

# Intermediaries and inequalities: a literature review

WORKING PAPER



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Faisal Garba for helpful comments on an earlier draft. A special thanks to Katharine Jones for her inputs into the design of the project and this paper as well as providing helpful comments throughout the process. Thanks to Heaven Crowley for her strong support of the publication of working papers with MIDEQ. I am also grateful for the editorial and layout support of Baidu Kallon.

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## SUMMARY

This working paper addresses the question of to what extent intermediaries serve to construct socio-economic inequalities in global migration. Drawing on analysis of an extensive literature review, this work suggests that intermediaries operate within global structures of socio-economic and political inequalities, and play contradictory roles by both overcoming and reproducing socio-economic inequalities. Intermediaries are crucial actors in helping migrants overcome inequality in mobility - either through legal or irregular channels, which help migrants escape from socioeconomic precarity in origin countries and access new opportunities, creating income and benefits to their households and communities. However, intermediaries are also key players in reproducing and reconstructing gendered and racialized inequalities and major sources of debt, exploitation and abuse experienced by migrants both during the migration journey and in destination countries.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-border mobility is a visible reflection of global inequalities (Faist 2016: 324). Recent scholarship has noted that inequality is a multi-dimensional concept (Crow, Zlatunich and Fulfrost 2009; Therborn 2012; Carmo, Rio and Medgyesi 2018) which includes both vertical (income, wealth or education level) and horizontal (age, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality) aspects (Carmo, Rio and Medgyesi 2018:2). Despite emerging discussions on migration and inequalities, little attention has been paid to the involvement of intermediaries in either reducing or reinforcing socio-economic inequalities. This working paper addresses one of the hitherto neglected yet most fundamental aspects of international migration: to what extent intermediaries serve to construct socio-economic inequalities in global migration. Drawing on analysis of an extensive literature review, this work suggests that intermediaries play contradictory roles by both overcoming and reproducing socio-economic inequalities, albeit in complex ways. The literature shows that intermediaries play key roles in assisting migrants in overcoming socio-economic inequalities by enabling and facilitating cross-border mobility and access to employment abroad. The recruitment process not only creates debts for many migrants and their households but also reproduces and reconstructs gendered and racialized inequalities.

This working paper is intended to contribute to the development of the UKRI GCRF South-South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub (MIDEQ) research on migration intermediaries. MIDEQ studies the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequalities in the context of 12 countries in the Global South. Utilising an interdisciplinary mixed methods approach, MIDEQ builds an evidence-based understanding of the relationships between migration, inequality and development. It aims to translate this knowledge into concrete policies and

practices which improve the lives of migrants, their families and the communities in which they live. This paper brings new insights into the project by addressing the relations between intermediaries, migration and inequality. A dizzying array of terminology is used to describe migration intermediaries, including brokers, dalals, taikongs, recruiters, placement agencies, migration industry, people smugglers, human traffickers, facilitators, coyotes and immigration consultancies. Studies of their activities have tended to splinter between those that approach them as “smugglers” who facilitate irregular migration, including for refugees (e.g. Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012) and those which explore their role as facilitators of labour migration (e.g. Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012; Deshingkar 2019). Yet, in many cases their functions are similar. This article adopts the working definition proposed by Jones and Sha (2020):

*An intermediary is an actor or institution that fosters, facilitates or sustains human mobility. The mediating or brokerage process is relational and often involves interactions of multiple actors operating within complex local-global, socio-economic, cultural and political environments. The practices of intermediaries often blur the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial, private and public, state and market, formal and informal, legal and illegal due to the complex nature and conditions in which this “middle-space” exists.*

This paper is structured as follows. First, it explores how intermediaries help migrants overcome inequalities in cross-border mobility - through both legal and illegal channels. Second, it focuses on labour migration and addresses the ways that gendered and racialized discourses govern the sourcing, recruiting and marketing processes of migration, and how these processes reproduce and reconstruct gendered, racialized social inequalities. Third, it turns to economic aspects of migration processes: financing strategies and debts, and their implication for outcomes of migration and socio-economic inequalities, in particular by discussing the contradictory roles played by intermediaries in generating both financial benefits and socio-economic costs to migrants and their households.

## 2. INTERMEDIARIES AND INEQUALITY IN CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY

### 2.1 LABOUR MIGRANTS, INTERMEDIARIES AND INEQUALITIES IN CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY

Not everyone has equal access to mobility and international labour markets. Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye (2004 :750) suggest that such access is ‘constrained by options and conditions’ and depends upon ‘mobility capital’, which refers to unevenly distributed capacities and competences, within specific contexts of physical, social, and political affordances for movement. More specifically, inequality



in access to mobility is determined, at the micro-level, by individual capacities and resources, including the acquisition of knowledge, skills, socio-economic agency (i.e. purchasing power, social status etc.) and resources. At the meso- level, access is related to social networks and migration infrastructures that enable mobility. At the macro level, access depends on national social and geopolitical policies, in particular border control and governance of migration (Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye 2004). Empirical studies of international labour migration have demonstrated how these three levels of inequity intersect to produce inequality in cross-border mobility. Those designated 'high skilled' labourers often have greater access to mobility than so called 'low skilled' labourers (Castles 2010). Financial capacity and economic resources have significant impacts on mobility capacity – the economically better-off are more likely to emigrate as they can afford travel expenses and related costs, whilst the poor often remain stationary due to lack of financial capacity (Carmoa and Hedberg 2019). Similarly, those who have better access to information and job opportunities tend to emigrate more than those who have less such access.

Most studies have highlighted the role of state migration and border control policies in creating inequality in mobility. States have power to decide who can enter a country and who cannot. The varied categories they use to make such decisions often create stratified mobility – not just in terms of skills and capacities but also of social categories such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, community or sexuality (Pieterse 2002; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006; Mau 2010; Mosse 2010; Carmoa and Hedberg 2019; Owen 2020). The production of social categories contributes to 'the making of inequalities' within mobility systems (Carmoa and Hedberg 2019:102) and reproduces structural injustice 'in the form of racialized patterns of transitional positional difference' (Owen 2020:2585), controlling access to opportunity and sustaining global inequality (Mosse 2010; Carens 2013). Tesfahuney (1998:501) noted that 'differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position'. Most often those from relatively developed economies have greater access to mobility and opportunities, for example, through visa waver agreements, while those from disadvantaged states have less access (Mau 2010; Boatcă 2011; Amelina and Vasilache 2014; Owen 2020). Skeggs (2004:49) argued that 'mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power'. For those migrating through regular channels, the immigration procedures of leading destination states have become more complex with tightening immigration controls in advanced economies (Spener 2004; Feibisch 2007; Pijpers 2010; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013; Ayalew, Adugna and Deshingkar 2018; Cranston, Schapendonk and Spaan 2018). The process of obtaining the correct documents for migration is also regarded by migrants as time-consuming, costly, difficult and prone to corruption (Kern and Müller-Böker 2015:161; Spaan and Naerssen 2018:682). Moreover, frequent changes in regulations in both destination and origin countries make it difficult for migrants to keep up (Krissman 2005; Žabko,

Aasland and Endresen 2018). All these elements add extra barriers to migration and reinforce inequality in mobility.

Significant literature on migration intermediaries demonstrates how intermediaries facilitate migration and help prospective migrants overcome such inequalities in mobility. As identified above, intermediaries include diverse actors ranging from informal social networks (kinship, friendships) through local brokers to formally licenced agencies. Scholarship on social networks offers rich insights into their importance as social capital and as migration infrastructure: such networks are major sources of information, employment opportunities and financial support. They assist migration processes and offer social support in destination countries in terms of access to job markets, housing, welfare benefits and integration into local society (Massey et al. 1993; Spaan 1994; Spener 2009; Sha 2021).<sup>1</sup> Accumulation of social networks and migration knowledge reduces migration costs and risks, enabling broader access to mobility and making migration less selective (Black, Natali and Skinner 2006; Carmoa and Hedberg 2019). Another body of literature focuses on private commercial actors - particularly recruitment agencies. These intermediaries can help prospective migrants overcome inequality in mobility by offering professional services, including information, financial support, dealing with migration bureaucracies and facilitating transport, accommodation and employment (Findlay and Li 1998; Castles, Haas and Millar 2009; Jones 2014; Broek, Harvey and Groutsis 2016; Spaan and Naerssen 2018; Jones and Sha 2020; Jones 2021).

Agencies offer a wide variety of services, including helping broker visas, arranging birth certificates and passports, booking transportation, legal services, connecting migrants to healthcare and medical tests (Spaan 1994; Salt and Stein 1997; Agunias 2009; Hernández-León 2013; Jones et al. 2015; Broek, Harvey and Groutsis 2016; Ayalew, Adugna and Deshingkar 2018). They also match migrants to job markets in host countries. Even when there is no relatively long term contract available for migrant workers, intermediaries may arrange flexible-temporary or seasonal jobs and facilitate circular migration, to create alternative sources of income for migrants (Žabko, Aasland and Endresen 2018). They offer training for migrant workers before departure that aims to develop various skills targeting specific jobs in particular countries (Findlay and Mccollum 2013; Xiang and Lindquist 2018). Furthermore, all types of intermediaries – formal or informal – may inspire migrants to migrate by increasing awareness of overseas employment possibilities while alerting aspiring migrants to the resources and infrastructure that make this possible (Xiang and Lindquist 2018; Sha 2021). All these activities by intermediaries assist migrant workers in overcoming inequality in cross-border mobility and access to international labour markets. In the following section, we turn to the role of so-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please check Sha (2021): Migrant Networks as Social Capital: the Social Infrastructure of Migration. MIDEQ Working Paper. Coventry MIDEQ

called ‘smugglers’ who often organise irregular or ‘illegal’ migration and explore how they help prospective migrants overcome inequalities in mobility.

## 2.2 THE ROLE OF HUMAN SMUGGLING IN HELPING MIGRANTS OVERCOME INEQUALITIES IN CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY

One facet of inequality in mobility is that not everyone has access to regular migration channels. Tightening restrictions on cross-border migration have resulted in more complicated bureaucratic procedures leading to significantly higher migration costs, leaving many migrants reliant on smugglers to facilitate undocumented migration (Spener 2004; Liempt 2007; Liempt 2011; Fernandez 2013; Crawley et al. 2017; Ayalew, Adugna and Deshingkar 2018; Brachet 2018; Spaan and Naerssen 2018; Adugna, Deshingkar and Ayalew 2019). An extensive literature has developed on human smuggling and irregular migration which shows that whilst migrants may experience abuse and exploitation during the journey and in destination countries, for many, smugglers are the only way in which access to cross-border mobility can be obtained.

More recent scholarship offers a nuanced picture of human smuggling, demonstrating why migrants choose ‘smugglers’ and how smugglers help migrants overcome inequality in mobility. They challenge existing narratives that associate smuggling with ‘illegality’ and dangerous criminals while portraying migrants as victims of abuse and exploitation by smuggling operations (Fernandez 2013; Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Ayalew 2018). Although not denying that some smuggling activities do involve exploitative and criminal activities, these scholars seek to avoid a statist perspective with its normative assumptions, arguing that smugglers are actors who mediate parties in the context of social inequality and offer services that are not available in the formal border crossing market (Liempt 2007; Liempt 2011; Sanchez 2014; Alpes 2017; Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Ambrosini 2018). They highlight the ambiguous boundaries between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’, ‘formality’ and ‘informality’ in smuggling activities, noting that actual migration governance is sometimes more tolerant than formal rules suggest and is often contradictory (Ambrosini 2018). The facilitators of undocumented migrants are not only profit-oriented smugglers, but may include a range of actors, including networks of friends, or relatives; churches and religious institutions; NGOs; human rights lawyers; drivers and employers who turn blind eyes to irregular status. Even ordinary citizens can be involved in facilitating irregular migration through offering various forms of help to undocumented migrants in certain circumstances (i.e. Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013). Additionally, there is a ‘structural interweaving of the informal and formal in migration facilitation and control’ (Cranston, Schapendonk and Spaan 2018:546) – ‘formality’ and ‘informality’ can be convertible. Many border officials involved in formal migration control may corruptly work together with brokers



to facilitate undocumented migration (Liempt 2007; Alpes 2017; Brachet 2018; Spaan and Naerssen 2018).

This body of scholarship also points out that trust is crucial in choosing smugglers. Unlicensed brokers or smugglers are often respected and trusted by aspiring migrants and local communities (Spaan 1994; Lindquist 2010; Alpes 2013, 2017; Achilli 2018; Ambrosini 2018). This trust is often embedded in multiple relationships, community values and norms rooted in common ethnicity, religion, language or co-locality (Spener 2009; Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Adugna, Deshingkar and Ayalew 2019). In many regions, trust is deeply rooted in traditional patterns of mobility that rely on notions of reciprocity, solidarity, community, friendship and affect (Sanchez and Natividad 2017), rather than purely on maximizing economic gains (Spener 2009; Achilli 2018). The accumulated knowledge of shared information regarding contacts and routes offers a protective mechanism to irregular migrants and may be seen as a collective response to precarity and a collective way to secure mobility and overcome risk and uncertainty created by border control policy or criminalization of migration (Sanchez and Natividad 2017). It is 'community-originated forms of protection': 'a form of human security from below' (Sanchez and Natividad 2017) or 'a protection from below' (Achilli 2018; Ayalew, Adugna and Deshingkar 2018) that reduces risks in clandestine journeys, enabling undocumented migrants to overcome inequalities in mobility.

Given the complexity of actors and smuggling activities, it is the interconnectedness, dependence, and 'comingtogetherness' of different actors and multiple efforts that produce migration im/mobility (Schapendonk 2018). Different actors are responsible for a range of different activities, such as providing transport; setting up and guiding through safe/risky/unofficial routes; making arrangements with border officials for 'border-jumping' or avoiding inspection by the authorities; facilitating accommodation and offering informal money exchange and transfer services (Adugna, Deshingkar and Ayalew 2019). Intermediaries may have various interests, ranging from financial gain to group loyalty based on ethnicity, religion, language or locality, but all contribute to creating social and community support for smuggling activities enabling irregular migration to thrive (Ayalew, Adugna and Deshingkar 2018). Such social support is key for supporting undocumented migrants across borders and overcoming inequality in mobility. Although exploitation and asymmetric power relations between smugglers and irregular migrants are sometimes unavoidable, some scholars argue that, 'it is not merely about greedy smugglers who perpetrate violence', rather the activities of smugglers are 'an extension and part of the structural violence of global inequality and the deprivation of the mobility rights of migrants' (Ayalew 2018:73).

### 3. TRANSNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR AND INTERMEDIARIES

Having discussed how intermediaries help prospective migrants overcome inequalities in cross-border mobility, I now turn the attention to recruitment processes and the transnational division of labour. The selection and recruitment of migrant workers are often associated with inequalities based on race, gender, ethnicity and nationality which are shaped by socio-economic and political inequalities and labour market segmentation within neoliberal capitalist models (Anderson 2010). Strauss and McGrath (2017:203) argue that elements including intermediaries, state immigration regimes, employers and migrants themselves intertwine to construct and re-produce gendered and racialized migrant labour market niches. In this section, we will explore intermediaries' involvement in the sourcing, channelling and marketing of migrant labour.

#### 3.1 INEQUALITIES IN SOURCING MIGRANT WORKERS

Economic inequalities between regions and labour shortages experienced in certain sectors of advanced economies (i.e. care workers or agricultural workers) result in large scale migration flows from the Global South to the North. Recent studies show, however, that how, why and from where intermediaries source migrant workers are not only conditioned by economic factors, but are also socially, culturally and politically constructed and often associated with gendered and racialized stereotypes (Bakan and Stasiulis 1994; Preibisch and Binford 2007; Findlay and Mccollum 2013; Findlay et al. 2013; Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Jones 2021; Sha and Bhuiyan forthcoming). For instance, research on migration from Eastern and Central Europe to Western Europe suggests that Eastern European migrant workers are perceived as hardworking, flexible and cheap with a strong 'work ethic'. This stereotyped imagining of Eastern Europeans as 'good workers' governs the demand for workers in sourcing countries and shapes migrant recruitment and employment regimes, particularly given physical and institutional distances (Findlay and Mccollum 2013; Findlay et al. 2013; Mccollum and Findlay 2018). Recruitment agencies are not only selecting migrant workers from certain places, but also engaging with 'socially constructed boundaries around migrant bodies' (Findlay et al. 2013:145), applying the 'mould' of the 'good worker' in their selection practices. These stereotypes can create divisions and hierarchies in labour markets since Eastern Europeans are considered better workers than other migrants which continue to shape labour migration patterns and recruitment practices (Findlay et al. 2013; Mccollum and Findlay 2015).

Studies of international domestic migrant workers present another important finding regarding how gendered and racialized stereotypes governs labour regimes and recruitment practices. This scholarship notes that poor and Third World women

are often constructed as an ideal work force for domestic and care work and treated as 'global labour commodities' (Guevarra 2010:9). For instance, Constable (2007) show that in Hong Kong, domestic work is often associated with the terms 'maid' or 'servant' and is considered to be the job of foreign workers. Local workers prefer to work in hotels or factories but are reluctant to accept domestic work even when in need, as domestic roles represent subordination. Moreover, domestic migrant workers from the Global South are often imagined through racialized stereotypes, for instance perceived physical traits such as small hands are considered to be suitable for certain tasks (Fernandez-Kelly 2001; Pellow and Park 2002). Similarly to Eastern Europeans in Western Europe, they are also stereotyped as docile, hardworking, cheap and always ready to support the 'lifestyles of the First World' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002:4). In some cases, their nationality and gender is automatically associated with subordinate labour roles. In Hong Kong, for example the term *banmui* (maid) refers specifically to a Filipino girl (Constable 2007).

Again, employers' gendered racialized preferences influence the level of demand for workers from source countries (Preibisch and Binford 2007; Liang 2011; Findlay et al. 2013; Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Wee, Goh and Yeoh 2019; Jones 2021). Prospective employers from economically privileged countries demand various attributes, ranging from being 'docile', 'hardworking' or 'loyal' to particular skin colour, appearance, language skills and even religious orientation (Tyner 2004; Constable 2007; Liang 2011; Awumbila et al. 2019; Deshingkar 2019; Jones 2021). For instance, Constable (2007:40) show that in Hong Kong, Filipinas are depicted as 'the Westernized other': 'outgoing, individualistic, opinionated, and difficult to manage', whereas Indonesians are depicted as 'the traditional other', as 'docile women' who are 'obedient, slow and living the simple life'. In this way, through their hiring preferences, employers and recruitment agencies tend to construct hierarchies of migrant women, informed by wider societal attitudes towards race, ethnicity and skin colour.

### 3.2 CHANNELLING TO LOW-PAID, LOW-STATUS JOBS

Studies show that migrant workers from less privileged economies are often channelled to low paid and low-status jobs in destination countries: a practice which is informed by racialized and gendered ideologies based on age, sex, nationality and ethnicity. The existing literature analyses the key factors contributing to such patterns, including structural demands and employers preferences, immigration policies, intermediaries practices, and migrants' own dispositions.

First, immigration regimes and the regulation of the workplace contribute to channelling migrant workers to low-wage labour and creating social inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, class, nationality and citizenship (Jones 2014; Mccollum and Findlay 2015; Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Jones 2021). In the case of international domestic workers and care workers, scholars stress that a combination

of gendered and racialized government policies and recruitment processes serve to construct and devalue these roles as “women’s work” (Parreñas 2000). This justifies its designation as “unskilled” work, which then legitimates the low wages and poor working conditions the role attracts. Moreover, immigration regimes create categories of entrance – only allowing citizens of certain nations to immigrate for certain jobs, thus working to differentiate labour market and employment conditions (Buckley 2012:255), which further serves to produce ‘precarious workers’ who are placed in particular jobs and segments of the labour market (Anderson 2010; Jones 2021).

The second analytical perspective addresses how unequal global economic structures and capital accumulation models in the neoliberal era combine with gendered and racialized social recruitment processes to put migrant workers in low-paid jobs, creating new patterns of inequality, not just in terms of low income in destination countries but also lower social status. As capital accumulation in the neoliberal economy increasingly favours segments of the labour market composed of various forms of temporary, precarious, non-standard or insecure work, it has led to high demand for ‘flexible’ migrant workers in privileged economies where local workers are reluctant to take up such low-paid and insecure jobs. Migrant workers are willing to take these low-paid, temporary and insecure jobs because of the significant disparity in income and earning potential between their origin and destination countries (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Mccollum and Findlay 2015). The availability of this labour force is facilitated by recruitment agencies, who not only take advantage of market demands and inequality between countries, but also mould migrants to particular jobs based on the demands of employers: often associated with gendered and racialized stereotypes based on class, ethnicity, skin colour, and nationality (Pijpers 2010; Barrientos 2013; Findlay et al. 2013; Samaluk 2016; Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Jones 2021). In this way, they play a key role in reshaping local labour markets and restructuring racialized and gendered divisions of labour in the Global North (Bakan and Stasiulis 1994; McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Jones 2014; Polanco 2017; Jones 2021), reproducing exclusion and inequality in globally segmented labour markets (Pijpers 2010; Findlay et al. 2013).

In this sense, intermediaries are an integral part of the system that places migrant labourers from poorer countries in precarious subordinate positions (Awumbila et al. 2019; Jones 2021; Jones, Ksaifi and Clark forthcoming). Employers benefit from using recruitment agencies for low-wage employment because they offer lower costs and less legal responsibilities than direct recruitment (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Pijpers 2010; Barrientos 2013; Findlay et al. 2013; Jones 2014; Mccollum and Findlay 2018). Employers are not just creating a structural demand for migrant workers but are effectively sustaining a migration industry through the use of recruitment agencies who mediate and channel migrants, ‘oiling the wheels’ of these processes (Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Jones, Ksaifi and Clark

forthcoming). Through the interdependence of these actors, structural demands meet the availability of flexible labour forces to reproduce segmented migrant labour markets (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Castles, Haas and Millar 2009; Mccollum and Findlay 2015), reinforcing gendered and racialized recruitment practices and discourses in the process.

Scholars also point out that given global inequalities, not just in economic levels but also in perceived 'western superiority', many migrants labourers are willing to accept low-wage jobs that local nationals will not consider (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Anderson 2010). For instance, Central Eastern European (CEE) migrant workers to the UK may be highly educated, but their degrees are devalued in the UK. Consequently, they are willing to take low-paid jobs as a pathway to learning English and acquiring relevant skills allowing them to move to better paid jobs (Currie 2007; Pijpers 2010; Samaluk 2016). Yet, Samaluk (2016:460) indicates that CEE's 'imagined Western superiority also entailed self-inferiority'. Transnational intermediaries take advantage of this perceived inferiority and offer opportunities to 'acquire (trans)nationally recognized cultural capital'. Such perspectives depart from studies that view migrants merely as victims of precarious employment but rather highlight migrants' own strategic use of mobility, transnational links and various cultural resources (Samaluk 2016).

### 3.3 MARKETING OF WORKERS, SUBJECTIVITIES AND AGENCIES

It is not just how intermediaries select migrants that creates segmented labour markets and inequality during recruitment processes. How they go about marketing migrant workers can be highly influential in shaping as well as contributing to wider labour market norms (Anderson 2000; Cheng 2013). This matters as agencies influence expectations of both employer and employee (Findlay et al. 2013; Jones 2014; Mccollum and Findlay 2018; Deshingkar et al. 2019; Jones 2021; Jones, Ksaifi and Clark forthcoming). How agencies describe migrant workers impacts their access to jobs, work conditions and salary levels (Pratt 1997). Studies of labour migration show that agencies often utilise racialized and gendered stereotypes to market migrant workers to their clients. These gendered and racialized stereotypes serve not only to shape or perpetuate employers' perceptions of migrants, but also construct and reproduce migrant subjectivity and migrant 'self' identity (Bakan and Stasiulis 1994; Rudnycky 2004; Tyner 2004; Constable 2007; Guevarra 2010; Liang 2011). Sometimes, intermediaries present one group as superior to others. For example, recruitment agencies claim 'added value' by representing the 'Latvian attitude' as being distinct from the attitude of other CEE, particularly distinguishing Latvians from Poles 'as passive and offering no resistance' (Findlay et al. 2013).



In addition to marketing, a number of studies have documented how recruitment agencies and state pre-departure training programs contribute to shaping self-disciplined migrant subjectivities (Rudnycky 2004; Tyner 2004; Liang 2011; Chang 2018). This scholarship applies Foucault's analytics of governmentality to explore processes of regulation, discipline, and subject-making in these centres, achieved not through the 'promulgation of abstract policy prescriptions', but with mundane technologies and everyday practices (Rudnycky 2004:430). For instance, Rudnycky (2004) and Liang (2011) show that in migration pre-departure training centres in Southeast Asia, prospective migrant workers are placed in poor living conditions and hierarchical relations in which they are subject to rigorous control by recruitment agencies. The training process is directed by the concept of an 'ideal maid' who is required to be submissive, disciplined, and docile. In this way, prospective migrant workers experience resocialization by learning the required skills, attitudes, and ethics through which they are transformed into modern labouring bodies capable of domestic work transnationally (Rudnycky 2004:8; Liang 2011:1821). In other contexts, scholars note that migrant workers are subject to discipline from the moment of stepping into recruitment agencies in processes designed to produce performances of dedication, loyalty, and sacrifice (Constable 2007; Awumbila et al. 2019). Some migrants were even told by agencies to suppress their ethnic identity and perform stereotypical behaviours related to ethnic identities preferred by employers (Awumbila et al 2019:2663). Tyner (2004:16) argues that gendered racialized subjectivity is discursively made through the activities of government and private agencies which produce specific types of bodies with particular identities, and market them to labour-importing countries.

This is particularly represented in the work of Guevarra (2010) who introduced the concept of 'added export value' to show how state and private brokerage agencies in the Philippines produce a racialized form of 'productive' and 'competitive' labour power, compared with other Third World subjects, by promoting an ethic of migrant women's responsibility to their families, nation and the image of the great Filipino worker. In so doing, the state exercises its disciplinary power and fulfils the goal of 'governing from distance', producing disciplined, self-responsible, ideal workers and docile citizens whilst achieving capital accumulation. Similarly, Polanco's (2017) work show how labour recruiters and the Filipino 'labour brokerage state' produce 'culturally tailored workers for export' by informing migrants of the cultural norms of destination countries and teaching them strategies for behaving 'appropriately', with the same goal of delivering a competitive subject in a highly saturated global market. Chang (2018) describes the Indonesian state's scheme for managing aspiring migrants to Gulf countries as rooted in a 'paternalistic logic of protection' based on liberal governmentality: assuming migrant workers as rural, less educated and underprivileged individuals who can't protect themselves, hence needing to be trained and transformed into self-disciplined and self-regulated subjects. Chang (2018) criticises this approach as reinforcing migrant workers' own

responsibility to avoid becoming victims, while not recognising the structurally unequal relations in which migrants are being placed nor informing migrants of their rights.

Scholars have argued that the process of subjectivation often goes hand in hand with precarisation of migrants from marginalised classes and ethnicities in the Global South whose lack of power allows them to be pushed into precarious working conditions (Awumbila et al. 2019; Deshingkar 2019; Deshingkar et al. 2019; Wee et al. 2019). In this sense, brokerage creates and perpetuates power asymmetries and social inequalities (Faist 2014; Spaan and Naerssen 2018; Awumbila et al. 2019), seeking to 'position migrants in ways that are acceptable to the ruling classes in destination countries', hence reproducing social hierarchies and inequalities (Deshingkar 2019:2644).

Researchers have also pointed to the significance of immigration regimes in co-creating subjectivity and precarity amongst international migrant labourers and reinforcing social inequalities through excluding migrants from citizenship rights, putting them in unequal power relations while enabling employers to enjoy enormous controlling power over them (Bakan and Stasiulis 1994; Anderson 2000; Constable 2007; Liang 2011; Fernandez 2013; Deshingkar 2019; Deshingkar et al. 2019). Bakan and Stasiulis (1994:2) assert that: 'citizenship has cemented inequitable relations rooted in the global political economy and constructed through relations of race, gender and class, and has given these inequalities legal and ideological force'. While migrant workers are often excluded from basic citizenship rights in destination countries, their employers generally enjoy full citizenship rights (Bakan and Stasiulis 1994; Anderson 2000; Sha and Bhuiyan forthcoming). Moreover, the temporary nature of employment means migrant workers are subject to termination and deportation. This, combined with work permit systems and sponsorship arrangements bonding migrants to certain employment, reinforces migrants' dependence on employers and enables employers' severe discipline and strict control of workers (Eelens and Speckmann 1990; Feibisch 2007; Anderson 2010; Liang 2011; Buckley 2012; Fernandez 2013; Kemp and Raijman 2014; Wee, Goh and Yeoh 2019).

'Illegal' migrant workers are much more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Destination governments are often reluctant to regulate these relationships in employment markets, leaving migrants without any legal protection (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Fernandez 2013; Kemp and Raijman 2014; Goh, Wee and Yeoh 2017; Strauss and McGrath 2017; Sha and Bhuiyan forthcoming). Constable (2007:120) shows that immigration law and policies in Hong Kong are designed to protect the interests of employers, deterring migrant workers from pursuing their rights. Hence, as Anderson (2010: 313) put it: 'immigration controls effectively subject workers to a high degree of regulation, giving employers mechanisms of control that they do not have over citizens'.

At the same time, scholars have argued that migrants are not passive victims: they often perform ideal roles to promote themselves in labour markets. They respond to employers' expectations by 'performing' in ways which meet the stereotypes associated with their ethnicity or region of origin (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Constable 2007; Guevarra 2010; Findlay and Mccollum 2013; Findlay et al. 2013; Mccollum and Findlay 2015; Deshingkar et al. 2019). For instance, Guevarra (2010) shows how Filipino nurses internalize their added export value as workers and distinguish themselves from other domestic workers, believing that they are offering better care work that is different from others. Constable (2007) notes that domestic workers impose discipline on themselves to perform as ideal workers, not just for economic reasons such as paying debts and supporting families, but also for the pleasure, freedom, and independence that Hong Kong could offer. Filipino migrant workers in Canada's fast food industry feel obligated to perform an 'economic subjectivity' but they do not identify as 'obedient' or 'docile': rather they perceive themselves as using their agency to perform these qualities due to the structural constraints of the temporary work contract (Polanco 2017). Similarly, amongst CEE migrant workers in the UK, migrant workers consciously act in ways which fit the 'national' attributes expected by employers of a 'good worker' (Findlay et al. 2013:163).

Hence, the production of an ideal subject is a process of mutual conditioning in which both labour migrants and those who select and employ them interlink to coproduce migrant subjectivities (Constable 2007; Findlay et al. 2013). Recruiting and hiring decisions are social and cultural as much as they are economic as workers must perform in certain ways to meet not just economic demands but also cultural expectations (Crang, Dwyer and Jackson 2003; Findlay et al. 2013). Brokers may assist migrants to perform ideal subject roles as observed by Deshingkar et al. (2019) in the case of Bangladesh–Qatar migration. Although this might put migrants in precarious work, it also helps them find opportunities for employment and income which might not be available at home. Some scholars argue that waiting is another strategy of migrants exercising agency. In order to achieve long-term goals of increasing household income at home and expanding networks to find employment with better working conditions in future, migrants are often tolerant of precarious working conditions, which are perceived as short term (Deshingkar 2019; Deshingkar et al. 2019).

Recently, a few scholars have focused on how brokers may help migrants expand their agency – empowering migrants to some extent although not necessarily transforming unequal relations (Awumbila et al. 2019; Deshingkar 2019). In the special issue on migration brokerage edited by Deshingkar (2019), scholars highlight migrant agency within the context of brokerage: a) brokers help migrants extend their agency by assisting them in transgressing local socio-economic boundaries by moving away; b) brokering practices create room for migrants to exercise resistance

and bargaining power. They help expand migrant agency by assisting migrants in bargaining with employers for better working conditions or switching jobs if they are in a difficult position – although brokers are the ones who channel migrants to such precarious jobs in the first place. Hence, subjectivation/precarisation and agency should not be seen as two opposing poles but rather as mutually implicated: both form an inherent part of the migration process (Deshingkar 2019:2639).

In sum, labour migration recruitment is not a purely economic activity but is governed by socially, culturally and politically constructed discourses and social inequalities. Recruiters' activities intersect with those of other actors and institutions to reproduce and reinforce gendered and racialized social inequalities. In the last section, I turn to economic aspects of recruitment processes – recruitment fees and debt and their implications for migration outcomes and income inequalities.

## 4. DEVELOPMENT, INCOME INEQUALITIES AND INTERMEDIARIES

Discussions of economic outcomes and the impacts of migration on host and originating societies, particularly in terms of poverty and income inequality, reveal complex pictures. Outcomes of migration vary across individuals, households, communities, countries of origin and destination and types of migration. Little attention has been paid to how the involvement of intermediaries relates to income inequality and development. In this paper, I demonstrate that intermediaries play contradictory roles that can lead to both reducing and increasing income inequalities.

### 4.1 INTERMEDIARIES, FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND REMITTANCES

Intermediaries are considered as agents of development as they facilitate migration and expand migrants' life choices and opportunities. Beyond facilitating transport and employment, they also offer financial support and remittance related services to migrants, which are crucial for enabling mobility and creating income for migrant households. Remittance services are particularly important for irregular migrants unable to access formal money transfer services.

Financial support from intermediaries gives aspiring migrants access to new opportunities which may create income and reduce poverty and inequality in the source country. This most commonly happens through debt-financed migration in which intermediaries pay travel related fees in advance and migrants pay them back through salary deduction. While in some areas, men are asked to pay fees upfront (Lindquist 2010; Platt et al. 2017), for migrant women especially domestic workers and sex workers, it is common practice for recruitment agencies to pay all fees in advance and deduct them from migrants' salaries in destination countries (Agunias

2009; Lindquist 2010; Goh, Wee and Yeoh 2017; Platt et al. 2017; Lainez 2020). This debt financed system is particularly helpful to migrants who have no other way to finance travel. As Goh, Wee and Yeoh (2017:418) observed in the case of domestic workers in Singapore, the coordination and facilitation of intermediaries not only make it possible for women to undertake domestic work in Singapore but also frees the state from bearing the financial strain and responsibility of bad debts. Intermediaries also provide loans to prospective workers, which are paid back through salary deductions or within agreed times (Agunias 2009:14-15). Financial brokers have emerged as intermediaries specialising in offering loans (Zack et al. 2019). Such services are key to enabling mobility of migrants and access to employment.

Such mediated migration can expand migrants' range of choice, increasing the possibility of creating income and pursuing lives that migrants' value. Hence, intermediaries are seen as 'agents of human development' (Agunias 2009). The Polish migrants who rely on agents to find domestic jobs in Germany and Italy speak highly of agents: many families 'would remain hungry' in Poland without them (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008). In Nepal, agents and brokers are perceived as creating alternative income strategies and new livelihood opportunities (Eelens and Speckmann 1990; Kern and Müller-Böker 2015). In Africa, brokers expand the choices of younger men by helping them overcome the spatial and social boundaries that prevent them from improving their socio-economic status (Deshingkar et al. 2019).

The significant role of remittances in alleviating poverty and promoting development in sending countries is well-documented in global migration literature, however, what is less acknowledged is the role of intermediaries in facilitating the remittances of migrant workers. To date, little scholarship has paid attention to intermediaries. A survey of migrants who work in Thailand's domestic service, agriculture, fishing and manufacturing sectors reveals that intermediaries help migrants arrange remittances and communicate with family members back home. This role is particularly crucial for irregular migrants. In her studies of Chinese Fujianese illegal immigrants in New York City and Philadelphia in the USA, Zhao (2013) observed that ethnic networks, based on regional dialects, enable these immigrants to transfer money to China through underground banking. She argues that the high levels of trust between underground bank proprietors and immigrants originated from ethnic solidarity and enforceable trust.

Some scholars argue that migrants contribute to development in source countries not only through financial remittances, but also through social remittances: the transfer of human capital and social ideas and practices (Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2012; Faist 2016; Platt et al. 2017). 'Migration can be an engine for development through the transfer of remittances, experience and knowledge brought back upon return' (Sørensen 2012:65). Intermediaries who facilitate



migration are key actors in this development project since they enable movement to happen in the first place, whilst also facilitating financial and other connections between countries of origin and destination.

## 4.2 FEES, DEBT, EXPLOITATION AND FREEDOM

Faist (2014:324) notes that ‘cross-border migration and its relationship to inequalities have to do with the distribution of costs and benefits’. While intermediaries play key roles in bringing financial benefits to migrants, they can become the source of significant cost for migrants and may not necessarily help reduce income inequality. Much research has documented how intermediaries impose debts on migrants which create dependent relations, restricting their mobility and freedom, putting them into vulnerable and exploitive positions and limiting their capacity to generate income.

Most literature on intermediaries notes that high recruitment fees are at the core of debt and exploitative relations (Wee and Sim 2004; Buckley 2012; Barrientos 2013). Fees often differ according to destination, job characteristics and prospective salary. Because local supply is often higher than demand for migrant workers, most migrants are willing to pay high recruiting fees to access overseas employment and due to lack of monitoring and corruption in state institutions, private agencies often charge much higher fees than the legal standard (Kemp and Raijman 2014; Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts 2018), particularly for irregular migration (Agunias 2009). As many migrants have no capacity to pay high fees, they borrow money from friends, relatives, or through the ‘debt-financed system’ which often features high interest rates. Such indebtedness often leaves migrants in highly dependent relations with recruiters or employers and vulnerable to forced labour and exploitation in destination countries when they are obliged to return the debt (Davidson 2013; Strauss and McGrath 2017). Debt, combined with precarious and temporary employment, migrant status and strict migration policies, severely constrains their mobility and freedom, locking them into highly asymmetrical and often violent relations of power (Davidson 2013; Lebaron 2014; Strauss and McGrath 2017).

Eventually, debt becomes a form of labour discipline and source of vulnerability and exploitation experienced by migrant workers (Lebaron 2014). Studies of domestic migrant workers show that although the debt-financed migration system enables them to pay the costs of accommodation, travel and training, it also locks women into immobility until their debts are paid (Platt et al. 2017; Wee, Goh and Yeoh 2019). Migrant women often have to work several months with little or no salary to pay back the ‘loan’ (Platt et al. 2017; Wee, Goh and Yeoh 2019). To return the debt, some women are advised to take high interest loans by recruiters. Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, for instance, are forced to take a ‘loan’ from a finance company shortly after arrival to repay their recruitment debts,

without awareness of the implications of their indebtedness or that such payments to recruiters are illegal in Hong Kong (Wee and Sim 2004; Constable 2007). Obligated to return the debt, domestic workers are trapped in one job and subject to various kinds of exploitation. Hence, indebtedness functions as a powerful mechanism to keep a domestic worker 'in her place' (Constable 2007:79).

Similarly, studies from other contexts suggest that entering into a contract with intermediaries is the beginning of the precarisation process, particularly as a consequence of high recruitment costs (Buckley 2012; Barrientos 2013; Kemp and Raijman 2014; Wee et al. 2019). In construction sectors, migrant workers from Bangladesh in Qatar (Deshingkar et al. 2019) and Singapore (Platt et al. 2017); and migrants from Kerala in Dubai (Buckley 2012), have to pay high recruitment fees to secure employment. In contrast to domestic workers, migrant men are often required to pay the fees up front. Lacking financial capacity, they often enter into various types of 'loans' and become trapped in precarious and exploitative working conditions as they are obliged to return the debt and their gendered role as breadwinners obliges them to support the families they have left at home. Since they are often placed on the lowest rungs of the racially segmented labour market, characterised as unskilled or semi-skilled, it takes them many years to return the debts. Some migrants may still carry debts upon their return home (Buckley 2012).

Household members can also become victims of migration cost and debts. Moniruzzaman and Roberts (2018) show that in Bangladesh, migration could create a resource backwash for migrant households through the financing process. Households may sell land and other assets, deplete their savings, and borrow money at exorbitant interest rates to support household members' access to work in the Gulf or emerging Asian countries. Instead of counterbalancing uncertainty, migration can make migrant households extremely vulnerable through migration related debt, whilst the limited remittances from precarious and temporary employment may be insufficient to replace lost assets, particularly as migrant workers are often subject to high risk of unemployment in economic recession as they are employed in highly segmented and insecure sectors with little protection (Buckley 2012; Moniruzzaman and Roberts 2018). Hence, investment in migration means high financial risks for both migrants and their households. There are also circumstances in which migrants experience fraud and deceit after paying high recruitment fees to intermediaries. Kemp and Raijman (2014) show that brokers use 'flying visas' to bring migrant workers to destination countries where there is no employer waiting for them. In Israel, for example, migrants lacking an employer's sponsorship and under pressure to return recruitment debts may become forced labour, subject to exploitation and abuse.

Some countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal and Ethiopia have banned women from migrating to Gulf countries as domestic workers (Fernandez 2013; Spaan and Naerssen 2018; Adugna, Deshingkar and Ayalew 2019). This has

resulted in undocumented migration, increasing the costs of migration and risks of exploitation both during the journey and in the workplace. Faist (2016:335) suggests that the poorest individuals are most likely to be pushed into illegality. Since migrants in debt are afraid to lose their jobs, they tend not to report violations or cases of fraud (Kemp and Raijman 2014). Some authorities choose to ignore such cases even though they are aware of them, as they do not want government to lose a valuable source of income if agencies do not function (Constable 2007; Kemp and Raijman 2014).

Debt in mediated migration is often discussed in the context of 'human trafficking', 'modern slavery' and 'forced migration'. While the mainstream literature often links debt bondage with irregular migration and informal networks, emerging scholarship problematizes the binaries of 'regular' and 'irregular', 'freedom' and 'slavery', 'voluntary' and 'forced' labour, and call for more nuanced analysis. While not denying migrants are subject to exploitation and abuse through debt-financed migration, these scholars note that debt might include both constraints and opportunities for migrants (Platt et al. 2017). Most recently, Lainez (2020) has drawn our attention to the social embeddedness and multi-dimensions of debt. Based on an ethnographic study of Vietnamese sex workers in Singapore, she argues that debt is embedded in social relations, a moral landscape and the mutual interests of brokers and migrant workers, which creates interdependence and reciprocal relations between them, serving to maintain circular migration and brokers' business.

In sum, debt is of crucial significance for migrants' experience, especially when combined with migration restrictions. This leads some scholars to argue that migrant indebtedness is in large part produced by immigration policies and labour systems in which migrants are excluded from basic rights and protections (Davidson 2013 :188; Faist 2016:332). This perspective challenges the claim that migration is necessary for development of the Global South (Platt et. al 2017). Some scholars point out that given the heavy cost and debts related to migration and the contribution migrants make to destination countries as cheap and flexible labour, there is more financial capital flowing from South to North than the reverse (Sørensen 2012:67; Faist 2016:334).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This literature review explored relations between migration intermediaries and inequalities. It reveals that intermediaries operates within global structures of socio-economic and political inequalities, and play multiple and contradictory roles in both altering and consolidating socio-economic inequalities related to migration. The multi dynamics of brokerage processes determine these roles, which are embedded in macro-structures of socio-economic, legal and political realities in both sending and receiving countries, and micro-level social relations, practice, discourses, interests

and socio-cultural norms. Migrants themselves exercise certain levels of agency by calculating long-term and short-term gains and costs, yet, given the unequal power structures surrounding them, they have limited power to substantially alter socio-economic inequalities in their worlds.

Intermediaries play significant roles in helping migrants overcome inequalities in mobility and reducing socio-economic inequalities. They mobilise a varied 'infrastructure', helping migrants navigate both complex bureaucratic processes and physical journeys, enabling access to alternative livelihoods. This helps many migrants escape from socio-economic precarity and political conflicts in originating societies and leads to new opportunities and income for their households. Local communities can also benefit from social remittances, not only of money but also of new ideas, skills and experiences. Moreover, intermediaries that are embedded in informal social networks are particularly valuable to those who are unable to access formal migration channels. Such relationships are often associated with trust, reciprocity and solidarity.

This literature review also shows, however, that intermediaries are key players in constructing and reproducing socio-economic inequalities: particularly gendered and racialized social inequalities. They often channel migrants to precarious, flexible and low-paid jobs. The recruitment process of sourcing, selecting and marketing of migrant workers are marked by gendered and racialized inequality. This is not just because of migrants' acceptance of precarious conditions and their internalised subjectivities, but also because segmented labour markets, immigration controls and socially and culturally constructed gendered and racialized discourses all play roles in governing the division of labour and differentiated recruitment processes.

Rather than challenging hierarchies and inequalities within societies, intermediaries can reproduce inequality and the gendered and racialized subjectivities it produces, positioning migrants in subordinated power relations and precarious working conditions. Immigration and citizenship regimes further enhance such asymmetric power relations and hierarchies, excluding migrants from access to social rights and benefits whilst constraining their freedom and mobility. Moreover, debt caused by high migration costs, combined with precarious employment conditions can hinder their ability to contribute to family income. Although migrants exercise certain levels of agency, sometimes with the support of intermediaries, they are far too vulnerable in the face of powerful structures of inequality. Hence, it is important to address these structural inequalities in order to reduce migration costs and increase the benefits of migration to contribute to socio-economic development.

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## Suggested citation

Heila Sha (2021). Intermediaries and inequalities: a literature review, MIDEQ Working Paper. Coventry: MIDEQ. Available at: <https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/intermediaries-and-inequalities-literature-review>

## Cover image

Hong Kong is home to thousands of migrant workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Photo by Rex Pe . CC BY 2.0.

## Funding

This work has been funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]. The GCRF is a five-year £1.5 billion fund aimed at addressing the problems faced by developing countries.

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