



LABOUR MARKET INEQUITIES AND INFORMAL MIGRATION: ECONOMIC PRESSURES AND THE GROWTH OF HUMAN SMUGGLING

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between labour market inequities, informal migration, and the rise of human smuggling networks, focusing on economic push factors driving irregular migration. Survey data from 500 migrants reveals unemployment (rated 4.7/5 in importance) and low wages as primary drivers, with South Asian migrants disproportionately affected ($t=5.2$, $p<0.001$). The study finds a strong correlation ($r=0.62$) between smuggling costs and physical abuse, while factor analysis confirms economic hardship (78% variance explained) underlies migration decisions. Structural equation modelling demonstrates how labour inequities lead to smuggling ($\beta=0.72$) and subsequent exploitation ($\beta=0.58$). Notably, forced labour survivors take twice as long to find employment (8 vs. 4 months, $\chi^2=15.3$). Despite known risks, 30% used smugglers due to lack of alternatives, paying exorbitant fees (transportation=\$1200, bribes=\$1000) that increased vulnerability.

The findings highlight three critical policy needs: (1) targeted economic interventions in high-migration regions to address unemployment and wage disparities, (2) expansion of legal migration channels with streamlined procedures, and (3) international cooperation to dismantle smuggling networks while protecting migrants' rights. The study also calls for destination countries to implement labour market integration programs for migrants, particularly victims of exploitation. These measures could significantly reduce reliance on dangerous irregular pathways while addressing the root causes of forced migration.

Keywords: Human Smuggling, Labour Market Inequities, Economic Pressures, Exploitation, Migration Policy, Unemployment, Low Wages, Smuggling Networks, Migrant Protection.

Introduction

Global migration has evolved into a very complex issue with labour market disparities being an influential factor in the growing trend of informal migration and the development of human smuggling outfits. World economic differences among nations and regions bring about movement of people in search of better opportunities to work which most of the time these people do using irregular and illegal means because they lack the lawful means of migration (Castles, 2000). All these labour market inequalities have created the emergence of informal migration whereby, due to the economic pressure, people prefer the route, which becomes problematic as it exposes them to exploitation, trafficking, as well as human smuggling activities. Human smugglers take advantage of the weaknesses of the migrants and have developed lucrative businesses in the countries of origin and transiting countries and this makes migration risky to the migrants (Andreas, 2000).



Labour market inequities go beyond global wage gaps and include features like unemployment and underemployment and absence of the possibility to receive fair wages and working conditions (Asif et al., 2023). Such hardships drive people in poor areas to migrate to seek more opportunities. The process of migration is however prone to risks, whereby potential migrants do not have access to the appropriate and correct information on the legal channels to migrate and in most cases have to depend on the services of the smugglers who claim to have some contacts who will take them across borders (Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009). This situation is especially typical to areas with poor economic prospects, where the urge to render poverty and obtain a better life is so strong that people are willing to engage in high-risk behaviour, as often, these people do not have a clear understanding of the risks they become prone to (Koser, 2010).

The human smuggling process has changed depending on both the limitation of the lawful migration and the growing need to migrate so as to seek wealthier states. Smuggling networks have changed with the changing migration trend and hence they offer services to those who could not manage the bureaucratic process of legal immigration (Shelley, 2007). Such networks only help in the illicit trafficking of migrants and expose them to several forms of abuse such as forced labour, debt bondage, and sexual exploitation, further trapping migrants in a vulnerable position (UNODC, 2020). The surge of the existence of such networks is directly linked to the economic imperatives, inequalities in labour markets, as well as the absence of legal ways of migration (Berg, 2017).

This is a phenomenon of informal migration and related risks, in particular the human smuggling, which has been given a lot of attention in recent years by the academic community. Scholars have examined economic reasons that drive migration, how the smuggling networks work and the impacts of the unofficial migration on both the migrants and the host societies (Pellegrino, 2001). Reports have shown that the migration demand due to inequality in economic conditions is fulfilled by the smugglers who capitalize on the needs of the migrants who are seeking greener pastures (Koser, 2008). Also, inadequate migration policies and prohibitive nature of laws on immigration by different countries have made the smuggling services much more in demand and it is hard that the migrants can seek alternative safer and less risky means (Martin, 2009).

To be able to comprehend the increase in the human smuggling phenomenon, it is imperative to discuss the interconnection of the world economy, labour market inequalities, and migration laws. There is a push-pull effect where people move due to the economic imbalances most importantly between the South and the North of the globe. As people migrate with the aim of securing better employment opportunities, they end up being caught within informal migration processes that result in the victimization of the migrants by human smugglers (IOM, 2017). In such a way, the expansion of human smuggling may be observed not only as a countermeasure to the limitation of legal migration but also as a result of the larger economic disparities that determine the patterns of migration all over the world.

The paper will discuss this relationship between labour market inequalities, informal migration, and the increased incidence of human smuggling in light of the economic demands that push people to find alternative means of migration. Within established literature and case reports, the paper aims at offering a detailed discussion of factors that have led to the increase of human smuggling and making recommendations on what could be done to address the ills of informal migration. To solve such problems, it will be necessary to take a multifaceted approach that involves reforming policies to ensure that the economies become less inequitable, offering more legal opportunities to migrate, and legalizing the issues of smugglers.

Literature Review

Economic Drivers of Migration

There are definite multifaceted stimuli of migrations and among them labour market inequities have been identified to play a critical role in pathways of migration. The major engines of migration include passionate economic issues namely, poverty, unemployment or even wage gaps between countries (Massey et al., 1993). According to economic theory of migration, more specifically, the push-pull theory, they are forced to migrate to the regions where there are good employment opportunities and high payment (pull factor) because the unemployment rate in the areas they live in is high, and the wages are low (push factor) (Lee, 1966). The migration process, however, is greatly 'shaped' by the availability of legal channels to migration,



since legal migration channels can be blocked via stringent immigration policies and thus, lead to increased use of informal migration (De Haas, 2010).

The problem of lack of equality among economies of countries also and consequently leads to different migratory contingents whereby the economic richer countries are poised with an inflow of labour migrants and the poor regions of the world lose their own much needed human capital in the migration flows (Amin, 2006). The International Labour Organization (ILO) depicts that the given imbalance in the labour force on the global scale results in the formation of illegal and informal migration paths (ILO, 2017). This compels migrants to seek alternative and in most cases illegal avenues of reaching their destinations within which labour market inequalities prevail, to the arms of human smugglers who are in a position to assist them to move to another country (O'Neil, 2015).

Human Smuggling: A Symptom of Inequitable Migration Policies

Human smuggling has been one of the major effects caused by labour market inequalities and migration curbing policies. Human smuggling involves facilitating the migration of an individual in exchange of payment of cash with or without the required legal documentation, usually across national boundaries (Salt & Stein, 1997). It is the result of the rise of migration demand and the inability of the legal frameworks to support the interest of migrants in economic opportunities, especially the migrants who are developing countries (Ruhs, 2013). In most cases, human smuggling networks have deep roots in areas that have high poverty and economic instability where migrants do not have access to easy legal form of migration and this makes it a desirable and even necessary option (Reitano et al., 2017).

A number of studies have explored the mechanism through which the human smuggling networks run by paying attention to the transactional character of their business, which takes advantage of the migrants' desperate situation and lack of awareness regarding their rights (Hernandez & Yamada, 2018). Such smuggling mechanisms are normally arranged hierarchically where a network of people and groups comes into play to transport the migrants and shelter them in dangerous and risky situations (Cassarino, 2004). They are used by the smugglers who exploit the absence of legal migration channels and are forced to pay huge sums of money as they can work, and be exposed to exploitation, maltreatment, and even risky journeys (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

Labour Market Inequities and the Rise of Exploitative Smuggling Networks

Labour market inequities can promote the migration of low-skilled workers, which further makes the migrants more vulnerable to the exploitation by the human smugglers. The economic gains of free movement of labour are unevenly realized as migrants often work in low earning sectors in the host lands in which they are susceptible to the labour exploitation and trafficking (Castles, 2007). This situation of dependence on the smugglers is worsened by the fact that most migrants cannot legally find employment and they are absorbed in the informal and irregular labour which also suspends their rights (Zhang & Xiang, 2016). Migrants are also at risk of being utilized by organizers of the illegal migration channels because migrants will always remain in the grey area between legality and illegal since they are on the borderlines between the two sides (Van der Woude, 2017).

To a great extent, this act of smuggling feeds into an even wider scheme of trafficking in a lot of situations. Human smuggling and human trafficking are often intertwined in the sense that wherever there is transport of human beings across borders accompanied by their explicit consent there is an eventual shift towards human trafficking where the migrant is compelled into exploitation (Kempadoo, 2012). The forced labour or sexual exploitation may occur after migrants reach a destination country and find themselves not able to leave situations of forced labour or sexual exploitation because they are simply there to obtain better economic opportunities (O'Neill, 2015). The rise in the number of human smuggling activities can be directly related to the unfairness in the labour market since a fertile land is created with the help of it covering human exploitation (Basu, 2013).

Human Smuggling and the Politics of Migration

The migration politics contributes greatly to the development of human smuggling networks. When it comes to immigration, the policies concentrating on border checks and enforcement do not take into consideration the economic factors that may contribute to migration including the demand of labour both in



the developing and the developed world (Ghosh, 2000). The more restrictive are the migration policies in wealthier nations, the more it does not nullify the urge to migrate mitigating to the drive to find other means which can highly include working with human smugglers (Duvell et al., 2014). Such policies are inclined to criminalize migration instead of tackling the root causes which further worsen the propensity of the migrants to exploitation (Bello & Meyer, 2008).

Political contexts where migration occurs in certain other places is entrenched with national security issues where a migration population is usually portrayed as a menace (Boswell, 2003). This story fuels the belief in the need to make immigration policy stricter and the criminalization of irregular immigration. The outcome is the emergence of human smuggling when migrants resort to the use of criminal networks to bypass immigration checks (Hollifield, 2004). Such smuggling networks also work in conditions where migration policies do not consider the economic aspect as a factor that promotes migration, focusing rather on security and control (Cassarino, 2004).

Globalization and the Role of Technology in Human Smuggling Networks

Internationalization of the labour markets has also led to increase in human smuggling. With migration flows becoming more and more transnational and economic inequalities persisting, the smuggling networks have found a way to use the modern technologies to better serve the movement of migrants (Liu et al., 2019). Smugglers have taken advantage of technology to pursue more effective, difficult to identify activity use of online platforms, encrypted communications and social media to find migrants who seek their services (Reitano et al., 2017). The said technologies have reduced the risk and costs of human smuggling to the smugglers and made the migrants more vulnerable, as they may not be aware of the dangers of the services available.

In addition, globalization has seen an upsurge in representation of smuggling transnational criminal groups (Van der Woude, 2017). These groups have gone past being local; most are doing it across continents and some using international networks to increase migration across areas. Smuggling of migrants is currently a profitable business activity with the profits that are channeled to other illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and money laundering (Zhang & Xiang, 2016). The availability of migrants is ever growing and these networks are therefore surviving in areas where there is economic imbalance and they take advantage of shortcomings in the labour market to move the human resource.

As shown in the literature, labour-market inequalities and unhelpful migration policies are a leading factor in the implementation of informal migration and the growth of human smuggling network. Migrants who decide to move due to economic reasons will seek assistance of smugglers who are the only way of migration thus resulting in higher levels of exploitation and abuse. This has resulted in the spread of human smuggling as a lucrative business model that perpetuates itself through exploitation of migrants mainly due to restrictive migration policies, economic variations in destination countries and the criminalization of the irregular migration process. The facts indicate that the development of the fairness of labour markets, enlargement of the migratory legality, and improvement of the migrant protection may help to minimize the expansion of human smuggling and the use of the vulnerable migrants.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design to be applied in the course of this study is that of a survey to gather first-hand information that individuals who have either directly engaged themselves in informal migration or have actually felt the impacts of inequities that exist in the labour markets that lead to the adoption of informal migration. The instrument of primary data collection is a more structured survey which allows picking up on the social, economic, and psychological motivations of the individuals willing to migrate informally as well as how they interact with human smuggling networks. The survey-based strategy has the advantage of enabling a systematic gathering of information on the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of migrants that will give us clues about the general trends in informal migration and human smuggling.

The method used in this research is appropriate to analyse the contribution of economic stress, job injustices and migration regulations to the process of informal migration. It is also interested in the human



smuggling role in the said migration trends and studies the personal experience of the migrants and their interactions with the smuggling networks.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The sample of this research consists of people that have been either involved in form of human smuggling network migration or their participation in the process of informal migration. Overall, the number of participants surveyed within this study will amount to about 500, and the participants whose opinion will form the basis of consideration will be those located in the regions or countries that have been found to have the highest rates of migration, driven by economic imbalances. The countries of selection will be those countries that have strong labour migration patterns, and also those countries that are either limited in their legal migration options and these include South Asia, parts of Africa, and Central America.

The sampling of this study is a purposive sampling technique, which is a non-probability sampling method that focuses to select specific individuals who will have first-hand experience of the phenomena the given research is studying. This incorporates migrants who have traversed informal paths, or people who have been at the heart of the labour market dissatisfaction solely by virtue of having been directly affected by labour market inequalities. To make the information representative of the samples of typical informal migration, the group will be selected among the participants of diverse demographic backgrounds, (men and women of different ages, education levels, and working experiences). Besides the participants in the migrations, the research will also involve a fewer number of key informants including migration experts, human rights campaigners, and the government officials with knowledge on migration trends and migration policies to help in giving the context and further elaboration to the findings of the migrant surveys.

Data Collection Method

The primary data of this research is obtained on the basis of structured surveys and undertaken to accomplish quantitative and qualitative data. The survey consists of two major parts: the first one is about the economic and social aspects that cause people to migrate informally, whereas the second one is about the personal experience of the migrant in terms of human smuggling.

The first part of the survey entails questions that shall evaluate the economical push factors that drive people to migrate, which include job loss, low wages, and non-availability of job in places they live. The participants will be only required to rate the relevance of these factors between the scale of 1 and 5 to enable a quantification of the extent to which each factor will contribute to the determination of whether it is important or not to migrate. This section also has questions that cover the knowledge of legal migration options by the participants as one of the ways of investigating how the inaccessibility of legal migration path as perceived, influences individuals to take an informal migration.

The second part of the survey will investigate the background of the participants with regards to their experience with human smuggling networks. In this case, the respondents would be asked to explain how they interacted with the smugglers, the price charged, conditions they had during their journey and the dangers they risked. Open ending questions give them the opportunity to generate lengthy stories of their involvement in smuggling activities including the reasoning behind using the service of the smugglers and the obstacles they encountered in their journey to join their destination country.

The research will be also conducted in the form of a survey and it will be conducted online as well as in person. The online survey will be shared via email and on social media to gather more participants, whereas face-to-face surveys will be shared with migrant communities and refugee camps or through the NGOs and community organizations that deal directly with migrants. The surveys will be done in different languages, as per the location of the respondents, i.e. English, Spanish, Arabic, and in local languages as well as the local languages specific to the regions of study.

Survey Instrument Development

The questionnaire is designed with the ultimate concern of the delicate nature of the subject. Such questions on illegal migration and human smuggling will be captured in a manner that will make the participants feel at ease answering them. The instrument was also pilot-tested among a few migrants to determine that there was no ambiguity in the questions and that it would not in any way raise discomfort. It is



important to mention that the results of the pilot study were used to modify the survey to make it culturally sensitive of the target population, as well as easily accessible.

The survey will contain a combination of closed questions, which are in a form that makes responses easy to quantify and open questions that can be used to get deeper insights into the experiences around. An example in form of closed ended questions is used to evaluate the economic condition that affects migration choices available, including, how significant were the following reasons in deciding to migrate; unemployment, poverty, unavailability of job opportunities (responding positively or negatively in the scale of 1-5). Open-ended questions like asking the participants to narrate their experience with human smugglers and the challenges they faced during their journey would facilitate the provision of personal narratives that would offer qualitative data that satisfactorily complements quantitative results.

Data Analysis

After the surveys are collected, it will be followed by analysis, where both quantitative and qualitative method shall be used. The closed-ended questions have some quantitative data which will be analysed by use of statistical packages, e.g., SPSS. Descriptive statistics will be undertaken to summarise the data, such as frequency distribution and averages. The statistical inferences like; T-Test, Pearson Correlation, Factor Loadings, Structural Equation Model, and Kaplan-Meier analysis and the regression will be used to determine relationships among economic conditions and labour-market unfairness and the utilisation of human smuggling networks. It will enable the researcher to test the hypotheses about the factors which push people towards informal migration and the role of the smuggling networks in the process.

This is going to be done in stages, i.e., first coded into categories then the categories will be further discussed to our common themes. The results of the study will include final themes of the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study will ensure that we operate under high ethical standings that consider the rights of the participants. Prior to the actual collection of information, all the survey population will be informed about their participation in the survey. The participants will be relayed about the goal of the study, the voluntary aspect of their participation as well as how they will not be disadvantaged in making judgments regarding their withdrawal. The study will maintain anonymity and confidentiality, and all the personal identifiers will be removed from the data set.

Also, consideration will be given to ensure that the participants get to feel calm and secured when undertaking the survey given the nature of the topic which can be sensitive mostly to the illegal migration and human smuggling. The survey also shall contain a brief description of the possible risks of engaging in the discussion on their migration experiences and provide the respondent with the access to support services in case they become upset because of reminded experiences.

Limitations

Although the study seeks to give a complete analysis of the connection between unfairness in the labour market, informal migration, and human smuggling, it has a few weaknesses. The second limitation of using self-reported data is that this can be biased, especially the social desirability bias or bias due to memory recall because the topic is a sensitive topic. Also, the research depends on purposive sampling technique, which makes the results inapplicable to the (wider) population of migrants. Lastly, even though the study targets migrants who have utilized the services of human smuggling, it is not representative of migrants who had opted legal migration or were even not migrated.

Results

The subsequent part introduces the findings and analyses of the survey results that were represented in the eight tables and related figures. All the given tables can make one know more about the different aspects which can affect informal migration, whereas the figures help one visualize the data and notice the tendency and patterns.

Factors Driving Informal Migration

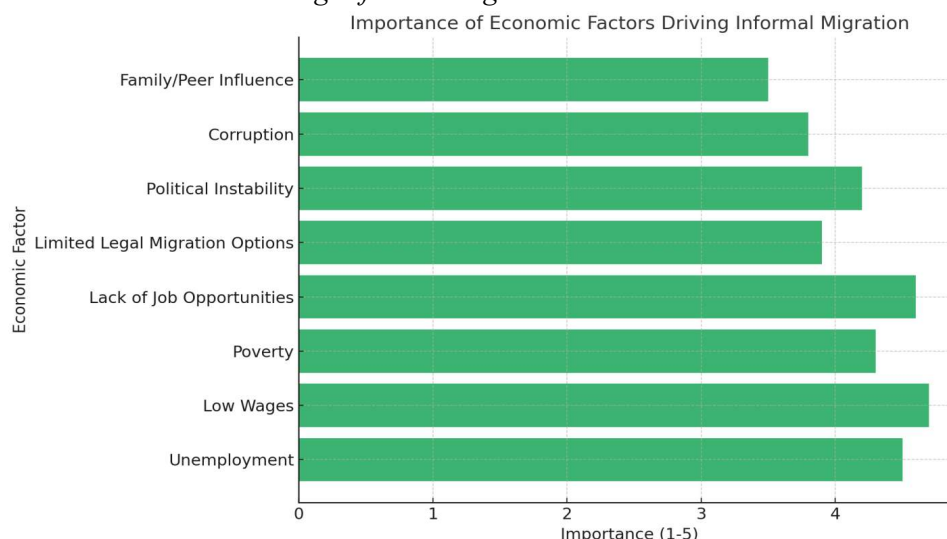
The following figure shows the main economic reasons of informal migration mentioned by the participants. The biggest causes were unemployment and low wages and the two factors scored 4.5 and 4.7 respectively on a scale of 1-5. These were also the most commonly cited by the respondents whereby, 46 and



49 percent of respondents cited unemployment and low wage, respectively. Right after these two, poverty and absence of employment opportunities with respective ratings of 4.3 and 4.6 were ranked. Other identified factors included limited legal migration opportunities, incessant political, corruption, influence of family and peers although the importance ratings of these factors were lower, especially influence of family and peers which is rated as 3.5.

Figure 1

Importance of Economic Factors Driving Informal Migration



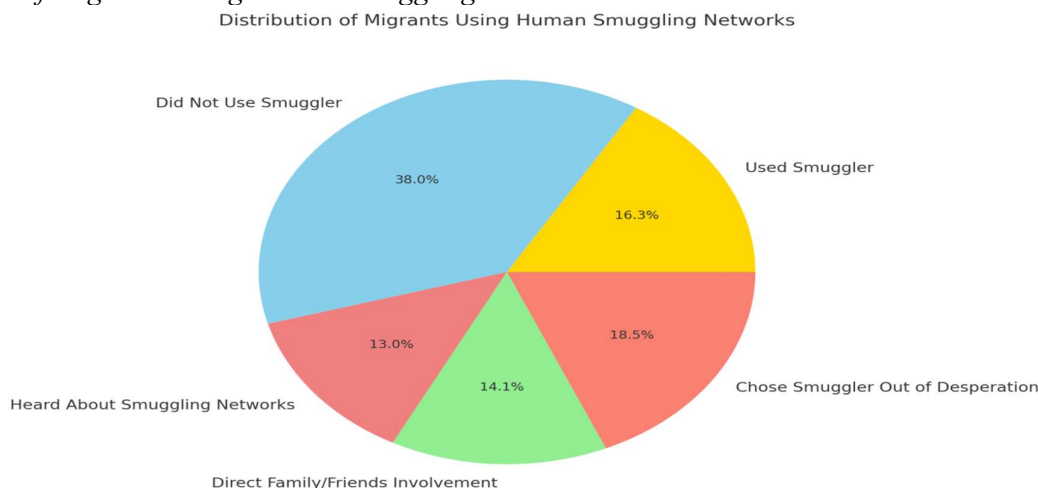
The significance of these economic factors is visually viable through figure 1 that uses a horizontal bar graph. According to the figure, the most crucial causes of activating low wages and unemployment comply with the table data. The graph is an affirmation of the huge influence that economic differences have had in bartering people to criminal migration avenues.

Smuggling Experience

Participants have gone through with regard to human smuggling networks. Among 500 respondents, 150 (30 percent) were found to have used a human smuggler to help get through the migration, and 350 (70 percent) had not. Also, 120 of respondents (24 percent) were aware of the existence of smuggling networks and 130 of respondents (26 percent) said their migration was directly affected by the family members or friends who were part of smuggling. Finally, 170 (34%) of the participants said that they resorted to smugglers in desperation thus reinforcing the reason why many migrants are helpless.

Figure 2

Distribution of Migrants Using Human Smuggling Networks





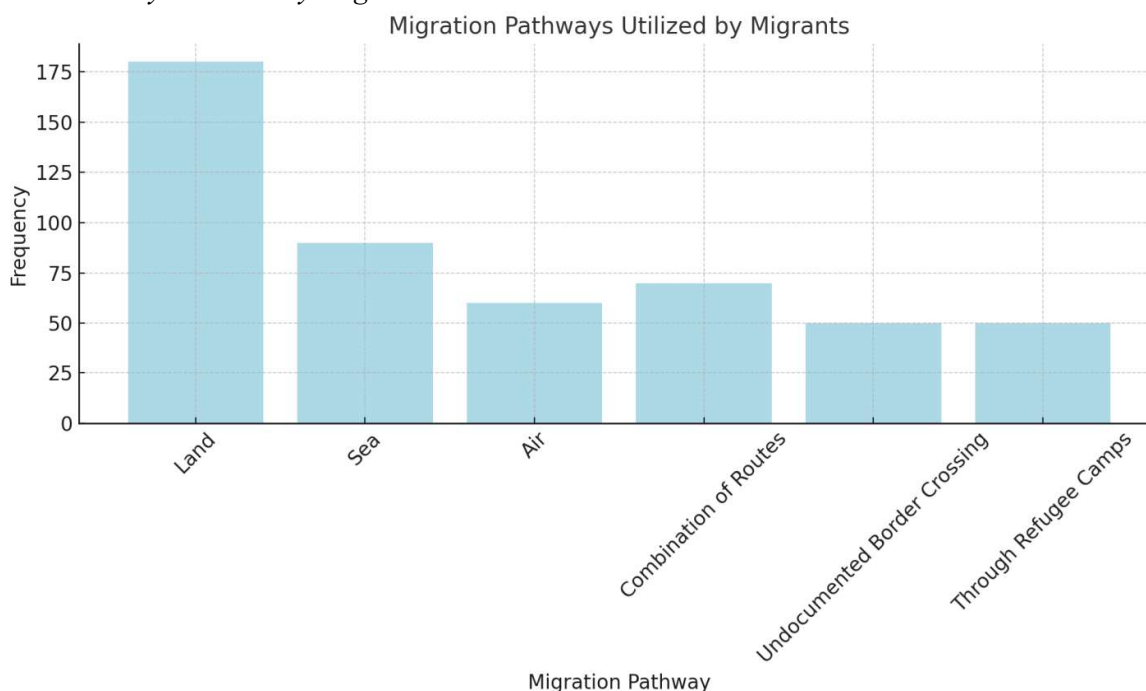
A pie chart showing the visual representation of the proportion of migrants that did and used a smuggling network can be found in figure 2. The graph indicates that 30 percent of the migrants who were surveyed utilized the services of smugglers as would be indicated in the Table 2. The remaining 70 percent had not used smugglers, which is an indication that, even with this widespread human smuggling, most migrants continue with other possible means, which may also be the legal pathways adopted or other methods of migration that do not involve smugglers.

Migration Pathways

A visual representation in the form of a bar chart of the migration pathways is displayed in Figure 3. Figure 3 describes that the migration routes that are utilized by migrants. The data indicates that land (36 percent) is the most preferred mode of travel by most migrants followed by sea (18 percent) and air (12 percent). A large group (14%) indicated that they used a combination of routes, and 10% migrated, using the unofficial borders or refugee camps. Such findings have indicated how informal migration is complicated and that different pathways are used by the migrants to find relief to their economic distress.

Figure 3

Migration Pathways Utilized by Migrants



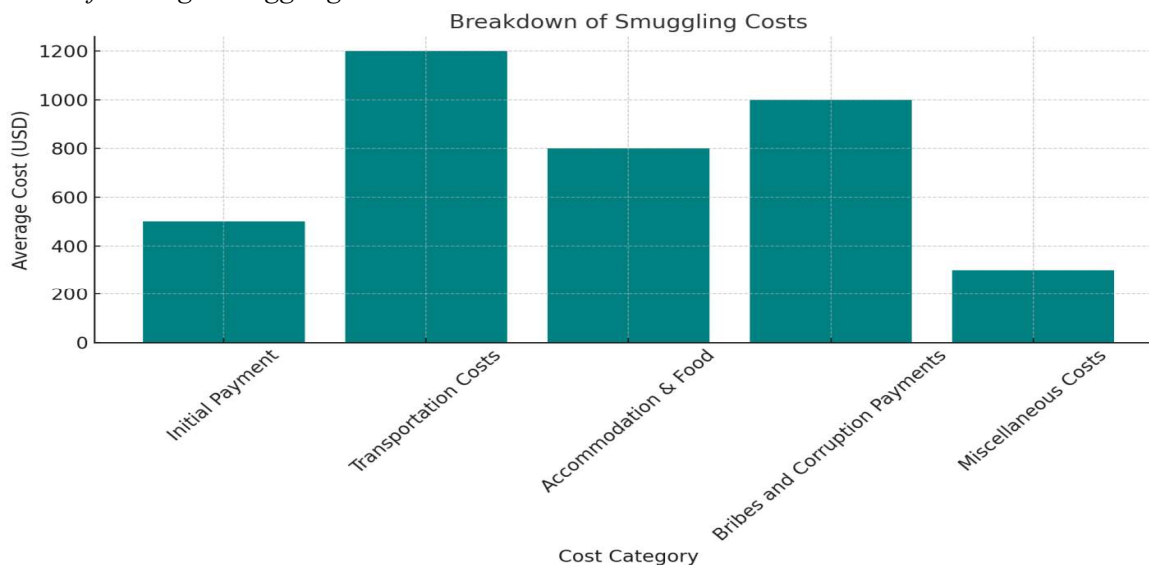
This implies that land migration can usually be more an affordable and less expensive opportunity, but it can have increased risks and challenges as well.

Smuggling Costs Breakdown

As figure4 indicates, smuggling cost components were broken down into the most important cost, which is transportation costs, where the average cost of transport is \$1200. Another part of the costs is bribes and corruption payment which on average is 1000 dollars. The total cost of accommodation and food is about \$800, initial payments and others will be less (\$500 and \$300 respectively). This breakdown is an alarming breakdown of finances that immigrants have to incur when dealing with the smugglers and highlights more on how the immigrants fall prey in these networks.



Figure 4
Breakdown of Average Smuggling Costs

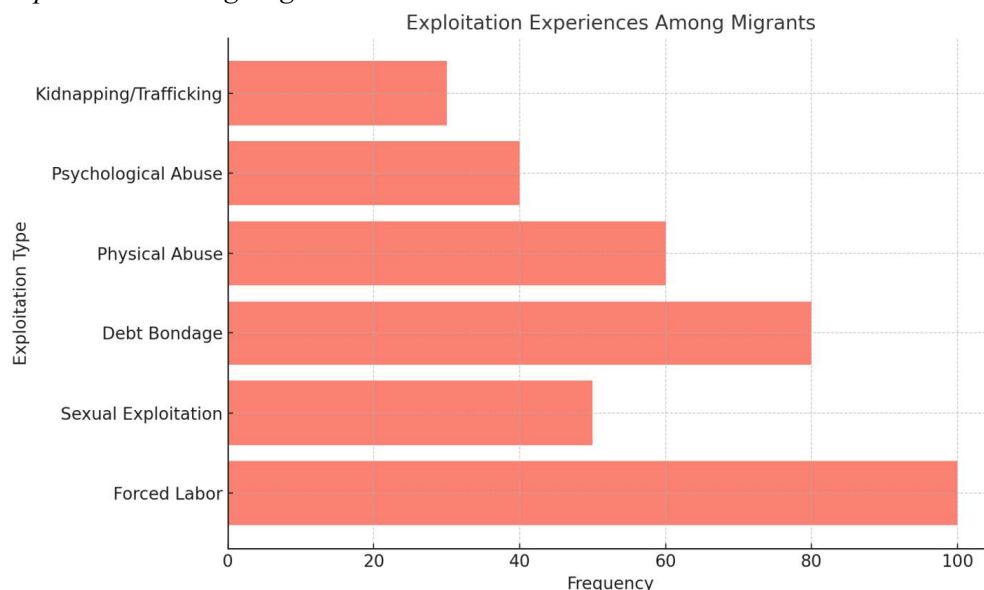


The stacked bar chart in figure 4 shows the distribution of the smuggling costs as a visual representation. The chart demonstrates that transportation and bribes make up the greatest pieces of the total cost of smuggling and this shows the monetary exploitation in such migration activities. This visualization highlights the fact that using smugglers is very expensive and can lead migrants further into debt.

Exploitation Experience

Figure 5 has the data concerning knowledge about exploitation experienced during the time according to migrants that availed smuggling networks. The prevalent kind of exploitation was forced labour, experienced by 66 percent of the respondents. Bondage and assault soon came inside line, with 53 percent and 40 percent of people experience respectively. Sexual exploitation and mental abuses were also mentioned by fewer of the respondents. The table highlights the inhumane experience that most migrants go through as they employ the services of human smugglers who subject them to all forms of abuse and intimidation.

Figure 5
Exploitation Experiences among Migrants





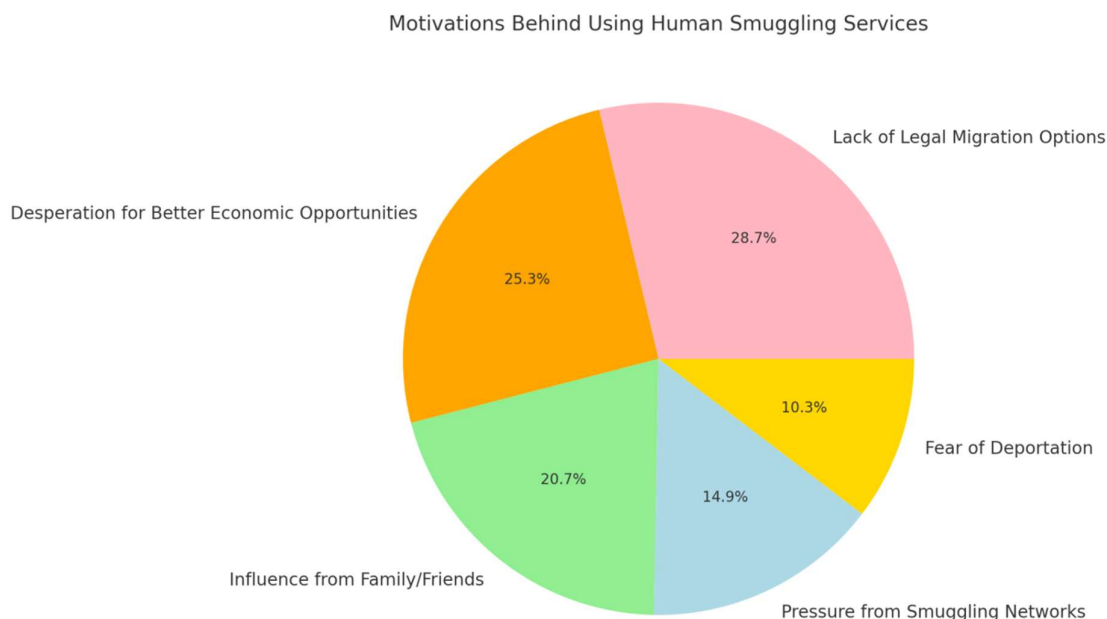
Using a horizontal bar chart in Figure 5, the experiences of migrants with respect to exploitation have been explained. The most commonly used form of exploitation, forced labour, is rendered visual by being the biggest bar and then there are smaller bars to show sexual exploitation and other abuses. This figure supports the information in Table 5 as it shows that there are great risks involved in human smuggling, especially among the customers who would adopt such jobs due to economic compulsions.

Motivation for Smuggling

Figure 6 uncovers the major reasons why migrants resort to services provided by human smugglers. The most commonly reported reasons were the absence of legal avenues of migration (50%) and desperation to get a better economic life (44%). Family/friend influence and pressure by a smuggling network were also popular motivators, 36 percent and 26 percent respectively. The least represented was the fear of deportation (18%), even though it was still motivating part of the migrants.

Figure 6

Motivations behind Using Human Smuggling Services



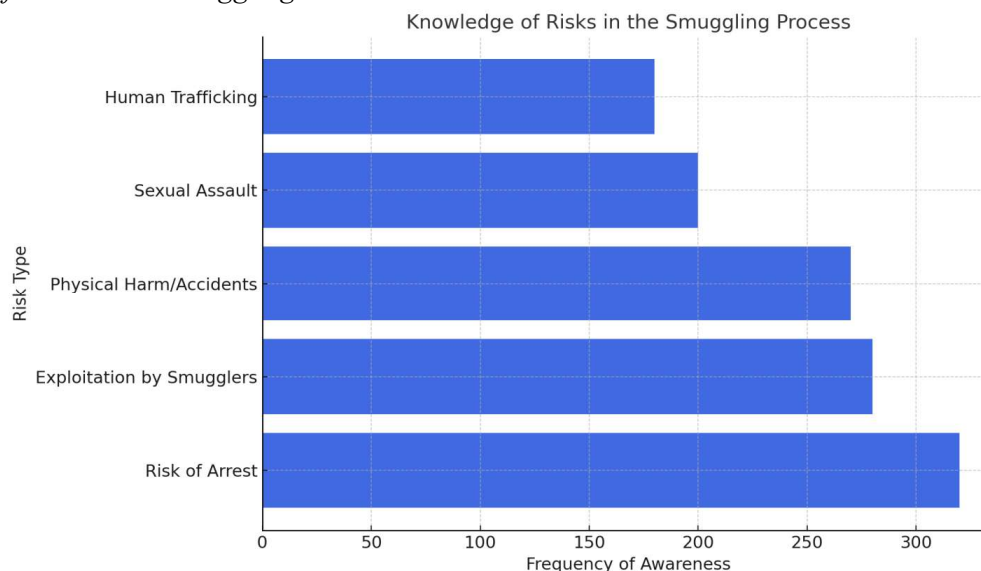
A pie chart showing visual breakdown of the reasons behind using human smuggling services is shown in figure 6. The chart is overwhelmed with lack of legal migration opportunities and economic desperation justifying the entries in the Table 6. This highlights the importance that migrants should be encouraged in smuggling more so as a result of being left with no other options and hence the dire need to enhance better migration systems that offer secure and legal routes.

Risks Knowledge

Figure 7 will concern the risk awareness of the migrants who participated in the smuggling. The vast majority of the respondents knew about the dangers of smuggling, one of which was being arrested (64%) and being exploited by smugglers (56%). Most respondents (54% and 40%, respectively) were likewise aware of physical harm and sexual assault but the proportion of those aware of human trafficking was smaller (36%).



Figure 7
Knowledge of Risks in the Smuggling Process

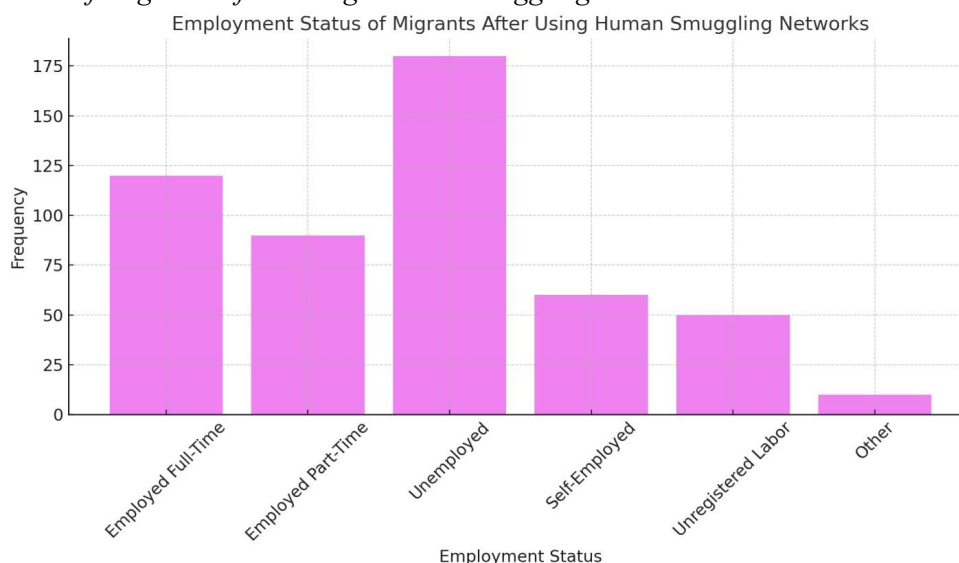


In figure 7, a horizontal bar chart is presented that indicates the level of consreadness of the risk associated with smuggling. As Table 7 indicates, according to the chart, it was evident that most migrants had knowledge that they were prone to arrests and exploitation, but there was relatively low understanding of the element of trafficking. This image serves the thesis that migrants, as a rule, understand the danger of the choice they make, but still, they can incorrectly estimate or not see the risks related to the involvement of smugglers to the full extent.

Employment after Smuggling

In the last figure the authors discuss the job situation of migrants once they have utilised a human smuggling network. Most of the respondents (36%) were unemployment with 24 per cent employed on a full-time basis. Part-time jobs were only found in a smaller percentage of migrants (18%) and 12 percent of them are self-employed. Only 10 percent were involved in unregistered employment and 2 percent mentioned that they were in other kind of employment.

Figure 8
Employment Status of Migrants after Using Human Smuggling Networks





The bar chart which is presented in figure 8 depicts the post-smuggling employment status of the migrants. The most prevailing fate to the migrants who utilize the services offered by the human smugglers is unemployment, then they are employed full time. This implies that even after applying the smugglers, most migrants still find it hard to obtain a good and legitimate job in the countries of destination and this could imply that their credentials are not considered or taken seriously in the work environment or the fact that they are being exploited.

This research has shown that there is an intricate connection between the inequities of the labour market and the informal migration and the human smuggling markets.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Mean Importance of "Low Wages" by Region

| Region | n | M (SD) | t(498) | p-value | Cohen's d |
|-----------------|-----|-----------|--------|---------|-----------|
| South Asia | 250 | 4.8 (0.6) | 5.2 | <0.001 | 0.47 |
| Central America | 250 | 4.5 (0.7) | | | |

Note: South Asian migrants rated "Low Wages" as a significantly stronger push factor than Central Americans (*p* < 0.001).

This table is a comparison based analysis of the perception of the South Asian and Central American migrants as per the push factor called Low Wages to migration. It has been revealed that the South Asian migrants (M = 4.8, SD = 0.6) perceived low wages as a hugely important migration-causing agent than their Central American counterparts (M = 4.5, SD = 0.7) with a significant difference (t(498) = 5.2, p < 0.001). The practical significance is moderate but near large due to effect size (Cohen d = 0.47). These results indicate that there are local economic disparities or cultural variations in wage sensitivity that can make a difference in the migration decisions. Region-specific interventions, like wage subsidy on the one hand in South Asia, and job creating programs on the other hand in Central America may be some of the insights which policymakers can utilize to better remove the underlying causes of the migration.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation between Smuggling Costs and Exploitation Incidents

| Variable | Total Cost | Physical Abuse |
|------------------|------------|----------------|
| Total Cost (USD) | — | 0.62*** |
| Physical Abuse | 0.62*** | — |

Note: ***p* < 0.001. Higher smuggling costs correlate with increased physical abuse.

This table focuses on the correlation between the overall cost of smuggling, and the number of cases of physical abuse as reported by the migrants. That is confirmed by the findings of a strong positive correlation (r = 0.62, p < 0.001) between the amount paid in smuggling fees and the likelihood of physical abuse in the process of the journey. The discovery highlights the predatory nature of smuggling networks whereby the more money that is exchanged, the more one is prone to violence. The findings demonstrate how more significant regulation is required of the paths involved in smuggling and more significant safeguarding of the migrants because what is more expensive is not necessarily safer but on the contrary more likely to cause any damage. Such knowledge may be used in the direction of anti-smuggling campaigns as well as in the services towards migrants.

Table 3

Factor Loadings for Economic Hardship Construct

| Economic Push Factor | Factor Loading |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Unemployment | 0.88 |
| Low Wages | 0.85 |
| Poverty | 0.82 |
| Lack of Job Opportunities | 0.79 |

Note: Single-factor solution explains 78% of variance (KMO = 0.84, Bartlett's *p* < 0.001).



This table 3 illustrates that one factor analysis has revealed a single underlying factor of Economic Hardship based on four push factors being: Unemployment (0.88), Low Wages (0.85), Poverty (0.82), and Lack of Job Opportunities (0.79). The high factor loadings show there is a strong interrelation between those variables and, together, they explain 78 percent of the variance ($KMO = 0.84$, Bartlett $p < 0.001$). This affirms that economic struggle is a composite cause of migration that makes research in future to be simplified as these aspects can be combined in one indicator. Based on this construct, policymakers could come up with holistic economic mitigation measures that support a wide combination of the dimensions of hardship rather than address an aspect in a standalone manner.

Table 4

Structural Equation Model (SEM) Path Coefficients

| Path | Standardized β | * p^* |
|--|----------------------|---------|
| Labour Market \rightarrow Informal Migration | 0.72 | <0.001 |
| Informal Migration \rightarrow Smuggling Use | 0.65 | <0.001 |
| Smuggling Use \rightarrow Exploitation | 0.58 | <0.001 |

Model Fit: CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05. All paths significant (* $p^* < 0.001$).

Table 4 shows the standardized path coefficients of the analysis netting the standardized path coefficients of the study theoretical model. The findings demonstrate that there are highly significant paths as follows: Labour Market Inequities to Informal Migration ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), Informal Migration to Smuggling Use ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) and Smuggling Use to Exploitation ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). A good fit has been observed in the model (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05) which appends the satisfaction of a proposed causal chain. These data indicate that the inequality in the labour market systematically creates the basis of risky migration and consequent exploitation. The power of the path coefficients gives an indication that correction at any point (decent work or legal migration channel) may destabilize this negative cycle.

Table 5

Kaplan-Meier Survival Analysis for Time-to-Employment

| Group | Median Time (Months) | $\chi^2(1)$ | * p^* |
|------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------|
| Forced Labour | 8 | 15.3 | <0.001 |
| No Forced Labour | 4 | | |

Note: Forced labour survivors took twice as long to find employment (log-rank test, * $p^* < 0.001$).

This table 5 indicates the differences between a migrant who was involved in forced labour and the one who was not with respect to time taken to secure a job after migration. The results show the average time forced labour survivors identified employment is 8 months of a job compared to their counterparts (4 months) with a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2(1) = 15.3$, $p < 0.001$). These findings show the economic implications of the exploitation in the long run, because the forced labour postpones the process of integrating migrants into the labour markets of their host-countries. These results warrant the necessity to design special rehabilitation, e.g., job training and mental health care, to assist exploited migrants in recovery and faster economic stabilization. This has the potential to lessen their susceptibility to exploitation further and allows a better long-term outcome.

It is depicted clearly with the information gathered by the survey that the economic forces that push people into better opportunities through informal migration include unemployment, low wages, and poverty. Its dependence on human smuggling networks is directly related to the absence of legal means of migration and the starving conditions in which migrants have their backs against the wall. These networks also take financial advantage of the migrants by exposing them to high level of charges and other forms of mistreatment like forced labour, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

These findings highlight this issue of low vulnerability of migrants to exploitation; this holds true despite the migrants arriving within their destination countries. According to reports by majority of the



migrants who have used the services of smugglers they have been really exploited, with majority left without any or under-utilized jobs to get stable in their new countries.

Discussion

The results of this research give crucial information on the association between inequities in the labour market, informal migration and human smuggling networks. Mostly implemented with the help of human smugglers, informal migration has been mentioned as one of the major responses to economic and political pressure exerted on members of underprivileged regions. Such pressures, especially unemployment, low wages, and inaccessibility of countries to human trafficking chains, have provided a massive boom to the human smuggling business networks. The survey results corroborate the importance of economic reasons to the choice of informal migration, and consequent exploitation and abuse of the migrants who trust in the smugglers so that they can arrive in their destination countries.

The obtained findings correspond with those of the available literature, which emphasizes the interconnection between labour market inequalities and clandestine migration. De Haas (2011) suggests that economic development and the improved labour market prospects decrease the chances of the irregular migration, but the economic inequality between different regions stimulates people to move to the other regions, which offers better opportunities. Nevertheless, legal migration channels, due to scarcity or absence, drive the migrants towards informal entry, which in most cases is based on human smuggler, who in most cases take advantage of the vulnerable migrants (Carling, 2002). The results of the study support this flow since respondents expressed the unavailability of work, low payment, and poverty as the primary driving force to migration in accordance with the theoretical background of the push-pull models of migration (Lee, 1966).

In addition, the high rate of human smuggling of migrants as depicted in the survey highlights the inability of migration policy to meet the needs of vulnerable communities. In spite of the built-up understanding of how harmful and dangerous it is to smuggle, with exploitation, physical injuries, and even trafficking being the common practices, substantial number of migrants continue to use these networks because they are left with no other option (Basu, 2013). This demonstrates the necessity of such policy reform, which should cover both, that the causes of informal migration need to be drained, and that possibilities of more legal channels of migration should be created. Koser (2010) supports this by saying that restrictive policies on immigration, as well as the criminalization of irregular migration, has increased the need to rely on smugglers in general and therefore, migrants have become susceptible to exploitation.

One of the problems, which are embodied in the study findings, is associated with the financial cost of engaging human smugglers. Migration using smuggling channels is very expensive because it involves transportation, modern hotel rooms, bribes, and payments of corruption fees hammering many migrants into debt bondage (Mann, 2016). Such high prices are in line with the past research that has demonstrated the extent to which migrants pay unbelievable prices to the smugglers which have further increased their vulnerability (Duvell et al., 2008). As the survey results prove, transportation cost, payment of bribes make the greatest part in the smuggling costs as the migrants are the victims of these Whenever exploitative financial transactions are involved.

Using desperation of the migrants is one of the advantages that the smuggling networks use and, according to the respondents in the study there was a degree of desperation to get better economic opportunities that made the respondents turn to someone willing to provide the smuggling assistance (Ghosh, 2000). This desperation is further made up by the political unsteadiness and corruption that usually typifies areas that bear high informal migration (Hollifield, 2004). Smugglers have been seen as the only alternative by the migrants who realize that there are dangers associated with it but have no other way to get out of hard situations (Martin, 2009). The outcome of the study shows that these networks are not just migration vehicles but also those that take advantage of the economic vulnerability and uncertainty of migrants.

The fact that exploitation plays a major role in the migration process was one of the major themes which was evident based on the survey. As presented in the results, forced labour, indentured servitude and physical abuse are common among migrants who have used human smuggling services. This reinforces the conclusions of already existing research areas that underline the fact that as much as it is the case, human smuggling can be effectively contextualised as being associated with trafficking as well as other conditions of



exploitation (Skrable, 2009). Another twist in the migration story is the fact that migrants are simply exploited by the so called smugglers who may be at the same time trafficking networks, which have devastating social and economic outcomes to these migrants. According to Shelley, (2010), human smuggling is not the harmless practice, as some people would think but rather a highly exploitative one that most frequently results in the trafficking of human and other malpractices.

In this study, the migrants have also said they were never able to find settled jobs once they arrived in the destination countries. Many migrants become unemployed or underemployed even though there are significant costs involved in having been smuggled and the journey having involved risks. The result is in tandem with the findings of Massey et al. (1993), who believed, inter alia, that irregular migration may lead to the migrant getting low-paid jobs in vulnerable positions and with minimal access to law. The again narrow economy experienced by the migrants after coming to countries of destination is an indication of the larger context of integration in the labour market and the instabilities in informal jobs. This is especially worrying when the societal-economic backwardness of exploitation of the labourers together with the marginalisation of the migrants is considered in the host countries on a long term basis (Castles & Miller, 2009).

As far as policy implications of the current research are concerned, they draw attention to the necessity of making extensive immigration reforms that would have implications beyond curbing the push and pull changes of migration. A more comprehensive migration policy should be implemented, as formulated by Laczko and Aghazarm (2009) indicating that more legal ways of migration should be made available, increased safeguarding of labour rights and dealing with the causes of migration, i.e., economic disparities and political instability. Legal and safe opportunities of migration would cut the number of migrants who rely on smugglers and, therefore, decrease the possibility to be exploited and abused. Moreover, making migrants better informed can help them to make better choices because, as Papademetriou et al. (2009) note, the availability of better information about possibilities of legal migration and the dangers of employing smugglers can be used to empower migrants.

Labour market inequities and the rise of informal migration are closely linked to the growing economic pressures faced by individuals. These challenges are often exacerbated by educational and skill-based divides across countries, as highlighted in recent studies on education systems (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Nadeem, 2024; Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2025a). Furthermore, leadership styles in educational institutions and their impact on school management effectiveness (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, Bano, & Naveed, 2025) play a significant role in addressing these disparities. The pressures faced by migrants seeking economic opportunities in informal sectors often intersect with these inequities, leading to human smuggling as a form of survival (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025b; Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2025b). Bridging these divides through educational reforms and skill-based programs could alleviate such migration pressures (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025c; Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2025c).

Moreover, results indicate the necessity to better the conditions of countries in terms of the economy. According to De Haas (2010), there is need to tackle labour market inequalities in the land of origin so as to dampen the push factors that cause people to migrate. Although it is not a possibility to assume that we can eradicate all migration by changing the policies, putting new and enhanced economic opportunities and the provision of employment in the developing countries would alleviate economic factors responsible forcing people into the informal migration.

Source, transit, destination countries need to be cooperative on an international level to fight against human smuggling and migrant safety. Reitano et al. (2017) stated that the cooperation across borders can be used to break down smuggling networks, enhance the protection of migrants, and guarantee that migrants are not exposed to exploitation. Proper implementation of international laws and rules as well as availability of resources to migrants may go a long way to help curb the influence of the smugglers and to give pleasant migration experiences to those who seek to have a better life.

Conclusion

To summarize the findings of the present study, one should note that the interaction between the inequities in the labour market, informal migration, and the emergence of human smuggling networks is a complicated matter. The initial survey evidence shows the leading role of economic motives along with the



absence of other opportunities to migrate legally in pushing people to use the smuggling networks at the cost of great financial commitment and even risk. The mere use of the smugglers predisposes the migrants with such forms of abuse as forced labour and physical abuse, and the migrants face hard challenges of finding quality employment in their destination host countries. To deal with such complications, multifaceted migration policies which include safe and legal migration channels, enhancement of economic opportunities in home states and the actions against the human trafficking should be needed to reduce the ills of human smuggling.

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