

POLICY BRIEF

Fair work in the fields? Ukrainian women working in agriculture in Poland¹

Employment of Ukrainian female war migrants in agriculture

For almost 20 years, agriculture has remained the leading niche in the Polish labour market, where tens of thousands of foreigners find temporary employment every year. For many years, undocumented work for the local fruit grower or farmer was the main activity of newly arrived migrants with no previous migration experience or knowledge of the Polish language. [According to data on the number of seasonal work permits, almost 114,000 such documents were issued in 2021.](#) The main group is citizens of Ukraine, to whom 98% of these documents were issued. The profile of seasonal workers from this country is quite diverse (in terms of age, gender, education, place of residence) and strongly related to the type of work performed. For example, [women of all ages mainly pick fruit and vegetables and carry out maintenance work \(weeding, planting, etc.\)](#). Thanks to the numerous administrative facilitations for taking up temporary work in Poland and the developed infrastructure between Poland and Ukraine (especially

¹ Acknowledgements: The work on this policy brief was supported by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange under the Urgency Grants and a project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 893032.

Authors

Olena Fedyuk, MSCA "RightsLab", University of Padua; **Kseniya Homel**, Faculty of Applied Social Science and Resocialisation, Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw; **Ignacy Józwiak**, Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw; **Marta Kindler**, Faculty of Applied Social Science and Resocialisation; Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw; **Kamila Kowalska**, Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw, University of Gdańsk; **Ivanna Kyliushyk**, Kozminski University; **Iuliia Lashchuk**, European University Institute; **Kamil Matuszczyk**, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies; Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw; **Maciej Tygielski**, Faculty of Applied Social Science and Resocialisation, Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw. Consulted with **Benjamin Cope** of [Ukrainian House](#), Poland.



Issue 2024/18
August 2024

transport), both people from the cities and Ukrainian farmers, as well as people with professional training and medical personnel (mainly nurses), have so far been employed in seasonal work. At the same time, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a decline in the interest of migrants to work in the agricultural sector, mainly due to the unattractive working conditions and other emerging opportunities for permanent work or in urban areas with access to social infrastructure (e.g. schools, health services, aid organisations). As a result, over the past five years, fruit growers have increased their efforts to recruit workers from distant countries (e.g. Nepal, India, Latin American countries).

Russian military aggression against Ukraine triggered massive relocations from that country. [This process was accompanied by introducing of legislation, both at the EU and Polish levels, lifting barriers to access the labour market in the destination countries.](#) The arrival of war migrants from Ukraine has increased the proportion of women among seasonal workers. Farm owners have joined spontaneously organised actions to receive Ukrainians and Ukrainian women after 24 February 2022. Many Ukrainian men and women, especially in the Grójec district, decided to accept this 'invitation', mainly because of the free accommodation offered and the vision of harvest work from spring onwards. As a result, as our fieldwork showed, many farmers were visited by families with children who had limited opportunities to participate in school activities due to a lack of schooling in the village. Another challenge was related to organising the leisure time of children who, with no other alternative, stayed on the farm all day. Interestingly, agricultural employment was not the dominant sector of work for war migrants. [According to a study by the Centre for Migration Research of the UW, this was the case for only 5% of the Ukrainians surveyed who had no previous experience of migration.](#)

Despite changes in labour relations in this sector, many irregularities and the precarious position of Ukrainian workers can still be observed. Our research, [as well as previous work, has identified the following problems:](#)

Contractual or non-contractual employment - Despite the introduction of a special form of employment (harvesting assistance contract) in 2018,

many workers still perform short-term work (e.g. strawberry picking for 2 weeks) without a contract guaranteeing minimum labour rights or on a contractual basis, depriving them of access to social security.

Irregular pay - Fruit and vegetable picking is paid on a piecework basis, where wages are based on the pace and productivity of the work. This means that workers are only sometimes guaranteed a minimum wage. Similarly, the harvesting assistance contract mentioned above does not guarantee a minimum hourly wage. Field research has shown that harsh weather conditions (e.g. rain) also lead to a halt in field work and thus to a lack of earning opportunities for workers.

Inadequate accommodation - The predominant model of accommodation in the Polish countryside is still to house workers on the employer's farm. These are often converted old farm buildings (e.g. cellars, garages, barns). Although conditions have improved in recent years, there are still situations where workers have no access to sanitary facilities, only to cold water and overcrowded rooms.

Lack of health and safety standards - Agricultural work remains one of the least safe occupations, mainly due to the daily use of highly specialised equipment, the use of chemicals for plant protection (including pesticides), or forms of fruit and vegetable storage that are dangerous to humans. At the same time, there is a lack of mandatory preparation (training, instruction) for each worker in the principles of health, safety, and ergonomics of agricultural work. Our research showed that employers only sporadically provide basic protective equipment (e.g. gloves, pads) or organise posters warning of hazards in a language that workers can understand.

Multi-employment (or agricultural work as a second job) - for some foreign workers, agricultural work is an additional paid activity during their stay in Poland. Some of our interviewees during the study were employed by a large food production company, and after working hours they would earn extra money from local fruit growers. This is usually done as part of their free time, but in most of the cases we identified, those who are 'day labourers' do their work without a contract.

Recommendations

To promote fair and transparent labour practices in agriculture, we make the following recommendations:

1. Monitoring of working conditions in agriculture

- Working conditions in agriculture need to be monitored regardless of who is doing the work; to this end, farms should be covered by the **State Labour Inspectorate**. To this end, it is reasonable to recognise the existence of an employment relationship on a farm, regardless of the legal form of the employment relationship. Farms must be inspected by the State Labour Inspectorate or other bodies (including those set up to monitor working conditions in agriculture). In this respect, attention should also be paid to small farms - less than 10 hectares - which are often registered as one-person enterprises.
- **Increase the presence of NGOs (including migrant rights organisations) in rural areas:** Currently, NGO activities are concentrated in larger urban centres (mainly the regional administration centers). Rural areas should also be included in information, monitoring, and advocacy activities. The Recommendation does not imply the need for organisations to open permanent or representative offices in these areas. There are examples of organisations such as Action Aid (an international organisation active among others in Italy) and the German organisation Faire Mobilitat, which organise information visits to rural and agricultural areas.
- **The evaluation of the “harvesting assistance contract”** in terms of farmers’ compliance with health insurance obligations under the provision and respect for the personal dignity of the workers employed. The establishment of a minimum wage for workers is also crucial, as is a greater emphasis on health and safety issues. Such measures could be taken by NGOs, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy.
- **Trade union presence in the agricultural sector.** The seasonal and temporary nature of agricultural work is an obstacle to the creation

of trade union organisations representing agricultural workers (there are virtually no trade unions in this sector in Poland). The language barrier and unfamiliarity with the laws and realities of working in this sector in Poland are additional obstacles (although there are no legal barriers to trade union membership for migrant men and women, and trade unions are open to them). However, trade union organisations can carry out information campaigns on forms of employment that are favourable to workers. This information should be written in a language that female workers can understand and formulated in a way that is comprehensible to those who are not familiar with the Polish context.

2. Preventing and correcting of unethical practices/ethical misconduct:

- Effective punishment for the practice of taking documents from workers (preceded by an information campaign on the subject aimed at farm owners and those employed or planning to be employed in agriculture). This type of practice should be severely punished as an example of slave labour. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and local governments in agricultural areas should be responsible for information activities in this regard. The prosecution of such cases is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, the police and regional and local prosecutors.
- Provision of drinking water by farm owners. Water should be potable and delivered directly to the place of work.

3. Prevent transport exclusion of people working in agriculture by developing public transport in rural areas:

- An important factor affecting the situation of people working in agriculture is the state or lack of public transport in rural areas, which leads to the transport exclusion of rural residents. The degree of exclusion is even greater for visitors. The lack of communication makes migrants even more dependent on employers and intermediaries. Developing public transport and improving its quality is a task for local governments and the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre (MPC) conducts advanced policy-oriented research on global migration, asylum and mobility. It serves governance needs at European and global levels, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Erik Jones, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

www.eui/rsc



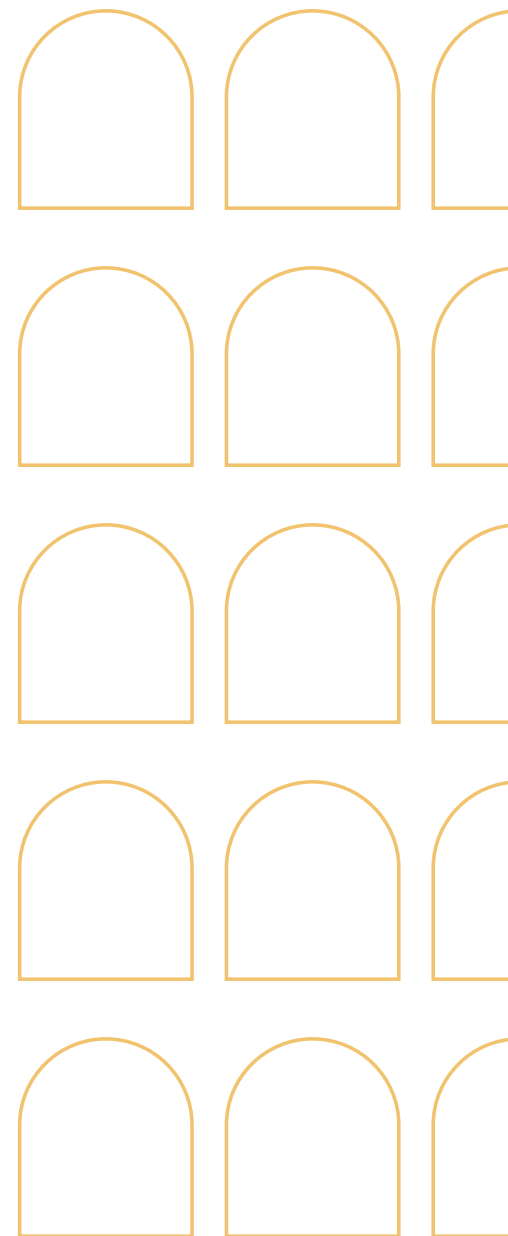
Co-funded by
the European Union

© European University Institute, 2024
Editorial matter and selection © Olena Fedyuk, Kseniya Homel, Ignacy Józwiak, Marta Kindler, Kamila Kowalska, Ivanna Kyliushyk, Iuliia Lashchuk, Kamil Matuszczyk, Maciej Tygielski, 2024

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy



doi:10.2870/30580
ISBN:978-92-9466-539-3
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-AX-24-018-EN-N