

# Human Rights Situation of Indian Labor Migrants in Armenia

## Executive Summary

Armenia, in recent years, has progressively opened its labor and migration regime to foreign workers, including third-country nationals, by simplifying work-permit procedures through online platforms such as **workpermit.am**. This creates opportunities — but also potential risks. Based on 11 in-depth interviews with Indian labor migrants working in sectors such as construction, retail, manufacturing, agriculture and services, this report reveals a mixed reality: while some migrants report decent employment conditions and relative stability, while others face severe systemic problems — lack of legal status, informal work with exploitative conditions, no access to social protections or healthcare, unsafe working and living conditions, and episodes of discrimination.

Interviews make it clear that the main motivation for Indian labor migrants to end up in Armenia is the prospect to travel to Europe: a promise that recruitment agents in India often sound. The migrants' stories reflect not only individual hardships but also structural gaps in regulation, enforcement, social protection and information access. The EU–Armenia Visa Liberalization process offers an opportunity to close these gaps, given that the Action Plan includes benchmarks on labor migration, fundamental rights, non-discrimination, and anti-trafficking.

This report recommends targeted actions addressing legal protection, labor regulation, social inclusion, and information access, involving the Armenian government, employers, civil society and international partners. The aim is to transform the opportunity of labor migration into a framework of rights, dignity, and social integration — not exploitation.

This report is a snapshot, rather than a comprehensive picture of challenges in the area of labor migration. A more comprehensive study is necessary for a more in-depth understanding of the situation.

# Methodology

## Research Design and Objectives

This study is based on qualitative research conducted to understand the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and human rights conditions of Indian labor migrants working in Armenia. The aim was to identify recurring patterns related to recruitment, legal status, employment, living conditions, access to services, and potential indicators of exploitation, and to develop evidence-based recommendations for national stakeholders.

## Sampling and Recruitment

- A total of **11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews** were conducted with Indian migrants working in Armenia.
- Participants were recruited through **snowball sampling**, beginning with existing community connections.
- A trusted community intermediary facilitated introductions and, when needed, **provided interpretation during interviews**.

## Participant Profile

- **Gender:** 10 men and 1 woman.
- **Age:** mostly 20–40.
- **Sectors:** construction, manufacturing, delivery/gig work, supermarkets, restaurants, and small business.
- **Duration in Armenia:** from several months to multiple years.
- **Legal status:** ranged from undocumented to holding Temporary Residence Cards (TRC) obtained through work or business.

## Data Collection

- Interviews were conducted in **October–November 2025** in Yerevan.
- A **semi-structured interview guide** was used, covering migration journey, recruitment, working conditions, documentation, housing, health, discrimination, and access to services.
- Interviews ranged from **45–75 minutes**, depending on interpretation needs.
- **Languages:** English, Hindi, and Punjabi, with interpretation provided by the intermediary where required.
- All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed.

## Ethical Considerations

- Verbal **informed consent** was obtained after explaining the purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation.
- Participants could decline questions or end the interview at any time.
- No identifying information (names, employers, addresses) appears in transcripts or the report.
- Interviews were conducted in safe, neutral locations to ensure privacy.
- A **trauma-informed** and **gender-sensitive** approach guided the interviews.
- Details posing potential risks to participants were intentionally **excluded from the public report**.

## Translation and Transcription

- Interpretation was provided during interviews for Hindi/Punjabi speakers.
- Transcripts were cleaned and lightly edited for clarity without altering meaning.
- Interpreter followed confidentiality and neutrality expectations.

## Analytical Approach

- Analysis followed a **thematic approach**, identifying patterns across interviews.
- Coding focused on recruitment practices, legal status, working conditions, intermediaries, housing, health access, discrimination, and indicators of vulnerability.
- Themes were cross-checked across interviews for consistency.

## Limitations

- Snowball sampling produced a **non-representative** sample concentrated in specific social networks.
- Women are **underrepresented**, limiting gender-specific insights.
- Research was largely Yerevan-focused, with limited regional variation.
- Migrants in highly restrictive or abusive situations may be underrepresented.
- Findings rely on **self-reported** experiences, which reflect individual perceptions and memory.

# 1. Legal Status in Armenia

Armenian legislation formally allows the employment of foreign nationals, under the condition that a valid **work permit and a temporary residence permit (TRC)** is obtained. The platform **workpermit.am**, launched in 2022, is designed to streamline this process online. The work permit process is **employer-initiated** and now largely integrated with TRC issuance through the online **workpermit.am** system. However, our interview data shows that legal status remains precarious for many Indian workers. Among the 11 respondents:

- Several reported arriving on tourist or short-stay visas and later being told by employers or intermediaries that they would be "regularized" — but no proper work permit or TRC was eventually issued.
- Others described verbal agreements only, with no written contract or official documentation; one worker said: *"They told me I would work in construction with a contract — but when I arrived, there was no paper, only verbal agreement."*

This informal status exposes migrants to exploitation, limits access to public services, and leaves them vulnerable to sudden dismissal or deportation. Even where a work permit was eventually issued, workers reported difficulties renewing TRCs due to bureaucratic complexity and language barriers.

Migrants can obtain TRC on different grounds, including employment, business, and family. Several interviewees received TRC through business registration rather than employment. Only a minority — 2 of the 11 — had managed to secure proper work permits and TRCs, thanks to employer support. These individuals expressed a greater sense of security and better working conditions. Employers often avoid providing formal assistance with work permits and TRCs primarily due to administrative burden and tax obligations.

While legal frameworks exist in Armenia, in practice many Indian workers remain outside formal authorization systems. This legal limbo is a root cause of other violations. We understand that the government plans to introduce a work visa to ensure more regulation over labor migration — certainly an important step to avoid arrivals on tourist visa for work and then falling into irregularity.

## 2. Working Conditions, Nature of Job, and Job Safety

Interviewed migrants work in physically demanding, low-skilled sectors: construction, agriculture, retail, hospitality, and manufacturing — often in positions Armenian citizens are reluctant to take. Many described strenuous, unsafe conditions:

- Long working hours (10–12 hours per day, 6–7 days a week), often without overtime pay, adequate rest breaks, or protective gear. One construction worker recounted a seriously hazardous case involving an almost fatal injury while using a factory instrument, which lacked protective gear. The employer failed to call first aid, there was no official injury reporting, and no compensation was provided.

- In manufacturing or agriculture, workers described repetitive, hazardous tasks, exposure to chemicals or heavy machinery, and lack of training or safety instructions.
- Several workers reported wage delays, partial payments, or wage deductions for housing, transport or broker fees — in one instance, wages were withheld for several months.

However, a few migrants noted relatively better conditions: two workers in retail and hospitality had written contracts, received regular pay, and were provided accommodation. One of them described the employer as "fair and respectful", giving weekends off and paying on time. Another was provided with some personal protective equipment (though still limited) and received at least minimal safety briefings. It should also be noted that delivery workers reported better conditions when it comes to payment transparency, as the use of apps helps to clearly see deductions and income, while taxes are paid automatically.

These varying conditions suggest that employer practices — more than formal legal provisions — determine migrants' experiences. The lack of systematic labor-inspection mechanisms for migrant-heavy sectors, weak enforcement, and absence of effective collective bargaining or union protections (especially for foreign workers) exacerbate the risks.

Armenia allows trade union membership under its constitutional and labor laws, but in practice few foreign migrants know about or are able to join unions. None of the interviewed migrants reported union contacts.

### **3. Employment Details, Income, and Contracts**

Of the 11 interviewees:

- Only 4 had what they described as "some kind of contract" — in two cases, in Armenian only (untranslated); in two others, the contract was signed after several months of informal work.
- Many workers report stable daily wages (typically 7,000–10,000 AMD), but no days off or choosing not to take them due to financial pressure. Monthly earnings ranged between 150,000–250,000 AMD. A few older workers or those in more specialized tasks claimed somewhat higher pay, but these were rare.
- Most were paid in cash; none reported social or pension contributions or documentation of tax payments.
- Some had their passports held by employers or brokers; others lost opportunities to change employer because of withheld documentation — effectively binding them to exploitative situations.
- Many migrants arrive already with debt accumulated from upfront recruitment fees, subsequently facing the challenge of balancing rent, daily expenses, and remittances.

These patterns — irregular contracts, low transparency, absence of benefits — indicate systemic risks of labor exploitation. The Armenian labor law requires written contracts for employment, whether fixed-term or indefinite. Yet, the law seems weakly enforced for foreign workers.

On the positive side: the few migrants with proper contracts highlighted some workplace stability; they had documented income, could rent accommodation independently, and had a better sense of control over their situation. That said, many of them might not realize the benefits of having a contractual arrangements with relevant legal protections, so greater outreach on their labor rights would be useful.

## **4. Access to Healthcare**

Access to public healthcare for foreign workers in Armenia is contingent on legal registration, residence status, and, in some cases, social-security contributions. That said, emergency medical aid must be provided to anyone in Armenia regardless of status.

The interviews reveal notable barriers:

- Most migrants were unaware whether their employer registered them for social or health insurance.
- Several said they avoided seeking medical care even when ill or injured, fearing costs, rejection due to lack of documentation, or employer consequences. One reported being refused treatment at a hospital emergency care because staff did not know how to process a foreign passport.
- Reports from delivery workers suggest that while police arrived quickly during traffic incidents, first aid was often delayed and conducted not thoroughly.
- Only one of the respondents received necessary medical care at a hospital, thanks to the intervention and translation provided by a local acquaintance. Several noted that they avoid seeking medical help even when sick or injured, fearing the costs, rejection due to lack of documentation, or potential consequences from their employer. One reported being refused first aid at a hospital, where staff stated that holding a TRC (Temporary Residence Card) was mandatory and that he could not be registered without it.
- Lack of information in English and other languages as well as high private clinic costs are a barrier reported by several interviewees.

These reports suggest that, in practice, many migrant workers function outside any health-insurance or public-health safety net, leaving them vulnerable to illness, injury and economic hardship. Non-emergency care is often denied in practice for undocumented migrants.

## **5. Social Services, Living Conditions, and Well-Being**

Social services — such as legal aid and psychosocial assistance — are virtually non-existent for migrants. Government-run services rarely target third-country nationals; NGOs covering migrant needs are few and not widely known.

Living conditions reported by interviewees were often substandard:

- Employer-provided dormitories, especially for factory of construction workers, were frequently described as overcrowded — 6–10 men sharing a room; shared bathrooms;

inadequate heating or ventilation. Several said the dormitories lacked basic hygiene, especially problematic during the cold months.

- Migrants renting their own apartments often did so in shared rooms with other workers to reduce cost — still far below decent housing standards. At least two reported paying high rents relative to their earnings, leaving little for food, remittances or savings.
- Social isolation was commonly noted: most migrants left their families behind in India, had limited contact with Armenian society, lacked social networks, and felt excluded during holidays or cultural events. One said: *“My children think I am in a better place, but I live in a shared room with 10 men.”*

There were no reports of integration or support programs, such as language courses or better access to labor markets, being provided.

## 6. Risk of Trafficking

At least three of the eleven interviews show indicators consistent with the early stages or risk of labor trafficking, particularly deceptive recruitment, withholding of documents, abuse of vulnerability, threats and coercion, non-payment of wages.

For example, some interviewees experienced elements characteristic of trafficking-related exploitation, including:

- **Deceptive recruitment:** Some migrants were promised one type of job but assigned to another upon arrival. It is important to make a distinction between recruitment agents based in India, who often take fees and might misinform migrants, and Armenia-based brokers, often in charge of job placement, accommodation and replacing workers.
- **Inadequate information:** Some migrants were unaware of their employer, wages, or job conditions before departure.
- **Employer control over documents:** At least one worker had their passport taken by the employer.
- **High, unclear fees:** Most had to pay between \$3,000 to \$5,000 for recruitment, often without written contracts or clear breakdowns.

These situations reflect exploitative practices where consent may have been undermined due to deception or coercion.

In addition, most migrants faced conditions that increased their risk of abuse, even if not exploitative on their own, including:

- **Debt dependency:** Many financed their migration via informal loans.
- **Unregulated brokers:** Most used intermediaries with no formal oversight.
- **Irregular status:** Several had unclear legal standing, which discouraged reporting problems.

- **Isolation and language barriers:** Migrants had little access to support and limited job mobility.

These factors compound migrants' dependence on employers and brokers, making them more susceptible to abuse and less able to assert their rights. An additional factor is the lack of formal contracts, especially with the foreign workers in construction, manual labor and other sectors.

These cases should trigger formal identification procedures and protection measures under Armenia's anti-trafficking framework. However, the lack of trained frontline responders, accessible reporting mechanisms, and legal insecurity for migrants prevent effective intervention.

## **7. Discrimination, Ethnic Bias, and Social Exclusion**

Most interviewees reported feeling physically safe, generally well treated, and there were no reports of violent physical attacks based on ethnicity. That said, experiences of subtle and overt discrimination occasionally occur, including derogatory remarks from customers or colleagues, avoidance by locals in public transport or public offices, being treated as "outsiders," or being excluded from workplace socialization.

One worker said that at a store, local customers often avoided checkout lines with him; another said Armenian coworkers rarely spoke to him and excluded him from shared lunches or breaks. A third described being laughed at while trying to explain himself to a bank clerk or a doctor, due to accent or language limitations.

These experiences not only affect dignity and sense of belonging but also hinder access to services (healthcare, banking, housing, etc.) when staff are reluctant to deal with non-Armenian speakers.

## **8. Access to Information and Legal Awareness**

One of the clearest structural gaps identified is information asymmetry. None of the 11 migrants reported receiving official information (from state bodies) about their rights, legal pathways, or complaint mechanisms in English or Hindi. Most relied on informal networks — brokers, fellow migrants, social media, or word of mouth — which often propagated incorrect or misleading information. One migrant said: *"No one explained the laws or my rights. Everything was in Armenian or Russian, which I don't speak."*

Interviewees almost universally do not view official bodies as accessible or helpful, despite current efforts. This lack of accessible, reliable information — especially about work permits, TRCs, contracts, labor rights, healthcare, and legal recourse — undermines migrants' ability to protect themselves or assert their rights. It also facilitates exploitative practices by unscrupulous employers or intermediaries.

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## Recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered and in line with Armenia's commitments under the EU-Armenia VLAP (notably on labor migration, fundamental rights, non-discrimination, and social inclusion), the following recommendations are proposed:

### 1. Legal and Administrative Reform (Government of Armenia)

- While Armenia has made progress on the regulatory framework, **improvements and targeted support for both employers and workers** are necessary to ensure effective implementation. These improvements should, among others, reduce the current administrative complexity *vis a vis* various steps such as visa applications and make legal compliance more demanding for employers and migrant workers. **Inter-agency coordination also needs improvement**, with input from international organizations and civil society.
- The government may **consider the establishment of a specialized Migrant Protection Unit** within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, dedicated to labor migrants' rights — including issuance and oversight of work permits/TRCs, monitoring compliance, collecting data, and providing multilingual support.
- **As part of an effort for greater employer regulation, mandate that all foreign workers receive written employment contracts** before starting work, in a language they understand (Armenian, English, or Hindi/English for South-Asian workers). Contracts must be submitted to and registered with the Health and Labor Inspection Body (HLIB), and copies given to the employee.
- **Proceed with the plan to introduce a work visa**, as already planned by the government.
- **Strengthen enforcement and labor-inspection capacity at HLIB**, especially in migrant-heavy sectors (construction, agriculture, retail). Regular unannounced inspections should assess safety measures, housing, contract compliance, wage payments, record-keeping. Violations should carry meaningful penalties for employers.
- **Ensure access to public healthcare for all migrants**, regardless of employment or residence status in cases of emergency and basic medical care.
- **Develop a national “Migrant Integration Strategy”**, with clear benchmarks for rights protection, social inclusion, anti-discrimination, and data collection — integrating these into Armenia's broader reform agenda under the VLAP.

### 2. Information, Awareness & Legal Aid (Government + Civil Society)

- Launch an **official multilingual information portal** (ARM / ENG / Hindi) for migrant workers, disseminating up-to-date information on work-permit procedures, labor rights, complaint mechanisms, health and social services, contacts for assistance and hotlines.
- Set up **migrant support hotlines and legal-aid clinics**, in collaboration with civil-society NGOs, providing free or low-cost legal assistance, mediation, psychosocial support, and referral services.

- Carry out **public awareness campaigns** targeting employers, community institutions, and the broader public to combat xenophobia, raise sensitivity toward foreign workers, and promote tolerance and social inclusion.
- Further improve access to complaint and reporting mechanisms.

### 3. Eliminate risks in human trafficking (Government)

- **Strengthen identification and referral mechanisms** for suspected victims of trafficking among migrant workers.
- **Stronger regulation on intermediaries and recruitment agencies is necessary.**
- Develop **training for labor inspectors, police, and medical personnel** on trafficking indicators.
- Create a **migrant hotline** (multi-language) with links to shelters, legal aid, and counseling.
- **Prohibit confiscation of passports** by employers or intermediaries and penalize violations.

### 4. International Cooperation & Monitoring (EU, etc.)

- International partners are advised to provide **technical assistance and funding** to strengthen Armenian labor-inspection bodies, support civil society research, monitoring, and develop migrant-friendly social services.
- Encourage **peer learning and knowledge-exchange** between Armenia and other Eastern Partnership countries with experience in migrant labor regulation, social integration, and diaspora engagement.

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## Conclusion

The testimonies of these 11 Indian labor migrants reveal a dual reality in Armenia's evolving labor-migration landscape. On one hand — the promise of work opportunities and remittances. On the other — systemic vulnerabilities rooted in informal labor, weak protection regimes, social isolation, and ethnic marginalization.

If Armenia seeks to align with European standards — as envisaged under the VLAP — it must address these vulnerabilities. Effective, rights-based migration governance is not only a matter of human dignity — it is essential for social cohesion, economic stability, and Armenia's international reputation. With targeted reforms, robust implementation, and inclusive stakeholder engagement, the rights and human dignity of migrant workers can be protected — benefiting migrants and Armenian society alike.