
Migrants, brokers and the state in Ghana and Myanmar: victims of trafficking and modern slavery or agents of change?¹

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What is the issue?

Brokers, i.e. those who mediate migration, are often present in global labour migration processes. It is widely assumed that migrants and brokers are in opposition to each other and that the state is a benevolent and positive facilitator of labour migration. This research sought to investigate the inner workings and operational logic of brokers, the state and employers in positioning migrants from Ghana and Myanmar in precarious work and creating unfree labour in Libya, Kuwait, Singapore and Thailand.

The focus of the project was on brokered migration for domestic and construction work, as these two occupations are globally important for low-skilled migrants and offer important insights into the specificities of the recruitment and placement of workers. Migrants from poor and historically disadvantaged social groups and regions are heavily represented in both occupations. Brokerage is also widespread in these occupations as companies extend their reach to ever more remote locations in search of a docile workforce that will accept exploitative conditions. Both kinds of work have been listed as occupations of concern in the context of efforts to abolish trafficking and slavery and the worst forms of child labour. Also, both Ghana and Myanmar have made serious efforts to eliminate informal brokers in order to reduce exploitation.

¹ This note is based on a British Academy-funded project '*Brokered migration for domestic work and construction work in Ghana and Myanmar: examining the relevance of the slavery and trafficking discourse*'. The project is part of the British Academy/DFID programme on [Tackling Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Modern Business](#).

² Professor Brad Blitz led the British Academy/DFID programme on *Tackling Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Modern Business* between 2017 and 2019.

The research evidence

This project shed light on the micro-mechanisms that create unfree labour during the recruitment, journey, placement and employment of migrant workers in the domestic work and construction sectors. It studied why systems of brokerage and unfree labour continue to exist despite efforts to eliminate them. Furthermore, it sketched a nuanced portrait of the interaction of structure and agency, and the role of brokers within that. Rather than viewing migrants and those who mediate migration in opposition, and the state as a benevolent facilitator, the project team argued that they should be analysed as co-constituting systems of brokerage, irregular migration and exploitative work. The project has revealed that brokerage is culturally embedded in local systems of reciprocity and closely depends on the involvement of state actors. The findings highlight the need for states to take greater responsibility for managing their own involvement in creating modern slavery. At the same time, the project sheds light on the ways in which migrants use brokerage to exercise agency by taking advantage of irregular migration routes and informal employment.

Policy and practice implications

- Pressure should be exercised to instigate both sending- and destination-country governments to create more opportunities for legal migration and minimise opportunities for rent-seeking.
- More easily accessible formal routes to migration as well as employment should be created to counter vulnerabilities that occur through the use of irregular migration routes and informal employment.
- Accessible information provision platforms for labour migrants in destination countries should be created, which could enable them to exercise their agency (e.g. to change jobs or accommodation) without their reliance on informal brokers.