

Shadows of Home: Cultural Values and the Ethics of Exploitation Among Co-Nationals Abroad

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Keywords:

Cultural values;
Ethical relativism;
Intra-ethnic exploitation;
Migrant labor;
Social control.

Abstract. This study pursues the question of how cultural norms, beliefs systems and national identity are deployed and manipulated to support, or mask, exploitative labor practices among migrant and co-national community members. It attempts to uncover the ethically rationalized mechanisms from which labor abuse are permitted in culturally bound groups of overseas. The study uses ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation and in-depth interviews with migrant workers of South Asian background in the old Sharjah City-center of the United Arab Emirates to explore how traditional hierarchy and moral norms are reproduced in host countries. It allows for a qualitatively detailed knowledge of the ways the migrant labor organizes in diasporic situations. The study uncovers five key themes: (1) Cultural Rationalizations rooted in heritage and tradition normalize exploitation as customary; (2) Imported Hierarchies such as caste or class divisions travel with the diaspora; (3) National Identity as Control manipulates solidarity to suppress dissent; (4) Fear of Ostracization inhibits whistleblowing due to threats of community exclusion; and (5) Moral Double Standards arise where ethical behavior is inconsistently applied within in-groups versus out-groups. The implications of these findings are very critical in the enforcement of multicultural labor laws, which often fail to recognize the presence of intra community dynamics and culturally embedded silence. These traditions are kept a secret as they are mentally embedded in the blue-colored migrant culture. This study provides original insights by combining cultural anthropology and labor ethics to demonstrate the originality of exploitation between co-nationals as not just economic, but as deeply moral and social to raise urgent ethical relativist and justice questions in multicultural societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of intra-ethnic exploitation of co-national migrants seems to be largely under explored as part of labor migration (Chan & Chen, 2024; Dimitriadis, 2023; Zhao, 2023). Despite a large body of scholarly literature on abuses by migrants or institutions of host country nationals a very little is known about exploitation within refugee or migrant communities themselves (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Fernandez, 2021; Kall et al., 2020; Pakhomova), However, the issue is complex that there are people with shared cultural background, language, and values, but exposure to power imbalances and migration vulnerabilities make them vulnerable to exploitation (Carruth et al., 2021; Gilodi et al., 2024; Wolf, 2021). To tackle the ethical and social problems that migrant workers confront, an important aspect to clarify is why and how co-nationals become agents of exploitation within a situation of shared heritage and common ties with such people. Millions of migrant labor around the world is on the move in search of better economic opportunity abroad (Chamie, 2020; Massey, 2019).

1.1. Problem Statement

While exploitation by employers is well studied, intra-community exploitation among migrants remains hidden. Migrants often depend on co-nationals for work and housing, leading to unrecorded, informal labour arrangements and precarious conditions fuelled by survival competition.

Wage theft and restricted freedom are common to these workers, who are mostly pushed into competing against each other in order to survive, resulting in precarious conditions (Ndubuizu, 2023; Stringer et al., 2022; Yeoh & Lam, 2022). Exploitation in migrant communities is rarely exposed, while host country policies and employer practices are well scrutinized (Fletcher & Trautrim, 2024; Palumbo & Sciarba, 2018). Work relationships are vaguely formalized and not officially recorded and high dependency on their co-nationals for jobs, housing and social networks, speakers of two languages and labor conditions create intra-ethnic exploitation (Siudek, 2021). Apart from that, cultural values, like respects for authority, hierarchical social structures and loyalty towards the community might diminish, atypically justifying or hiding exploitative behaviors, which complicates the task of tackling it ethically and practically (Esteinou, 2025; Johnson, 2019).

1.2. Research Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to understand how cultural values affect the ethics of exploitation among the co-nationals working and living abroad. The research question posed to this study is, how do shared cultural values shape the ethical boundaries and justifications in favor of exploitation of co-nationals to simultaneously enhance their well-being and building cohesive communities? The study investigates this question to open the moral tensions and social dynamics of inter-ethnic exploitation and provides insights that can inform culturally respectful policies and mechanisms of help to migrant workers. Moreover, the study aims to shed light on the 'shadows of home' which the migrant carries with their baggage and how cultural values both mound and limit the practice of ethical conduct abroad.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The next sections examine the contrast between traditional and intra-ethnic forms of migrant labor exploitation, the role of community-enforced norms like honor and silence, and the influence of ethical relativism and multiculturalism in shaping labor ethics. This is followed by the paper's theoretical framework.

2.1. Migrant Labor Exploitation: Traditional Vs. Intra-Ethnic Dynamics

Migrant labor exploitation shows the complexity of the landscape where traditional forms of exploitation of migrant labor by employers and host country actors are coexisting with less visible intra ethnic dynamics of exploitation among co nationals (Palumbo et al., 2022). Most of the traditional cases of exploitation are related to structural vulnerability relative to immigration status, restrictive labor policies and power asymmetry between migrant workers and employers (Mantouvalou, 2018). Studies across the UK's Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) visa system show how legal restrictions prevent workers from changing employer increase workers' vulnerability to exploitation by making them more likely to stay in abusive situations and thereby experience abuse including trafficking (Boucher, 2022; Hamann & Bertels, 2018). These findings suggest the correspondence of state policies and legal frameworks to indirect facilitation of exploitations through defeats the agency and options of migrants.

On the other hand, intra-ethnic exploitation refers to the exploitation carried out by the members of the same ethnic or national community abroad belonging to an informal network of employment, housing or social support (Liu & Olivos, 2020). It is less studied but increasingly recognized to be significant. Often, migrants rely on co-nationals' job referrals, accommodation, social integration, etc. (Stips & Kis-Katos, 2020), which are the recipes for exploitation framed by cultural hierarchies, trust, and power asymmetries within the migrant community. Recent work on digital labor platforms, for example, uncovers that migrants are concentrated in precarious, bad quality jobs (ranging from ride-hailing or care work) where they can be even more exposed to ethnic and platform intermediation, or algorithmic exploitation, of previously existing inequalities. Intra-ethnic exploitation can be facilitated by relying on migrant networks for accessing such work as migrants with more established positions may use their status to control or exploit newer arrivals (Hack-Polay, 2019). Furthermore, the literature stresses that migrants' perception of authority, loyalty and solidarity are determined by cultural values and social norms impacting upon migrants' decision to exploit fellow migrants within the same ethnic group. These cultural factors can make the making of ethical judgment on exploitation difficult, as certain behavior could be accepted as 'normal' or rationalized within the moral structure of the community (Nisbet, 2023). It is perceived that cultural narratives justify the extortion and abuse in the migrant communities, which seemed to be relevant as the previous research emphasized that the gap relies in the intra-migrant communities' abuse which is explored lightly in previous literature. The previous arguments in literature can propose that:

P1- Exploitation within migrant communities is often justified through cultural narratives rooted in tradition, which frame harmful practices as customary and acceptable.

Hypothetically, hierarchical social structures or concepts related to communal obligation may cause willing-ness to endure abusive labor arrangements as outsiders would deem (Chen, 2020). However, migrant labor exploitation is complicated by this intra community dimension: both legal and economic factors are addressed alongside cultural ones that are sensitive and changing (Palumbo et al., 2022). The discrimination based on caste is irrelevant in the Emirati culture and Sharjah shares the same national ideology that all men are created equal which also abides with the Islamic and Abrahamic principles. This shows that the culture of superiority and inferiority is carried over from the South Asian Continent Moreover, it is rational also to propose that:

P2- Caste, class, and other social hierarchies from the country of origin are reproduced in the diaspora, structuring power and control among co-nationals abroad.

2.2. Community-Based Enforcement of Norms (Honor, Shame, Silence)

Community-based enforcement of norms—particularly through honor, shame, and silence—operates as a powerful mechanism of social control within migrant communities. For instance, shame has been seen as an internally experienced emotional response and an external disciplinary tool. In a study of Pakistani immigrants in Canada, Collardeau et al. (2021) showed how shame was a mechanism to signal personal moral boundaries as well as a mechanism for maintaining hierarchical social structures causing people to self-regulate to conform. Like ushers et al. (2017) Ussher et al. (2017) also found that traditionally and culturally based notions of shame and honor meant migrant and refugee women did not share their sexual and reproductive health issues, thereby limiting their access of relevant health services. It is logical to ask about the whereabouts of the global feminisms' agendas on their in-take on the abuse against the migrant women who seems to be a blind-spot to many women centric organizations.

It is perceived that people who breached community standards of cleanliness were stigmatized, but not only based on health, as the concern was with perceived moral failings that reinforce exclusion and social boundaries. Bhanbhro (2021) then analyzed how honor-based violence in UK based Pakistani community peripherally relied on the construct of honor, which when concretized in the form of collective cultural pressures, causes the deeply rooted, often harmful effect of enforcing a normative ideal. In a field experiment in Germany, however, it showed that social behavior reinforced ethnic asymmetries, whereby in general a majority population was more likely to sanction social behavior toward other minority and majority population, which raises concerns about the predatory aspects of such enforcement as a reaction to social behavior (Stips et al., 2020). The previous arguments could propose that.

P3- Invocations of shared national or ethnic identity are used to suppress dissent, enforce loyalty, and discourage resistance to exploitation.

2.3. Ethical Relativism and Multiculturalism in Labor Ethics

The recent studies on the tension between ethical relativism and multiculturalism in labor ethics have particularly dealt with migrant and diasporic labor. However, ethical relativism (i.e. moral standards are culturally defined and therefore variable) often caters well to universal labor rights and establishments. Scholars assert that the ethical difficulties in multicultural labor

environments, including migrant environments, cannot be cleaned up with one-size-fits-all standards. For example, in Sitorus et al. (2023), it is shown how the lived experiences of Chinese migrant workers in Indonesia give evidence to culturally embedded moral logics guiding labor practices. Note that the study emphasized that these concepts of obligation, reciprocity, and hierarchy are in-built into these workers' labor relationships and do not match Western understandings of exploitation and fairness.

Likewise, O'Neill (2020) discusses how cultural sensitivity can be used to hide behind the multicultural mask to disregard labor rights in exploring how global labor markets often overlook harmful practices in the name of concession to tolerance of other cultures. In multicultural settings labor abuses within ethnic communities may be invisible or can be either ignored or justified by reference to culture being 'culturally appropriate'. This is aligned with Barak's (2019) critical criminology perspective that cultural relativism is sometimes used as a decree in defusing social accountability claims especially for engagement in exploitative practices that are presented as traditional or normative within communities. These abusive practices that are not reported to the authorities raise concerns about why such practices are harmful yet go unpunished. The reason as perceived from literature is that the victims are silent as there aren't any other logical reasons for such silence. Thus, it is justified to propose:

P4- Migrant workers often remain silent about abuse due to the fear of social exclusion, isolation, or reputational harm within tightly knit co-ethnic networks.

In addition, policy-oriented research—like the ILO (2019)—professed the necessity in harmonizing labor rights and cultural consciousness. This supports a 'contextually grounded universalism'—a setting where there's a cultural variation but strict laws about labor such as freedom from coercion, fair wages and safety. This emerging stock of work implications that despite its value addition to the discourse on ethical in labor, multiculturalism is not without its own assumptions which require a critical approach that is neither ethnocentric nor relativist in cultural terms. The problem is to create globally consistent labor ethics that are still locally sizable, so that cultural diversity does not hide exploitation.

2.4. Gaps in Scholarship: Lack of Focus on Co-National Exploitation

Due to the increasing globalization of labor markets, ethical relativism and multiculturalism in labor ethics are generating complex dilemmas, especially in those cases involving migrant and minority workers. The meaning of what constitutes ethical labor practice diversely varies in different cultural contexts, making it difficult to standardize labor standards. For instance, Sitorus et al. (2023) describe how Chinese migrant workers in Indonesia make sense of and defend their working conditions, showing that promulgations of fairness and justice do not always correspond with international labor rights conventions. In multicultural labor environments, cultures are often practiced and ignored for the exploitation of laborers under the facade of respecting cultural norms. Götze et al. (2019) reported that in healthcare related labor settings, such as caregivers and service providers often face ethical conflicts when cultural perceptions of care, authority and communication are different. The difficulty in delivery of equitable services and enforcement of labor ethics is aggravated by these challenges. Also, multiculturalism is not well managed may even enable maintenance of practices which violate the most basic labor rights, as seen in debates on culturally specific patterns of labor division or gendered norms expectation. Parekh warns, and scholars such as him, against the erosion of fundamental human rights in labor situations by multicultural forces, appealing for an appropriate balance between promoting the cultural practice and ensuring the universal ethical safeguards that apply to all human beings. Thus, this research body that're saying, policy frameworks that acknowledge and not disparage, but honor and celebrate cultural diversity, but at the same time in the workplace, uphold the dignity, equity, justice, and core principles of the workplace at the same time. The previous arguments lead to propose.

P5- Ethical principles are inconsistently applied within migrant communities, with leniency granted to in-group members while outsiders or vulnerable individuals face stricter moral scrutiny.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The framework of this study is multidisciplinary and is used to explore the ethical aspects of labor practices in diasporic or multicultural settings. Combining Ethical Relativism, Cultural Reproduction Theory, Social Control Theory, and Postcolonial Theory, the framework forms a way to make sense of how cultural values, social hierarchies, and power hold their influence over labor ethics and practices across contexts that are transnational.

2.5.1. Theory of Ethical Relativism

Ethical Relativism affords a basis for considering morality as what it is: a culturally relative phenomenon (Bockover, 2018). It suggests that ethical norms and judgments are a matter of varying degrees of specific cultural traditions rather than authentic principles (Edel, 2020). To investigate migrant communities' interpretation and justification of some labor practices deemed unethical according to international labor standards but normalized by the specific cultural framework they belong to, this is an essential perspective. The relativist world view thus raises issues regarding the enforcement of universal labor rights by complicating the matter in an expanding gap between global ethical norms and local cultural values (Rorty, 2020). It is difficult to find a haven for migrant workers as in their perspective morality is shaped by culture a not universal standards for instance, sexism is reported as appropriate although it is against international standards. This paves the way for further studies to investigate the situation of female migrant workers. Thus, it is perceived that what one culture sees as exploitation, another may see as duty or necessity. Finally, this theory helps explain why harmful labor practices can be normalized within migrant communities. We can theorize the following: When labor exploitation is normalized as culturally acceptable, migrants may not perceive certain practices—such as underpayment or overwork by co-nationals—as unethical. Adapting Ethical Relativism to this study helps explain how moral justifications are used within migrant groups to legitimize harm while avoiding external accountability.

2.5.2. Cultural Reproduction Theory (Bourdieu)

How these culturally specific norms are kept going over time and across borders is to a greater extent further explained through the use of Cultural Reproduction Theory specially as propounded by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2018). Through social institutions such as the family and education, cultural capital such as values, expectations and behavioral norms are transmitted by Bourdieu (1977) (Farkas, 2018). These forms of cultural capital are travelled to diasporic labor communities from the homeland

and from there, they are reproduced in host societies. This transmission brings social stratification, by implanting a sense of belonging to classes in working ethnic labor market and by sustaining systemic unfairness. It is then perceived that cultural values, beliefs, and hierarchies are passed down and reproduced over time and across borders. This enough evidence to justify that the abusive and conductive environments are not native to the United Arab Emirates, and it is the product of globalization and labor migration. Moreover, we can theorize the following: Migrants replicate familiar social hierarchies abroad, reproducing power structures such as caste or class even in informal economies. By applying Bourdieu's theory, this study highlights how systemic inequality is not only imported but reinforced within migrant labor networks.

2.5.3. Social Control Theory (Hirschi)

Social Control Theory is then employed to complement and address alone informal mechanisms of compliance maintenance within migrant communities (Costello & Laub, 2020). Hirschi (1969) and its initial development centered on the mechanisms for controlling the behavior of the individual through social bonds and communal expectations (Fowler, 2022). Social control exercised in an informal manner (shame, honor, quiet, communal surveillance) discourages dissent and whistleblower. This means that exploitative labor conditions are likely to endure not only because of institutional failures, but because deep in society social expectation run against individual rights in favor of group cohesion (Hamann & Bertels, 2018). It is then justifiable to state that migrant behaviors are governed by informal controls like shame, honor, and community expectations. Thus, it is common for the community to control silence dissent and reinforce compliance, even under exploitative conditions. The key idea here relies on the notion that these behavioral controls are not enforced by the UAE's officials, and it is done completely by the migrants. This raises significant importance in understanding the migrant informal beliefs that leads to voluntary slavery to inexistant community moral high grounds. We can theorize the following: Migrant workers may endure exploitation silently due to internal social pressures that prioritize group loyalty over individual rights. Adapting Social Control Theory allows us to explore how fear of ostracization and communal expectations sustain silence and compliance under exploitative conditions.

2.5.4. Postcolonial Theory

Post-Colonial Theory offers of a critical view to handle the residue of colonial hierarchies and class stratifications in the transnational labor dynamics (Hall, 2023). Historical systems of domination and subordination are not abolished in past, argues postcolonial scholars rather rearticulate themselves in contemporary economic arrangements especially in the flows of labor from the South to the North (Ciocchini & Greener, 2021). A great deal of migrant workers coming from formerly colonized regions have resulted in marginalized labor roles due to their own ideas of self which they believe would support their syndic ability and due to external discrimination. This theoretical perspective allows one to explain why there is limited socio-economic mobility among many migrant laborers despite their geographic relocation (Panichella et al., 2021).

As an attempt to understand how cultural norms, social structures, and historical contingencies in a broader sense come together in ordering the appropriate labor ethic within diaspora settings, this study promotes integration of these four theoretical lenses. By providing a clearer understanding of the ethical ambiguities and structural constraints of reconciling multiculturalism with universal labor standards, the framework also opens the idea of developing and investigating transfers of both ideas and legal measures and practices from North to South, East to West. We can theorize the following: Migrants may internalize colonial-era subordination, accepting exploitative roles due to both external discrimination and inherited beliefs about their economic place. By applying Postcolonial Theory, this study reveals how exploitation is not only reproduced but rationalized through the residual effects of historical power relations.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study applies qualitative ethnography to examine the way that cultural norms and community dynamics dictate how labor ethics among the migrant workers take place. This inquiry is particularly suited to ethnography because ethnomethodology offers immersion, contextual understanding of how lived experiences, social interactions and informal systems of behavior are understood in a particular cultural community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

3.1. Ethnographic Field Work

For two years of field work, selecting migrant neighborhoods in the old regions of Sharjah that were once very upscale and now to be still considered very vibrant, but the locals of the areas moved to newer suburbs near the vast deserts. This paved the way for more migrants to be accommodated in these areas. These areas are near the Corniche and are beside all the historical landmarks of Sharjah. Consequently, the field work relied on participant observation in several community spaces, religious centers (mosques that are very common and churches which are clustered in one area), ethnic businesses (grocers, salons, and small-scale service enterprises), as well as in public gathering places such as community centers and parks. They were located where the point of daily life converged with the informal control over the social order, for defining identity, and for negotiating labor exchange. The researcher was able to observe the daily work behavior via visits to community events, worship services, and everyday social gatherings by attending regularly as the researcher is a native to that area. Work and fairness were considered within culturally embedded values such as honor, shame, and silence.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

The complementary observational data and the ethnographic account of migrant workers are enriched by the semi structured interviews conducted with around 30 migrant workers (a full interview is considered option as it was more of a walk around and ask event) in three main labor sectors, cleaning, construction and domestic work. High levels of migrant labor and precarious forms of employment are present in these sectors. Snowball sampling is a method that was especially well suited to recruiting participants in areas of hard to reach and close-knit communities. The interview protocol centered around themes of workplace experience, perceptions of fairness and exploitation, responses to mistreatment and about the impacts of cultural or community

perceptions of labor decisions. While the format is semi structured, that means that the participants can read their own stories in their own words but at the same time do not stray too far away from the analytical themes that should come up in these stories. The interviews were conducted in English, Arabic and Urdu (Urdu was translated to English by a professional translator).

3.3. Ethical Considerations

As the research context was particularly sensitive with assumed undocumented and precariously working people so vulnerable, ethical considerations became essential. Anonymized interviews of participants in which informed consent was obtained. With closely knit ethnic communities, even an indirect reference could result in social exclusion or reputational damage and so special attention was paid to protecting confidentiality. Identifying details were obscured by pseudonyms and a couple of generalized descriptors. It was also ensured that no one in a community has access to field notes or interview content.

3.4. Reflexivity and Positionality

As a critical aspect of this ethnographic inquiry, the researcher was positioned to consistently reflect upon their positionality. As both an insider (based on shared linguistic, religious, or cultural background with some participants) and an outsider due to the academic observer and nonmember of some subgroups, the researcher reflected on the role of their presence for the process of data collection, analysis, and report. The dual position had to occupy required careful work around trust, boundaries and assumptions. Gaining insight into the insider status gave access, but posed ethical problems, like managing expectations, or making sure that one is impartial. Reflections on this dynamic are embedded into field notes; thereby being transparent about how the researcher's identity affected the research process.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Thematic analysis reveals how cultural norms, social expectations, and inherited hierarchies shape exploitation within migrant communities. These findings offer insights into how harm is justified and sustained through familiar traditions and group dynamics.

Table 1: Thematic analysis

| Number | Theme | Code | Illustrative data / Quote | Interpretation |
|--------|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 | Cultural rationalizations | Customary endurance | "This has always been done this way." | Cultural norms normalize exploitation by treating it as tradition or duty. |
| 2 | Familial obligation | "My parents worked hard to bring us here..." | Familial loyalty is used to suppress complaints and justify hard labor. | |
| 3 | Imported hierarchies | Transplanted caste/Class | "We help our own, but not those from lower backgrounds?" | Class or caste-based hierarchies are reproduced in diaspora communities. |
| 4 | Respect for elders/Superiors | Deference to elders/Employers cited in interviews | Hierarchical values imported from home countries are maintained abroad. | |
| 5 | National identity as control | community shame | "If I speak up, I am hurting everyone from my community." | National identity is invoked to suppress dissent and maintain silence. |
| 6 | Burden of representation | Participants feared being seen as "airing dirty laundry" | Migrants feel responsible for community image, discouraging reporting of abuse. | |
| 7 | Fear of ostracization | Social exclusion | "I was shunned. I just don't exist." | Whistleblowers face social penalties, losing community support. |
| 8 | Loss of network | "...excluded from community activities..." | Community retaliation discourages advocacy or resistance. | |
| 9 | Moral double standards | Selective Ethics | "Nice to co-nationals of higher status while exploiting those below." | Ethical behavior is inconsistently applied based on status within the group. |
| 10 | Justified exploitation | "Survival narratives" used to rationalize abuse | Economic necessity is used to justify unethical practices. | |

Table (1) Thematic Coding Table: Cultural Mechanisms of Intra-Ethnic Labor Exploitation Among Migrant Co-Nationals. In this table, odd-numbered entries represent the main themes, while even-numbered entries serve as supporting sub-themes. Each even-numbered theme is conceptually linked and contributes depth to the preceding main theme.

4.1. Cultural Rationalizations

Theme 1 & Theme 2 from Table (1) can show that a joint theme prominently emerged is cultural rationalizations of work conditions during the interviews when many participants adopted a resigned acceptance of exploitative work conditions (Benson, 2019). A common phrasing was, "*This has always been done this way*," as a reason for poor pay and long hours. It is a phrase that encapsulates culture inertia, in which asking questions of the status quo is discouraged. Interviewees recounted their family obligations and generally a very high level of deference to elders and employers. "*I can't complain, after all, my parents worked hard to bring us here, so I can't just start to not show up to do my job, no matter how hard*," said one. This emphasizes the power of familial expectations in forming what an individual might be expected to do and tolerate in the workplace. This supports P1, as it shows how cultural tradition is used to justify practices that may otherwise be deemed exploitative.

4.2. Imported Hierarchies

The second important joint theme was the Imported Hierarchies. It is saddening to hear that one participant stated that “We help our own, but not those from lower backgrounds?” which shows that even as all of them are migrants living in a stranded land far away from home; it is still important to note that they follow the caste system very religiously. As strange as it may sound, Hierarchical values imported from home countries are maintained abroad. The obstacle to addressing here is they allow exploitation to occur informally thus this issue will continue until the chain is broken. This supports P2, demonstrating how caste, class, or status hierarchies are reproduced within the diaspora and shape internal power dynamics.

4.3. National Identity as Control

The third important theme was the deployment of national identity to control others. The fact that interviews often took place in English meant that shared nationality often made them silent about injustices at work. It was often said that you should not bring shame to your people; that was often a deterrent. On top of that, there is a pervasive fear of peer scrutiny that discourages people from ‘airing dirty laundry’ with the host country authorities. One participant charged, *“If I speak up I am not just hurting myself, I am hurting everyone from my community.”* This shows how collectively there is a burden of representation that many bear, to a degree of culture of silence around exploitation. Moreover, this supports P3, illustrating how shared identity is used as a tool to enforce silence and suppress resistance.

4.4. Fear of Ostracization

An additional important finding was the fear of being ostracized by religious or cultural events. Problems with being seen as troublemakers meant many people were anxious about being excluded from community activities. Unfair practices had social repercussions; personal accounts by whistleblowers revealed that they lost their social network upon speaking out against the unfair practices. *“One person even shared that while I used to be part of everything, when I reported my boss, I was shunned. I just don’t exist.”* This shows how so much is owed to the community dynamics when it comes to the individual agency. This supports P4, showing that the threat of social exclusion deters individuals from speaking out against exploitation.

4.5. Moral Double Standards

The research found that there were double moral standards in the community itself; compassion and ethical practices were treated with selective application. Those interviewed stated *“that people would be nice to co-nationals of higher status while being exploitation towards those below”*. Something so dichotomized was voiced by one participant who said, *“We help our own, but not those from lower backgrounds? They’re just seen as expendable.”* Often under ‘survival’ narratives, community leaders often justify these behaviors because of economic necessity which is said to often turnaround ethics. This rationalization further complicates this moral landscape in that the tension between the ethical obligation to help others in one’s community and the broader ethical obligations becomes morally questionable.

Together these findings demonstrate how cultural, social and economic factors interact and mix to create the experience of migrant worker. The themes also call out not only what they struggle with but the deeply embedded belief and practice that keep this cycle going. This all needs to be understood for the development of suitable interventions and support systems for the vulnerable populations in the labor market.

5. DISCUSSIONS

This study revealed the polysemous and paradoxical function that shared cultural values have in constructing the ethics of exploitation by co-nationals in foreign work settings (Edensor, 2020). In relation to migrants, the friendships which they establish with other compatriots for employment, housing, and social integration are often exploited for their own benefit, mainly due to power imbalances, leaving the friendships burdened with exploitative characters. The findings indicate that cultural values, such as respect for authority, hierarchical social structures, communal loyalty and notions of honor and shame can unite as well as rationalize abusive practices among migrants (Papoutsi et al., 2022). As a result, behaviors that outsiders might call abusive are euhomised within the community’s moral framework making for maniple ethical judgments and iterations.

The research maintains empirical evidence showing that particularly intra ethnic exploitation occurs through informal networks when co nationals with social or economic capital use it to gain access to jobs and proper housing, sometimes tactically exploiting the newly arrived migrants with unfair labor condition or additional exertion of financial burdens (Bisignano & El-Anis, 2019). Social control mechanisms based in cultural norms of honor, shame and silence encourage lack of dissent and not whistleblowing, thus perpetuating cycles of abuse (Noer, 2024).

The integration of Social Control Theory also points to how a communal expectation and fear of social sanction assists in maintaining compliance and encourages coverage of exploitation such that the victim is wary of support or the challenge of his circumstance (Carter, 2023; Wadiwel et al., 2022). Furthermore, these findings fall within the same theoretical framework of Ethical Relativism that brings forth the conflicts between the cultural grounded moral logics and the universal labor rights (Cabrera, 2020). Cultural backgrounds of migrants shape their perceptions of fairness as much as their sources of obligation and their reluctance to adhere to individual autonomy, legal protections and right of the migrants (Tiedemann, 2021). Thus, cultural relativism can lead to ethical blind spots in the sharing of benefits of labor that should ideally be a fundamental hatred but often are tolerated or even valorized as part of expressing loyalty or communal responsibility (Jackson, 2021). As Cultural Reproduction Theory, the study confirms not only that these norms are transmitted, but that they are reinforced across borders through these networks of domination and exploitation of these diasporic labor markets. Furthermore, the study makes an important point about the continuum between the traditional forms of exploitation by host country actors and intra ethnicity exploitation, suggesting that these phenomena are interconnected, not different. Immigration policies that are restrictive as well as legal protections for migrants are limited, which increases migrants’ dependency upon co-nationals, facilitating vulnerabilities and the risk of exploitation inside ethnic networks. From this continuum perspective, there is a need for comprehensive policy approaches that overcoming structural

vulnerabilities as well as react to cultural dynamics existing within migrant communities.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The implications across policy, legal, and social domains of the study are highly important in relation to the protection and empowerment of migrant workers within ethnic networks.

6.1. Policy

The types of labor protections and community outreach programs sought must be culturally informed and specifically for intercommunal exploitation. Shared cultural values must be considered in these initiatives, and the difference between promoting solidarity and making these hidden exploitative practices more well known. The existing policy interventions should feature community-based approaches to affecting awareness of labor rights, fighting against harmful silences and shame norms and increasing vulnerability of victims who can seek help without fear of retribution. In addition, since there is a continuum between traditional and intra-ethnic exploitation, approaches to addressing the structural vulnerabilities to which migrants are made vulnerable by the continuation of co-national relationships such as restrictive immigration policy and poor access to legal protection are required.

6.2. Legal

The study underscores the need to reexamine protections for whistleblowers among migrant workers within ethnic networks that have mechanisms of social control, such as honor and shame, and silence, preventing such reporting of abuse. To protect migrant workers from retaliation for reporting exploitation of which they are victims, legal frameworks should be strengthened. For these reasons, legal changes are needed to protect whistleblowers from social ostracism or other forms of reprisal, such as setting up confidential reporting channels which accept reports in multiple languages, while providing legal assistance for whistleblowers. On a legal reform side, it should be included the fact that cultural relativism creates ethical blind spots that should be offset with real reforms against the labor exploitation that happens for cultural norms.

6.3. Social

It is necessary to support grassroots organizations that energize intra community advocates to foster greater community cohesion and support of migrant workers. The advocacy these organizations can lend to ending exploitation will enable them to raise awareness of exploitation, provide culturally sensitive counseling and support services and challenge harmful social norms that promote abuse. These initiatives aim to provide the power and the means to migrant workers as agents of change to construct a more equitable and supportive environment for migrant workers. In addition, actions are needed to enhance cross cultural understanding and dialogue to deal with the diversity of cultural values in order to safeguard the universality of labor standards.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that cultural values of co-nationals abroad facilitate both solidarity and exploitation. Although migrants depend on each other, power asymmetries open the door to abuse justified by the prevailing cultural norms. Ethical relativism and social control strengthen exploitative practices, which are embedded in the community's moral framework. The findings are important to policymakers in that they deem the necessity of culturally informed labor protections as well as community outreach. It is crucial to strengthen whistleblower protections and grassroots empowerment. This should be further studied longitudinally, cross nationally, to reduce non solidarity, and non-justice intra ethnic interaction of migrants.

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