencies: the MoL handles recruitment for inland waters, while the FA, a sub-agency under the MoA, oversees recruitment for distant-water operations. Recent findings by the EIJF (2020; 2023) highlight systematic labour abuses aboard DWFs vessels, particularly those operating under the jurisdiction of Taiwan's FA. These vessels, which often operate in international waters and are not covered by the protections afforded under Taiwan's Labour Standards Act, have been repeatedly associated with forced labour indicators, including debt bondage, document confiscation, wage theft, and physical abuse (EIJF 2020). The exclusion of DWFs from MoL regulations further entrenches their vulnerability, enabling a legal structure in which extreme forms of exploitation persist with minimal oversight. In Central and Eastern Java, coastal areas serve as recruitment hubs for low-cost labour, funnelling fishers into exploitative employment conditions aboard Taiwanese ships. Migrant Care, an NGO based in Jakarta, has documented how recruitment agencies facilitate oppression (Findlay et al. 2012). Furthermore, EIJF's interviews with 193 fishers from 167 vessels revealed that 80% reported forced labour conditions, and 35% described human rights violations (EIJF 2023). The minimum monthly wage for DWFs stands at NTD13,900 (less than USD500), yet many workers face deductions for food, accommodation, and placement, even when living aboard the vessel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Debt, Precarity, and Legal Loopholes: The Structural Exploitation of Indonesian Fishers in Taiwan

The recruitment and employment of Indonesian fishers in Taiwan's fishing industry are marked by structural coercion. Exorbitant recruitment fees, wage deductions, and legal loopholes collectively ensure the continued economic vulnerability of migrant workers. Debt incurred through recruitment, reinforced by suppressed wages, traps fishers in exploitative conditions, making it financially prohibitive to exit their contracts. Drawing from field interviews, NGO reports, and legal frameworks, this section shows how recruitment fees and wage deductions reinforce Taiwan's semi-peripheral role in the global seafood economy. Indonesia is a major labour supplier, particularly for offshore and DWFs. While precise regional data is lacking, interviews confirm that Central Java, especially Cirebon, Berebes, and Pemalang, is the key labour-sending region. These communities have long histories of both local fishing and international migration to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

Based on an interview, an ABK in Kaohsiung said "Back home, it's hard to earn this much. So, we just endure it here". This testimony underscores how migration is rarely voluntary, it's an economic necessity, reinforcing dependency between Indonesia and Taiwan. Many ABKs shift from small-scale fishing in Indonesia to Taiwanese vessels due to income instability and depleting fish stocks. According to NGO findings like Humanity Research Consultancy (Chen et al. 2024), most Indonesian ABKs work in distant-water fleets, exempt from Taiwan's labour laws and protection unlike offshore fishers under the MoL.

These numbers in Figure 4 demonstrate that DWFs, regulated by the FA, represent most Indonesian workers in the sector. The key distinction between the two groups lies in legal protections and regulatory oversight.

As shown in Table 1, distant-water workers face longer hours, weaker oversight, and minimal protections. Recruitment fees act as structural coercion, workers arrive already indebted, their first year's wages often allocated to repayment. Last-minute loan agreements further entrench dependency, while ongoing deductions for food, housing, and services reduce real income.

Table 1: Wage structures and deductions for Indonesian DWFs in Taiwan

Earnings breakdown	Amount (USD)	Notes
Official minimum wage	450 (MoL)\300–400 (FA)	Distant-water fishers earn less than offshore workers.
Distant-water fishers	150–250	Monthly deductions for agency fees, accommodation, food.
Actual take-home pay	200–300	Despite working > 14-hour-shifts.

Source: Adapted from EJF (2023).

Taiwan's dual legal system, as detailed in Table 2, segments ABK into two categories, creating regulatory asymmetries. Interviews with the TLF confirmed that offshore fishers (under MoL) are covered by the Labour Standards Act, including basic wage and working hour protections, while DWFs (under MoA and FA) fall outside legal jurisdiction, as their labour occurs in international waters or on foreign-flagged vessels.

Table 2: Regulatory and employment disparities between offshore and DWFs in Taiwan

Category	Regulatory body	Employment conditions
Offshore fishers	MoL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work within Taiwan's EEZs. • Minimum wage of USD450 per month. • Stronger legal protections but still subject to wage deductions.
Distant-water fishers	FA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in international waters. • Lower wages. • Weaker legal protections. • Contracts classified under private management have limited oversight.

Source: Author's elaboration based on Taiwan's Labour Standards Act.

As confirmed by a representative from the TLF:

Those who work on distant-water fleets are under the Ministry of Agriculture. This means they are not covered by the Labour Standards Act and do not receive the same protections. They are seen as outside Taiwan's domestic jurisdiction, even when they work on Taiwanese ships. We consider this exclusion a form of discrimination.

This regulatory fragmentation entrenches a dual labour regime in which distant-water ABKs are rendered vulnerable to wage suppression, contract manipulation, and employer impunity. The result is a system in which legal structures actively facilitate surplus extraction by withholding rights from the most precarious workers.

As detailed in Table 3, this legal division becomes a structural mechanism for exploitation. It allows the Taiwanese capital to maximise surplus value by placing ABKs in a legally precarious category. Though MoL mandates minimum wages, enforcement is weak; distant-water workers

are effectively excluded. The system permits Taiwanese recruitment agencies to impose capped fees domestically, but no limits exist in Indonesia. ABKs often begin their contracts already owing USD1,500–4,000, needing 12–18 months to repay debt, which places them in debt bondage.

Table 3: The dual-system regulation in Taiwan

Regulatory body	Sector covered	Legal protections	Key issue
MoL	Offshore fishing	Covered under Taiwan's labor laws, including minimum wage and dispute resolution mechanism.	Generally better protections, but enforcement remains weak.
FA	DWFs	Exempt from Taiwan's standard labor laws, with contracts regulated by private recruitment agencies and vessel owners.	Lower wages, lack of legal protections, and higher risk of abuse.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Taiwan's Labour Standards Act and FA regulatory framework (Taiwan Fisheries Agency 2024; MoL 2023).

This reinforces unequal exchange: surplus value is extracted before work even begins, benefiting Taiwan as a semi-peripheral economy while offloading labour costs onto migrant workers. Recruitment agencies function as private tax collectors, capturing worker earnings across borders. As a result, labour migration reproduces core-periphery dependencies, sustained not only through wages but through structurally embedded debt. This mutual yet asymmetrical complicity enables Taiwan to extract surplus labour, while Indonesia trades labour for foreign currency. In both cases, capital accumulation is prioritised, and worker protections are marginalised. Taiwan's fishing industry exemplifies this dynamic: a site of value generation and exploitation, positioned at the intersection of global capital and racialised labour hierarchies.

Ultimately, this political economy of Indonesian labour migration reflects entrenched global inequalities. Taiwan benefits through wage suppression and legal exclusion; Indonesia institutionalises outbound migration while exposing its citizens to abuse. Legal regimes and economic structures converge to create a system where worker vulnerability is not a flaw, but a feature. Migrant labour fuels transnational capital circuits, while remaining excluded from the rights and protections of decent work. This dynamic is visually synthesised in Figure 5, which maps the institutional and transnational mechanisms through which Indonesian migrant fishers are recruited, immobilised, and exploited within Taiwan's DWFs sector. It illustrates how recruitment, debt, legal exclusions, and global market demands converge to enable surplus value extraction across borders.

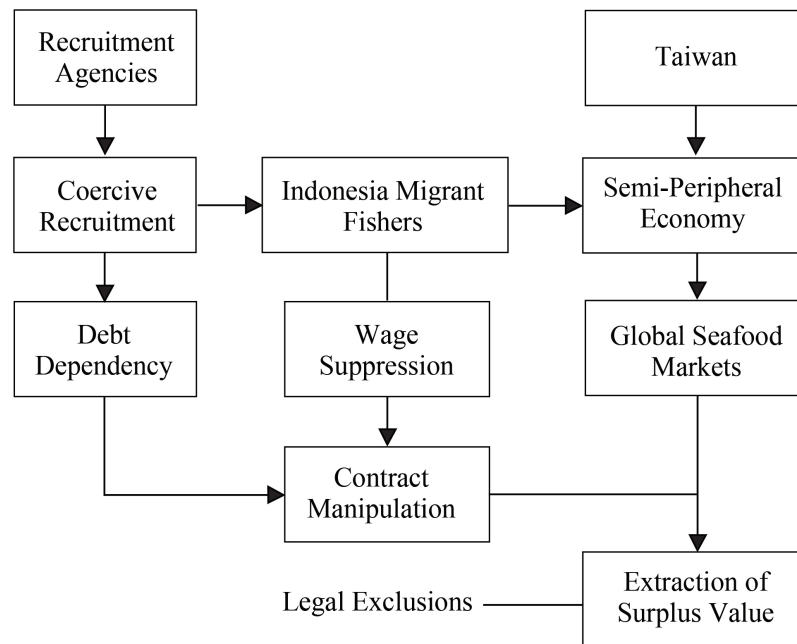


Figure 5: Peripheral labour flows and unequal exchange in Taiwan's fishing economy.

Structural Exploitation in Practice: Debt, Coercion, and Unequal Exchange in the Voices of Indonesian Migrant Fishers

The invisibility of ABKs in Taiwan's fishing industry is a case of reification, where labour relations are masked by commodity forms (Marx 1967 [1867]; Migrants and Refugees Section 2021; Skotnicki 2020). This part explores the empirical evidence drawn from the interviews and observations with Indonesian migrant fishers (ABKs) and labour advocates in Taiwan, demonstrating how structural exploitation is embedded within Taiwan's DWFs industry. Far from being anecdotal, these extended testimonies provide direct insight into the lived experiences of those subject to surplus value extraction, contractual opacity, legal exclusion, and systemic disposability (Sassen 1988). Drawing on interviews and field observations with ABK workers, this section reinforces the article's analytical grounding in Marxist political economy and world-systems theory, illustrating the mechanisms through which global capitalism exploits peripheral labour (Wallerstein 1980).

The testimony of Bagus, an Indonesian ABK, shows the problem regarding debt, recruitment, and the illusion of mobility by the ABK in Taiwan. His voice illustrates the extent to which recruitment processes are saturated with coercive economic mechanisms that undermine labour autonomy:

I was born by the sea, and I thought, why not try working abroad? I wanted a better life for my family. I paid around 50 million rupiah (USD3,000) for recruitment costs and came to Taiwan expecting to earn USD500 a month. But when I arrived, the reality was very different. After all the deductions, I only received USD150 a month. I could not complain because the captain held my passport. There were others who had been waiting for a job for months—some for 6 months, some for 3 months—and some had just arrived. We were all in the same situation, forced to stay at the recruitment centre and pay fees every day, without really knowing why.

Once I was assigned to a ship, I was shocked to see my wages being deducted for things I was not even aware of. I did not know what the deductions were for. I just had to accept it because I did not know where to go for help. We were promised a three-year contract, but after just six months, I was sent home. The agency did not do anything to help. We did not have legal rights, and they changed our contracts without any notice. When I wanted to complain, I did not know who to turn to. There was no one to help us. We were stuck because we could not leave the ship without our passports, and we feared being stranded without the proper documents.

Bagus' testimony illustrates multiple structural dynamics identified in the article: debt-financed migration, employer domination, legal invisibility, and contractual manipulation. As a DWF regulated not by the MoL but by the FA, Bagus had no recourse to standard labour protections. His experience corroborates the critique that Taiwan's distant-water sector exploits a vertically integrated labour regime, one where legal exclusion, mobility restriction, and delegated coercion are not anomalies, but functional features of capitalist accumulation at sea.

Therefore, the legal precarities faced by ABKs are compounded by fragmented labour governance. In an interview conducted in Keelung, an Indonesian offshore fisher Muta and his friends shared this:

At first, everything was confusing. The agency gave us contracts without any Indonesian translation, so I did not know what I was signing. When I asked them to explain, they would not. They just handed me the papers and told me to sign. I had no idea what I was agreeing to. This lack of clarity in contracts is a common issue, and many of us are misled by the agency. Once we were here, we were stuck, and there is no way out. The most frustrating part is the withholding of wages and the unexpected deductions from our pay. I worked for 7 months, but after that, I did not receive the wages I was owed. My pay was withheld, and they told me I had to work longer before they would give it to me. They also kept deducting my wages for unknown reasons, and I never got any explanation from the agency.

We were all promised three-year contracts. But upon arriving in Taiwan, we found out this was a seasonal fishing job. No one had told us that. There was no Indonesian translator when we signed the contract, so we did not understand anything. I only received NTD1,200 per month (USD40), even though it was supposed to be NTD24,600 (USD700). They deducted many things without any explanation. Even for food, we had to pay ourselves, despite living on the ship. Sometimes we did not know what the deductions were for. Our passports were held by the agency, so even if we wanted to leave, we could not. The employer did not want to hear our voices, and the agency stayed silent. Only after we united and reported to Taiwan's Control Yuan did they start taking responsibility. But the struggle was very hard. Many friends were afraid to speak out because they feared deportation or being blacklisted. But if we stay silent forever, nothing will ever change.

While Muta's case reflects Taiwan's offshore fishing sector, testimony demonstrates that regulatory coverage does not guarantee protection. Legal inclusion alone is insufficient when enforcement is weak, contracts are manipulated, and brokers retain coercive power. This suggests that even within regulated sectors, offshore migrant fishers remain structurally vulnerable, reinforcing the analysis that juridical inclusion without enforcement creates *de facto* exclusion. Muta's experience, while distinct from DWFs, illustrates how employer-tied contracts, debt dependency, and document confiscation function as cross-sectoral tools of control.

The commodification of labour and its expendability in global value chains are powerfully articulated in the testimony from Rio:

I paid 20 million rupiah (USD1,300) to the agency just to get here. They said it was for a guarantee, but once I arrived, everything became unclear. I did not even understand what the deductions were for. They just said “It is for insurance, it is for this, it is for that”. But no one really explained anything. Sometimes they said it was for medical fees, sometimes for documents. I kept working, but the debt did not go away. I could not go home either—how could I? I still owed money.

I asked to be sent back to Indonesia, but they said I could not go yet. They told me “Wait, wait until the issue is resolved”. But the issue never got resolved. I felt stuck, like I had no way out. My wife, my family—they are all waiting for me. I came here to make a better life, but I cannot even send money home. We were told we would work on proper ships, but when we arrived, many of us did not even get placed. We waited and waited, living in limbo, just to be exploited again.

Rio’s experience foregrounds how uncertainty itself becomes a tool of control. He describes persistent wage deductions for unexplained costs, “insurance”, “documents”, without ever receiving clear justification. This informational opacity sustains dependence and disempowerment.

More than that, Rio illustrates how debt produces immobility. Despite requesting to return home, he was repeatedly told to “wait”, leaving him trapped in a state of suspended precarity. His account also introduces the emotional toll of exploitation: the burden of family expectations, the frustration of unfulfilled promises, and the despair of being unable to remit wages. This shows how legal exclusion in the distant-water sector is compounded by administrative neglect and psychological entrapment.

The testimonies of Bagus, Muta, and Rio, supported by policy insights from the TLF, highlight a transnational labour regime sustained through legal exclusion and economic coercion. Indonesian ABKs are systematically placed outside labour protections while remaining essential to global seafood production. Their commodified labour and debt-financed migration underscore Taiwan’s DWFs industry as a site of surplus extraction from peripheral labour. Despite international frameworks like the ILO’s C188, enforcement remains weak, with recruitment agencies obstructing compliance (Lo 2023; Liu et al. 2024a). Regulatory gaps, long hours, withheld wages, and physical abuse persist (Li 2011; Karthikeyan et al. 2023). Blue justice offers a rights-based approach (Blythe et al. 2023), but systemic reform is slow. While remittances sustain families in Indonesia (Maksum et al. 2020), crises like COVID-19 have exposed the fragility of transnational labour chains, where risk is offloaded onto the most vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed the migration of Indonesian workers to Taiwan’s fishing sector through Marxist political economy and world-systems theory, revealing how Indonesian ABK workers are central to the industry’s productivity yet systematically exploited. Empirical findings, from field interviews, NGO reports, and legal analyses, demonstrate that ABKs endure wage suppression, debt dependency, and contractual coercion, not as anomalies but as structural features of global capitalism. As a semi-peripheral economy, Taiwan maintains global seafood competitiveness by extracting surplus value from peripheral labour. The recruitment and employment system reflects Marx’s reserve army of labour, with Indonesian migrants serving as a floating, disposable workforce, hired in growth cycles, discarded in downturns. This exemplifies how global value chains are sustained through racialised labour hierarchies and unequal exchange. Taiwan remains subordinate to core economies like the US and Japan while

exploiting peripheral countries like Indonesia through labour brokerage regimes and legal loopholes. This reflects global patterns where labour from the Global South subsidises wealth in the Global North while remaining economically and legally marginalised. To address these injustices, several policy reforms are essential. First, integrate DWFs under Taiwan's MoL, ensuring equal protection under the Labour Standards Act. Second, cap and monitor recruitment fees in Indonesia to eliminate debt bondage and ensure fair placement practices. Third, enforce ILO's C188, ensuring wage transparency, regulated work hours, and mechanisms for complaints. Finally, establish bilateral accountability frameworks between Taiwan and Indonesia to support labour rights monitoring and access to redress. Yet, policy reforms alone are insufficient. A deeper transformation of global seafood supply chains is needed, one that recognises migrant labour not as peripheral, but foundational to capital accumulation. This requires challenging labour commodification and rethinking how mobility, economic value, and human dignity are structured in the global economy. Ultimately, the exploitation of Indonesian fishers in Taiwan reflects the human cost of capitalist expansion. Without structural transformation, the vulnerabilities of migrant workers will persist, reproducing the very inequalities that capitalism depends on. Only by centring labour justice in global governance can we begin to dismantle systems of exploitation and build a more equitable future.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Participation in this study was voluntary and based on informed consent. All respondents were informed about the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical procedures standard in social science research, ensuring the anonymity, confidentiality, and dignity of all participants.

This research received ethical clearance with approval number 11648/B/UN3.FISIP/I/PK.03.02/2024 from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia. The study adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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