

RETHINKING HEALTH-RELATED VULNERABILITIES OF TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN AGRICULTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of vulnerability is widely discussed in research as well as policy, there is little consensus on its meaning given its “multidimensional (social, political, economic, etc.), multiscale (individual, household, community, country, etc.), and multidisciplinary (gender studies, migration studies, disaster studies, etc.) nature” (Tagliacozzo et al. 2020: 1903). The concept of vulnerability was used frequently, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in public calls to “protect those most at risk” and to target interventions to groups and populations considered most in need of attention and assistance (Molenaar & Van Praag 2022). In public health and medicine, vulnerability is a common concept that refers to a person at increased risk for adverse health outcomes. The term is commonly used in both research and public settings to suggest powerlessness, victimhood, and the need for external interventions that can be potentially stigmatising and condescending to individuals (Carruth et al. 2021; Molenaar & Van Praag 2022).

In this chapter, we understand vulnerability not as an individual characteristic of particular individuals but as a concept that can shed light on how specific policies and institutional processes generate and shape individual health experiences and larger patterns of disease (Parker et al. 2000; Bronfman et al. 2002; Carruth 2021). As Quesada et al. (2011: 144) argue, experiences of vulnerability are only “partially shared across populations as they are shaped unevenly by specific status attributes (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), conditions (i.e., legal status, economic and living conditions, etc.), and individual serendipity”.

Migrant vulnerabilities can relate to a wide range of intersecting factors, such as migrants’ precarious employment conditions, experiences of discrimination and racism, language and cultural issues, disproportionate material deprivation, and lack of access to health care and social security (Molenaar & Van Praag 2022).

For migrants, especially for asylum seekers and even more so for undocumented migrants, violent global migration systems and inequitable health systems before, during, and after their journey can also lead to shared structural vulnerabilities that can differentially affect their health outcomes (Carruth et al. 2021). These vulnerabilities may also affect people who come to other countries for work, usually referred to in the literature and policy documents as labour migrants or migrant workers.

However, the issue of categorisation is one of the fundamental problems of understanding and conceptualising contemporary migration. As Helms (2015) argues, it is typically taken as “a given” that migrants can be divided into asylum-seekers fleeing war who are considered in various public discourses as legitimate migrants and “economic migrants” fleeing global economic inequalities who are generally perceived as illegitimate migrants. Such narrow statistical typologies do not encapsulate the diversified nature of contemporary migration processes. A wide range of motives, often quite distinct from the statistically ascribed category, can lie behind the migration process. Typologies, as Brettell (2000) argues, present us with a static and homogenised picture of a process that is dynamic throughout an individual’s life.

For this reason, in this contribution, we do not define migrant workers as encapsulating only workers who come to the new countries to work as we acknowledge the overlap between different migration statuses. For instance, lengthy asylum processes and the inability to work in the formal labour market may lead to asylum seekers seeking employment in the semi-formal or informal economy. Furthermore, asylum seekers often live outside any protection regimes and without support for prolonged periods, which means they are additionally vulnerable to labour exploitation in all its forms, including trafficking (Wilson 2011). Labour migration and mobility policies in the European Union target specific groups of EU and non-EU nationals perceived as needed in specific sectors of the labour market. For example, companies in the European Union may send “posted” workers from a European Union country to provide a service in another Member State of the European Union on a temporary basis. Posted workers are among the groups that remain in the Member State where they work only for the duration of the provision of their service and do not integrate into the labour market of the state where they work. In this respect, we can observe highly diversified labour migration and mobility patterns within the European Union. Triandafyllidou (2022) notes that, especially in the last two decades, migration paths have become more fragmented and non-linear with multiple intermediate steps and transit points; acknowledging the complexity of migration drivers, we can speak of mixed motivations for migration. Furthermore, not

every migrant may wish to settle more permanently in the country of destination, and the formal migration categories do not necessarily correspond with their initial plans. As such, temporariness can be planned and intentional, unplanned or befallen, where the available migration visas do not permit long-term stay, although a migrant is seeking an opportunity to stay (Triandafyllidou 2022).

For this contribution, we, therefore, draw on Sargeant and Tucker (2009), who define migrant workers as workers without permanent status in the receiving countries. However, this definition is also applicable to a variety of temporary workers who are not necessarily migrant workers.¹ According to ILO (n.d.), temporary workers are those engaged only for a specific period, including fixed-term, project-, or task-based contracts, as well as seasonal or casual work. The latter refers to the engagement of workers on a very short-term or an occasional and intermittent basis, often for a specific number of hours, days, or weeks. For instance, due to the seasonal nature of agricultural and, to a somewhat lesser extent, construction work, these workers are often recruited on a temporary basis (Oso et al. 2022), meaning that they are required to leave the receiving country after the work is concluded and are asked to return when demand in the labour market resumes. However, among the category of temporary migrant workers, we may also find people who came to the new countries as, for instance, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, marriage migrants, etc.

The emphasis on temporary forms of labour can also lead to circular migration, facilitated by the European Union policy for over a decade (Vankova 2020). According to the European Commission, circular migration is a mechanism that enables states to “satisfy their labour market needs and at the same time disengage from the integration challenges associated with permanent migration” (Vankova 2020: 1). However, temporary workers are often disproportionately exposed to safety and health-related vulnerabilities in comparison to permanent status workers – be they migrant or not. Sargeant and Tucker (2009) argue that permanent-status workers have a better knowledge of OSH policies and practices than temporary workers, who are consequently more exposed to multi-layered vulnerabilities. However, they also acknowledge the heterogeneity of migrant workers as an important variable when accessing their vulnerabilities and argue that multi-layered vulnerabilities manifest themselves in different forms, depending

1 According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), international migrant workers are individuals who are formally included in the labour force in the country of their habitual residence (regardless of employment), but were not born in that country (ILO 2020). In reality, this category includes individuals who have a legal right of residence in the territory of the state in question, be it permanent or temporary workers, as well as undocumented migrants. However, the latter group is not included in labour statistics (Sargeant 2009).

on a set of factors. In this respect, highly skilled workers are generally more welcome in reception countries with special conditions for family reunification and settlement. However, some groups, such as international students, also face numerous obstacles to long-term stay (Triandafyllidou 2022). On the other hand, workers who are perceived by policymakers and employers as “low-skilled” are often admitted only temporarily to cover specific labour shortages, thus avoiding the social and economic “cost” of integration (Triandafyllidou 2022).

Therefore, we recognise that the static label of vulnerability may not be appropriate to describe the experiences of temporary migrant workers as a heterogeneous group and that their vulnerability may be contextual, dynamic, and often reversible (Molenaar & Van Praag, 2022). Temporary labour migration (TLM) manifests in different and complex forms through various schemes and programmes.² Temporary migrants are often not eligible for integration support, adversely affecting their economic integration and rights protection (EC in ILO 2022). Migrant workers, particularly temporary workers, are thus often located in precarious segments of labour markets where the pay is low, the working conditions are poor, and the share of informal labour is high. The temporariness of employment, therefore, significantly influences their occupational safety and health and exposes them to higher degrees of vulnerability (Danaj et al. 2020). According to different reports and research (ILO 2004; Vah Jevšnik & Toplak 2022), in labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture and construction, the risks of work-related accidents and the development of health-related conditions is especially high.

Therefore, the chapter aims to explore particularly the OSH (occupational safety and health) and other health-related vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers in agriculture and construction. To provide a more systematic assessment of OSH vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers, we follow Sargeant and Tucker’s (2009) layered framework for the analysis of OSH vulnerabilities of migrant workers. First, we examine the migration-related factors, such as the conditions of recruitment and the migration status. Next, we discuss the importance of the socioeconomic conditions in the country of origin and the socio-demographic characteristics of migrant workers themselves. The third section refers to the conditions in the receiving country, such as employment and living conditions, and the phenomenon of social isolation that also has implications for mental health. The argument draws on a review of the academic literature on temporary migrant workers, their OSH-related vulnerabilities, public and mental health, and grey literature, such as policy reports and other documents.

2 Among these are, for instance, the H-2 programme in the United States, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program in Canada, and different guest worker programmes in Europe.

FIRST LAYER OF VULNERABILITY: MIGRATION FACTORS

In the first layer of vulnerability are migration factors such as the recruitment conditions and the worker's migration status. If the conditions of recruitment are regular, meaning that workers obtained residency and/or work permits and suitable contracts are in place in accordance with the national laws and collective agreements, migrant workers are more protected. If employment is precarious and/or informal, the workers will be more vulnerable to OSH risks. In general, the more insecure the migration status and the more precarious the employment, the more exposed the migrant workers are to OSH risks, with undocumented migrants operating in the informal economy as the most vulnerable (Sargeant & Tucker 2009). In this regard, Elver and Shapiro (2021) even argue that undocumented migrants experience the worst forms of exploitation in their workplaces, including modern forms of slavery, such as forced labour, bonded labour, and human trafficking.

As immigration policies in main destination countries have become increasingly restrictive, many countries have preferred temporary or circular migration schemes (Triandafyllidou 2022). Labour migration programmes around the world are thus increasingly being managed by national governments and supranational bodies such as the European Union, and the conditions of recruitment feature enforced transience and temporariness as one of their main characteristics (Horvath 2014; Yeoh 2020). Therefore, despite some legal guarantees of managed migration as opposed to increasingly perilous and securitised migration routes, such programmes often contribute to limited mobility and the precarious status of migrant workers as only temporary employees. ILO's report (2022) summarises, "Historically, the threat of deportation has put temporary migrant workers on unequal terms with local workers; it has made them more vulnerable to pressures from employers." The temporariness of their stay further allows employers to undermine and violate labour standards and negatively affect migrants' health. For example, health insurance plans that are sustainable, transnational, or transferable often do not exist or are inadequate (McLaughlin & Hennebray 2012). The generally restrictive nature of temporary employment programmes may encourage the deregularisation and illegalisation of migrant statuses, which are precisely the consequences such programmes were intended to avoid (McLaughlin & Hennebray 2012). Moreover, temporary migrant workers sometimes "deviate" from the expected cyclical and temporary migration pattern by overstaying their visas, changing their migration status, working without authorization or with a status that does not permit their employment, or returning to their country of origin with injuries. These incidents

often exclude them from future employment opportunities as migrant workers (McLaughlin & Hennebry 2012; Tagliacozzo et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the agricultural sector, especially in Southern Europe (Italy, Greece, and Spain), has seen a shift from being dominated by farming with family members to hiring workers outside the family in order to be more competitive with corporate food chains.³ In this sense, the agricultural labour market is becoming increasingly segmented, with migrants generally being recruited for the most difficult jobs (Perrotta & Sacchetto 2014; Corrado et al. 2018; King et al. 2021). In Italy's agriculture, for instance, under a legal structure that typically links the residence permit to an employment contract, the number of undocumented migrants proliferated, a system of informal mobility developed, and finally, the number of intermediaries in the recruitment process increased, pushing migrants into an even more precarious situation of dependence on their employers (Corrado et al. 2018). Corrado et al. (2018) further note that this reinforces the so-called *caporalato* system, which was established based on the historical organisation of the agricultural labour market in southern Italy. Within this system, intermediaries, who are not necessarily part of the organised crime system, act as a link between agricultural entrepreneurs and workers. This type of intermediation has been made possible by fairly liberal recruitment policies. It operates, among other things on an ethnic or national basis: migrants who have been in the country for a long time eventually become intermediaries, particularly within their own ethnic group. Corrado et al. (2018) also argue that intermediaries not only foresee the process of recruitment but also, after migration, continue to control a large part of workers' everyday lives. This phenomenon is particularly problematic for workers from countries outside the European Union. However, an increased number of violations has also been observed among workers from European Union countries, particularly related to agency and posted workers. In describing the agricultural sector in Italy, Dines and Rigo (in Tagliacozzo et al. 2020: 1908) also refer to the process of "refugeeisation" in which increasing numbers of asylum seekers and individuals with regular refugee, subsidiary, or humanitarian status provide the flexible and low-paid labour on which the sector relies. Perrotta and Sacchetto (2014), for instance, cite cases where migrants who were waiting for a decision on their status in reception or detention centres left these centres and entered the informal agricultural labour market. This situation meant they were even more

3 King (2000) speaks of the so-called Mediterranean model of migration, where, in addition to the former dominant emigration, there is an increasing trend towards inward immigration. The seasonal nature of most of the dominant economic sectors in these countries (intensive agriculture, fisheries, tourism, construction, etc.) increases the demand for "flexible labour", which is available when employers need it.

dependent on intermediaries, as the authorities could expel them at any time based on information about their irregular legal status. Although in Italy, the situation of migrant workers in agriculture is particular in terms of a high degree of such informal recruitment and other labour practices, in other Southern European as well as Northern European countries, researchers also identified different forms of exploitation of migrant workers in agriculture (Lulle 2021; Mešić & Wikström 2021). In this regard, Mešić and Wikström (2021) studied the position of berry pickers in Sweden. Two groups of agricultural seasonal workers exist in Sweden: non-EU nationals, particularly from Southeast Asia (especially Thailand), who are granted seasonal work permits, and EU citizens, designated as “free pickers”, who sell the harvested berries directly to Swedish berry buyers. The conditions of recruitment and the enforcement of work-related rights are different for the two groups, as pickers from countries of the European Union do not require work permits to work in Sweden, and in this respect, their position can be considered as more favourable as those coming from countries outside the European Union. However, in reality, workers from both groups sometimes end up in considerable debt, are coerced by labour contractors, cannot return to their home countries or can return with only minimal financial gain or even in debt if their earnings do not cover loans for their travel. In this regard, some have become trapped in situations of forced labour. Although especially from 2008 on, the Swedish government has attempted to improve transnational collaboration and controlling mechanisms, the circumvention of regulations still prevails. One of the reasons is the existence of transnational subcontracting chains, where accountability and responsibility are generally spread among many actors.

Recently, temporary migration and mobility have also increased in the construction sector, resulting in shorter work contracts and often illegal employment (ILO 2016). Construction faces an increase in bogus self-employment and “posted work”, both of which often lead to lower wages, benefits, and other forms of security. According to the authors of the report published by the ILO (2016), these dual forces – changes in the legal and regulatory framework and exploitative practises in the industry – have led to a particularly precarious situation for migrant workers in the construction industry. Construction is also one of the critical sectors in the European Union that has used the posting of workers to bring cheap labour from low-wage countries to labour-intensive sectors in higher-wage countries (Arnholtz 2021; Arnholtz & Lillie 2023).⁴

4 The new Posting of Workers Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/957) that has been in force since 2020, mandates the principle of equal pay for equal work. This means that posted workers are to receive equal pay for the same work in the same place as the local workers.

SECOND LAYER OF VULNERABILITY: MIGRANT CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE HOME COUNTRY

The second layer of vulnerability refers to the characteristics of the migrants themselves, namely education and skill levels, language proficiencies, and the socioeconomic conditions of their home country. For workers coming from countries with lower wages, the cost of losing their jobs is higher than for those workers who can return home to comparable jobs, which can inhibit workers' willingness to exercise their rights. For these reasons, workers may also seek to maximise their income in the short term by agreeing to work long hours, thereby increasing their risk of injury, illness or disablement (Richardson et al. cited in Sargeant & Tucker 2009: 3). Due to significant wage disparities in the European Union Member States, workers from lower-income countries sometimes tend to intentionally ignore or downplay irregularities. They are reluctant to report OSH-related violations for fear of losing their jobs. The problem is exacerbated further when workers are recruited to the EU from third countries with lower salaries and poorer working conditions.

For instance, construction workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina are often exposed to several vulnerabilities and labour rights violations in their country of origin, which continues to have high levels of informality and semi-formal salary schemes, considerable levels of unpaid contributions and health insurance, poor mechanisms for social dialogue, and low trust in unions, as well as a dysfunctional juridical system. These generally provide low levels of protection to the workforce (Danaj et al. 2020). Therefore, the expectations of higher labour standards and salaries in Slovenia are a strong pull factor for migration, although they may also experience irregular and exploitative employment relations in the receiving European Union countries (Danaj et al. 2020). However, workers often intentionally overlook such irregularities for fear of losing their jobs and being denied the residency permit (Vah Jevšnik & Toplak 2022).

Fialkowska and Matuszczyk (2021) studied Polish migrants in Germany and Ukrainian migrants in Poland working in the agricultural sector. They observed the normalisation of minor injuries, such as back pain, headaches, dehydration, skinned fingers, scratches, falls, and rashes, as typical by employers and workers. Employers often attributed such injuries to "witless" and "lacking common sense" migrants. The lack of language knowledge was among the key factors for the lack of formal complaints in cases of mobbing and other violations in the workplace. Instead, the workers relied more on informal networks rather than seeking institutional support. Furthermore, they found that these workers, especially Polish workers in Germany, often rationalised their stay by saying they

came to Germany to work and not to rest. Securing employment would mean workers do not want to be seen as “problematic” by disclosing they are not feeling well or are suffering from a particular illness. Some workers even performed tasks in unsecured conditions and operated machines they were not adequately trained for or agreed to fix if broken. This phenomenon is described in research as migrants’ consent to marginalisation, which hampers attempts to improve OSH for migrant workers (Goldenmund et al. 2013 in Fialkowska & Matuszczyk 2021). In reality, such an approach to OSH also shifts the burden of responsibility to migrant workers supposedly making fully rational and informed choices about their work and life conditions (Fialkowska & Matuszczyk 2021). A review of the European literature on the health of migrant agricultural workers (Urrego-Parra et al. 2022) from 1998 to 2021 has found that the most common agricultural accidents, such as falls, cutting and machinery injuries, can go unreported due to a fear of deportation, employer retaliation and unemployment. Educational materials for migrant farmworkers were also insufficient and required cultural and language adaptation.

An important factor in training workers in a particular trade/profession and their ability to prevent OSH risks is their level of education and skills, as workers with lower education levels could be more vulnerable to OSH risks than other workers. Migrant characteristics also include language skills, which facilitate following OSH guidelines, procedures, and instructions, attending training courses, reading signs, and communicating concerns. The language barrier is also a pressing issue because the inability to communicate at work can interfere with establishing supportive relations at work, which can adversely affect workers’ well-being (Premji et al. 2008). Despite the transitory nature of temporary jobs, temporary migrant workers may still desire integration into workplace dynamics and the host society. Language plays a vital role in this respect, as language barriers may also evoke feelings of loneliness, detachment, and social exclusion in the workplace and beyond it. The research on workers posted to provide services in the EU construction sector showed that the inability to speak the local language was one of the most difficult barriers to overcome. Not so much in the workplace because workers were able to communicate about the details of the work process with the use of drawings, but especially outside work, where the inability to communicate with others was most burdensome (Vah Jevšnik 2018, see also a third layer of vulnerability). Along with the language barriers, differences in perceptions of health and safety may contribute to the vulnerabilities of some migrant workers. That is not to say that some nationalities are more careless than others are, but that perceptions, procedures, and communications on safety may vary among workers from different countries (Danaj et al. 2020).

THIRD LAYER OF VULNERABILITY: RECEIVING COUNTRY CONDITIONS

The third layer of vulnerability refers to the receiving country's conditions, specifically the characteristics of the employment sector, access to collective representation, access to regulatory protection, and specific problems of social exclusion and isolation. Some sectors and workplaces are more hazardous than others are, especially if they are transnational and disproportionately temporarily employ workers. Collective representation is of fundamental importance, too, as workers' associations often take over monitoring of OSH practices in the workplace and defending workers' rights in case of injuries and occupational diseases. However, foreign workers tend to be underrepresented in trade unions, and they usually seek unions' advice and representation only in case of gross violations of their rights (Danaj et al. 2020). For instance, research shows that the reluctance to approach Slovenian unions for migrant construction workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina can partly be explained by their lack of trust in unions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and also Slovenia. In addition, recruitment of workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina often occurs through networks of trust and joining the union would imply that the worker does not trust his employer (Danaj et al. 2020).

Additional aspects contributing to OSH-related vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers are work fragmentation, outsourcing, and long supply chains. Providing services in multi-employer workplaces with long supply chains presents significant challenges for OSH (Cox et al., 2014) and may also lead to elevated risks of work-related injuries (Nenonen 2011) for migrants and local workers. Several factors contribute to this, including tension between the safety and production efficiency of workers at the end of the subcontracting chain, miscommunication, conflicting interests, disorganisation, inadequate regulatory controls, and inability to initiate collective actions (cf. Lingard 2013; Mayhew et al. 1997). Even when chain liability laws are in place, long subcontracting chains make it difficult for workers to claim their rights because they can make it very hard to identify the contracting company at the end of the chain (Danaj et al. 2020). Outsourcing can be problematic in the context of OSH because both outsourced companies and contractors are sometimes unaware of the OSH-related risks in a transnational setting and might not know how to control these risks.

Shepherd et al. (2021) explored the attitudes, values, and beliefs of safety experts and trainers, as well as of "local" and migrant workers in construction in Italy, Spain, and the UK. Their results largely confirmed the results of previous studies conducted mainly in the USA, China, Hong Kong, and Australia. The

study found that the fragmented structure of the industry and subcontracting relationships affected safety in many ways. Participants reported subcontractors employing migrant workers as sources of “cheap labour” and saw the smaller, lower-scale subcontractors as more likely to violate health and safety rules at the workplace. They also viewed migrant workers as a group being given more dangerous, physically demanding, and dirtier jobs with higher rates of workplace accidents. However, they also attributed the violations of safety rules and regulations to the generally less strict safety practices migrants were subjected to in their home countries, language barriers, safety training, and their low knowledge of safety rules and regulations in the host country. These factors and migrant workers’ generally precarious status made them further vulnerable to exploitation.

In the study of migrant agricultural workers in southern Italy living in informal settlements (INTERSOS in Tagliacozzo et al. 2020), respondents were found to speak frequently about their health issues. They often spoke of the need to target existing health services to their needs, such as developing what is known as proximity services that are provided where the target population lives and works. For instance, mobile clinics can be developed since these areas are often remote and inaccessible by public transport. Mešić and Wikström (2021), who researched berry pickers in Sweden, identified several collective actions supporting berry pickers by civil society actors, local inhabitants, and berry pickers themselves. Some of these provided emergency relief and practical support, while others were directed more at illuminating vulnerabilities or even initiating political change. Such actions jointly contributed to the visibility of the berry pickers’ situation by underlining the need to improve their rights, although the local authorities and inhabitants also counteracted some of these actions.

Similarly, in the construction sector, as in agriculture, the scarcity of the possibilities for trade unions and other forms of collective action for temporary migrant workers means that workers used other strategies to negotiate and navigate the increasingly flexible labour market in Europe (Berntsen 2016). In this regard, Berntsen (2016) researched migrant construction workers at large-scale construction sites in the Netherlands. Although the workers were aware of the exploitative nature of some work practices, they did not overtly challenge them. Generally, they opted for more subtle forms of resistance, such as working less to reduce the profitability of their labour process. The typical pragmatic response to exploitative labour practices was often to change jobs when better payment opportunities arise instead of trying to get the employer to change their practices. For them, such a strategy was one of the coping mechanisms in the mobile and flexible labour market. As individual workers

often lacked bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers, some preferred to move within companies in groups, as they deemed it more difficult to fire a group of workers than individuals. Although such practices did not challenge the power structures between the employers and the employees to a significant degree, they did require quite some knowledge and understanding of how the labour market functions and point to the importance of workers' agency.

Finally, social exclusion and isolation might contribute to higher levels of stress and other mental health conditions, which is especially burdensome in the absence of services in cases of temporary work assignments. Ineffective communication and lack of support from management or colleagues are also categorised by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work as psychosocial risks that may result in negative psychological, physical, and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout, or depression (EU-OSHA). In a systematic literature review on the psychological health of migrant workers conducted by Mucci et al. (2019), the most significant risk factors for psychological stress were identified as their past personal history, socioeconomic context, and work environment. Distance from home and lack of family support can also cause a growing sense of insecurity and loneliness. Migrant workers also experience barriers to health services and are often unable to manage stress-related problems, such as insomnia, gastrointestinal symptoms, and headaches. The review has also shown that migrant workers may experience more work-related stress than the "local population", especially due to the phenomenon called "under-employment" – they often perform jobs that do not match their professional skills.

The review of studies on the health of migrant farmworkers (Urrego-Parra et al. 2022) found that the most frequently reported mental health problems in the examined studies were anxiety, stress, and depression associated with work conditions and the social context. The review has also identified physical symptoms, such as lower back pain and headaches, as related to a greater probability of suffering mental health problems. Conflicts with the local population, intolerance, language barriers, discrimination, racist attitudes, disrespect and isolation, lack of knowledge of rights in the host country, job insecurity, irregular and informal job arrangements and/or migration status, and difficulty accessing healthcare services were among the main factors increasing the likelihood of suffering from depression and anxiety. Different forms of segregation further exacerbate social isolation. For instance, in Italy, Perrotta and Sacchetto (2014) observe segregated accommodation for migrant workers in agriculture. Local communities set up reception centres for a limited number of workers with regularised documents, many workers – especially those from Eastern European countries – live in abandoned accommodation, often without electricity, heating,

or water, and workers from Africa often live in large “ghettos”, as they call them, where several hundred people live together in a small space (makeshift shacks, abandoned buildings, factories, etc.). Such accommodation organisation outside major cities promotes these workers’ spatial, economic, cultural, and political isolation from the local population (Perrotta & Sacchetto 2014).

Furthermore, Hovey and Seligman (2006) argue that there is considerably less research on the interplay of mental and physical health over time, especially given the supposition that severe stress may have an adverse effect on both facets of health. Therefore, one of the challenges is for physicians to understand the link between physical symptoms (such as those that result from pesticide exposure for farmworkers, for instance) and mental health difficulties of this group.

The issue of migrant workers’ work and life conditions in the receiving countries came to the forefront also during the COVID-19 pandemic with its emerging discourse on essential workers, among them workers in agriculture, health and social care, and the food industries. While at the beginning of the pandemic, the freedom of movement principle was initially suspended, nation-states soon resorted to various measures to maintain the “flow” of workers in sectors that were considered either “essential” (agriculture and related activities such as harvesting and packing) and/or “deficient” in terms of domestic labour (e.g., construction) (Tagliacozzo et al. 2020; Cukut Krilić & Zavrtnik 2023). At that time, exceptional and fast-track solutions, such as bringing in groups of workers deemed essential, often disrespected OSH and health safety measures in place during the pandemic (Fialkowska & Matuszczyk 2021). For example, among descriptions of the everyday life of migrant farmworkers during the pandemic, we can find reports of living in unhygienic conditions, of lack of protective equipment, of workers with positive COVID-19 tests using the same utensils and bathrooms as other workers and of rooms being overcrowded. This situation means that the rules of physical distance could not be respected, although several efforts on the part of NGOs as well as governments did exist to counteract this issue (Haley et al. 2020; Tagliacozzo et al. 2020). Therefore, a second aspect of essential workers’ vulnerabilities relates to the epidemiological aspect: due to their working and living conditions, they were less able to practice distancing measures and basic sanitary rules, and as such, they became a health-risk factor for the “local society” (Tagliacozzo et al. 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has investigated mutually intertwining factors of temporary migrant workers' vulnerabilities through the prism of OSH-related vulnerabilities. We have found that vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers can be a result of inadequate legal frameworks of migration and other policies that are increasingly focussed on limiting the legal entry into nation-states for particular groups of migrants as well as on generally providing only temporary status to migrant workers. The conditions in workers' home countries, particularly the significant wage disparities and lack of collective representation, can contribute to their marginalisation and even facilitate their consent to substandard living and working conditions. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed and exacerbated social inequalities in recruitment policies as well as the work and living conditions of migrant workers. Nevertheless, it has also exposed the emerging discourse of essential workers (Fialkowska & Matuszczyk 2021), which leaves open the question whether COVID-19 has provided new opportunities on how to conceptualise medical care and health policies for migrants (Carruth et al. 2021). Work fragmentation, outsourcing, and long supply chains, particularly in the construction sector, can also lead to decreased occupational health and safety. Social isolation, exacerbated by language issues, lack of information, and lack of appropriate services, may contribute to poorer physical and mental health outcomes. In this sense, the OSH vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers merit a broader and contextualised approach. In the view of Flynn (2018), the occupational safety and health at work (OSH) literature largely and narrowly focuses on injury events and ways to prevent them. As a result, the field of occupational health evolved into a technical and applied field dedicated to preventing and eliminating physical, biological, and chemical hazards found in the workplace. Researchers paid less attention to the wider social, historical, and geographical contexts that influence work, the lived experience of workers, their families, and their communities, and the inclusion of the injury experience into the life and social context of the injured worker. Also, the uncritical use of the concept of vulnerability risks implying the inherent vulnerability of particular individuals and/or groups and can overlook how people are also able to respond and react to their life situations (Molenaar & Van Praag 2022), once again pointing to differences among migrants and to the importance of their agency. While there is a subjective and autonomous element of mobility, there also exists an element of regulation of migration, with the labour force to be filtered according to specific criteria and hierarchies (Mezzadra 2016).

As Quesada et al. (2011: 142) argue, despite calls to address the effects of social inequality on health, the conventional biomedical paradigm of health also mostly

fails to translate the documentation of social forces into everyday practice and epistemology. In the absence of clinically accessible effective alternative models, clinicians continue to treat individual patients in a psychological, social, cultural, and class vacuum. Public health interventions continue to focus primarily on changing the micro-behaviours of individuals through knowledge-based education interventions, based on middle-class models of rational decision-making.

In this way, political will, legislative changes, an appropriate allocation of resources (Quesada 2011), and the move from a project-based and emergency-driven logic (Tagliacozzo et al. 2020) might be of utmost importance when thinking about the vulnerabilities, health, and well-being of migrant, as well as “local” populations.

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