

*“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,  
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20)*



### On the Edge of Society

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In the 1990s, Israel opened its borders to migrant workers, many of whom replaced Palestinians in the bottom tier of the labor market. Today, more than 180,000 workers from developing nations live and work in Israel as caregivers, agricultural laborers, and construction workers. Approximately half are considered illegal, lacking a contract with an employment agency and a visa. Recruited overseas by local contractors who charge huge sums of money, workers often remain in debt for years and are vulnerable to exploitation by employers. While many arrived in Israel legally, they have since lost their legal status.

For many years, the Israeli government looked the other way and made little effort to deport migrant workers. During this period, migrant workers married and had children, many of whom speak Hebrew as a first language and consider themselves Israeli. (Today there are 1,200 children of migrant workers in Israel.) When unemployment rose in 2003, the Israeli government began a policy of massive deportations. Some families left Israel, fearing that their children would be detained and forcibly deported.

Because most migrant workers do not speak Hebrew and are not Israeli citizens, they are unable to advocate effectively for themselves. They are vulnerable to abuses and violations of their human and legal rights, including withheld payment, confinement, and criminal abuse. Most migrant workers have no representation or access to institutional help.

## Challenges

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### Exploitation by employers

- Although the Supreme Court ruled against the “binding policy” that chains migrant workers to their employers in March 2006, the policy has not yet been implemented and it is unclear when it will take effect. Workers who are bound to their employers are subject to unsuitable living conditions, withheld salaries, non-payment of overtime wages, payment below minimum wage, and illegal confiscation of their passports by employers.
- Migrant workers are frequently arrested and deported before having a chance to testify against their employers.

### Detainment

- There have been many instances of police brutality during the arrest and detention of migrant workers.
- Many migrant workers have not had access to state-funded legal aid or interpreters in judicial and deportation hearings.
- According to NGOs working with migrant workers, the police have detained and deported legal migrant workers in order to meet quotas to reduce the migrant worker population.

### Obtaining legal residency

- The road to obtaining legal residency is very difficult for migrant workers due to their non-Jewish status.
- Hundreds of children of migrant workers who have completely integrated into Israeli society are at great risk of deportation, either because their parents entered Israel illegally or because they fall short of the government’s stringent requirements for obtaining legal residency.

### NIF Activities and Achievements

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With the aim of promoting a just and compassionate society in Israel, NIF works to protect the human rights of migrant workers and their families. Several of the NIF grantees in this field also combat trafficking in women, defend women brought into Israel to work as prostitutes, and protect the human rights of detained asylum-seekers.

Our grantees include:

- **Kav LaOved** (Worker's Hotline), which provides legal aid to disadvantaged workers and acts for systemic change in labor policies.
- **Hotline for Migrant Workers** (HMW), which provides legal advice and representation, and humanitarian support for migrant workers, works to enhance and enforce laws pertaining to migrant workers, and aims to eliminate trafficking of women in Israel. and
- **Association for Civil Rights in Israel** (ACRI), which addresses a full range of human rights issues and works alongside Kav LaOved and HMW to protect the rights of migrant workers and combat trafficking in women.

NIF and its family of grantees have achieved:

- **More humane treatment of detainees** by changing public perception of sex-trafficking victims, raising-awareness among authorities, obtaining state-funded legal aid to women willing to testify against pimps, obtaining a state-run shelter, and improving conditions in detention centers.
- **Freedom from bondage to abusive employers** by repealing a government policy that had bound migrant workers to their initial employers.
- **Health coverage** by the National Insurance Institute for migrant workers injured in work accidents, for all children of migrant workers, and for hospital costs in maternity wards.
- **Naturalization for children** by advocating for a cabinet decision in 2006 that grants legal status to 700 children over age 10 who have been living in Israel for at least 6 years.