



# PRODUCING AND REPRODUCING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES THROUGH LABOR EXPLOITATION ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

AN INTERMEDIATE ANALYSIS

Fabiana Kutsche, Jonathan Ngeh, and Michaela Pelican



Project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation

Grant number 96 966



**Kölner Arbeitspapiere zur Ethnologie No. 10**  
**Cologne Working Papers in Social and Cultural Anthropology No. 10**  
**Köln / Cologne 2024**  
**ISSN 1864- 7766**

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**2024**

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# Abstract

This report presents the intermediate results of four studies conducted by members of the research unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Contexts and Concepts of Labor Exploitation.” The studies focus on the roles of concepts and actors in producing and reproducing social inequalities in the context of colonial and postcolonial labor systems and regimes of mobility in the Global South from historical and contemporary perspectives. The findings suggest a power asymmetry in the origin of the concepts under study but emphasize the importance of linguistic contestations for the subjects of exploitation. The large influence of global structures, such as colonialism, racialization, classism, and patriarchy as well as the effects of capitalism and neoliberalism, on the concepts are discussed.<sup>1</sup>

Key Words: (historical) anthropology, history, social inequality, capitalism, neo-liberalism, colonialism, labor, gender, race

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**Acknowledgements:** We thank all members of the research unit for their intellectual contributions to this publication. We also thank Nico Wilkins for copy editing the manuscript and Halima Kamara, Noah Kahindi, Frederick Weck, and Ulrike Wesch for their support with the layout and illustrations. We are grateful for funding from the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant number 96 966) and institutional support from the Global South Studies Center (GSSC) of the University of Cologne.

**Disclosure statement:** We report no conflict of interest and retain full responsibility for the content and shortcomings of this paper.

# 1. Introduction

The research unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Contexts and Concepts of Labor Exploitation” is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant number 96 966) and runs over five years (2020–2025)<sup>2</sup>. It involves senior and junior scholars who jointly investigate why attempts aimed at increasing equality have often contributed to generating more durable inequalities. To address this question, the research unit focuses on the roles of concepts and actors in producing and reproducing social inequalities in the context of colonial and postcolonial labor systems and regimes of mobility in the Global South, with case studies from Cameroon, China, Ethiopia, India, and South Africa. More specifically, the research unit focuses on selected concepts that are locally grounded and describe forms of social inequalities linked to different types of labor exploitation, namely *native labor*, *new slavery*, *trafficking in persons and slavery*, and *development through cheap/abundant labor*. We examine the concepts and associated inequalities under investigation across four studies comprising

our research unit. These four studies are presented in Figure 1.

The studies of the research unit investigate, both from historical and contemporary perspectives, how these concepts circulate on a global scale and are negotiated, translated, and adapted by different actors with the aim of challenging social inequalities despite eventually contributing to the production of those same or new forms of inequalities. The actors under study are institutions and individuals involved in regulating labor systems and include policymakers, legislators, economic actors, international organizations, and civil society representatives. The research unit intends to reconcile debates on inequality, conceptual history, labor history, and labor migration and combines perspectives from both the Global South and North.

In the following report, we present our interim findings after three years of work in the research unit (2020–2023). While this is a work in progress and draws on selected findings, we present



Figure 1: The Four Studies of the Research Unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities”

<sup>2</sup> The research unit’s activities and outcomes are accessible here: <https://socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de> [last accessed: 10.07.2024].

preliminary answers to the research unit's guiding questions. In a first step, we outline our methodological approaches and the theoretical frameworks applied to our research. In a second step, each of the four studies and their selected findings are presented. We then approach the findings from a comparative perspective and highlight the main commonalities and differences across the projects. To conclude, we provide an outlook onto our future work. ■



## 2. Common Framework

All of our studies use qualitative research methods, with two employing historical discourse analysis and two principally using ethnography. We work with broad notions of inequality and exploitation and focus on processes and mechanisms that produce and reproduce inequality. Drawing on Tilly (1999, 2001), Therborn (2013), Quijano (2000), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), we see inequality as relational and historically embedded and as comprising several dimensions, including social, economic, and epistemic inequality. Our understanding of exploitation is inspired by Wertheimer's (1996) broad definition: those exploited give more than they receive in return.

The local contexts under study—Cameroon, China, Ethiopia, India, and South Africa—have all been shaped by the effects of global capitalism as spread through colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal development policies, all of which have reinforced economic disparities and inequalities of power between and within the Global South and North. At the same time, local actors have not simply embraced inequality, but have played a crucial role in negotiating, translating, adapting, and transmuting the concepts under study, thus challenging and transforming their content. Language here plays a crucial role, because the concepts' uni- and multidirectional translation and vernacularization can radically complicate their meaning, as several of our studies have shown (e.g., Huynh, 2024; Ngeh & Pelican, 2024; Zeleke, 2024).

Besides studying social inequalities, our research unit addresses epistemic inequalities. We see anthropology, history, and critical theory as particularly apt to question the assumed universality of the Social Sciences and knowledge produced in the Global North. We pursue a relational understanding of the concepts Global South and Global North that goes beyond geographical or geopolitical classifications and

highlights the Global South as a locus of intellectual and sociopolitical innovation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Connell, 2007; Dados & Connell, 2012).

The four studies of the research unit all address contexts of labor exploitation in different parts of the Global South from historical (Huynh; Lindner & Kutsche) and contemporary perspectives (Pelican & Ngeh; Zeleke). The researchers are experienced scholars of history and social anthropology who build on their previous collaboration and expertise. They engage with the following overarching questions:

- How do institutional and individual actors negotiate, translate, adapt, and strategically use concepts of labor exploitation?
- How do the concepts under study circulate and relate to one another? How do they conceal and stabilize forms of social inequality?
- Why have old concepts of labor exploitation and their contemporary derivatives (e.g., *'modern slavery'*) regained importance in the context of increasing global inequalities?

While the four studies, each in its own way, respond to these questions, they also pay attention to the role of global structures (colonialism, racism, capitalism, neoliberalism) and social categories (race/ethnicity, gender, class) in shaping labor exploitation and social inequalities. Our shared goal is to jointly develop theories grounded in historical and cultural experiences in the Global South to explain the roles of concepts and actors in producing and reproducing social inequalities through labor exploitation.

The academic value of our research unit also lies in its transdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to understanding social inequality. Unlike mainstream academic debates that are often

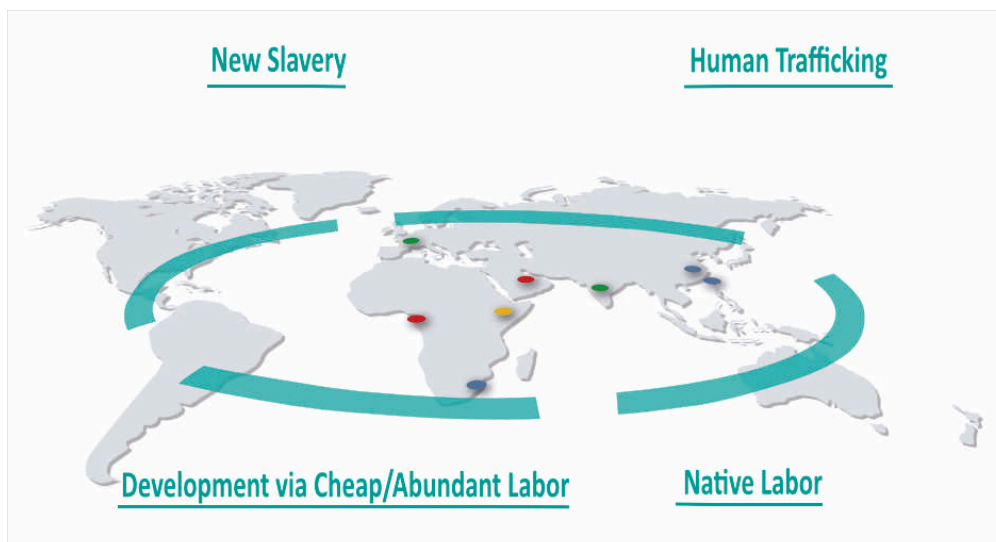


Figure 2: Circulation of Concepts © Frederik Weck 2019

rooted in particular disciplines, we are working at the interface of historical and anthropological discussions and critical theory. With our focus on grounded situations and the circulation of concepts, we bring into conversation different voices, perspectives, and knowledge systems. Ultimately, the research unit aims to interpret global labor regimes and to draw lessons from experiences for societies in both the Global South and North. ■

### 3. The Research Studies



#### **Between Global Standards and Unequal Treatment: The ILO and the Concept of Native Labor, 1919–1957 (Prof. Dr. Ulrike Lindner, Fabiana Kutsche)**

This study analyzes the racialized discourses that influenced the concept of so-called *native labor* used by the International Labour Organization (ILO) during the years 1919–1957. By referring to this concept, the ILO legitimized internationally regulated forms of labor exploitation in both colonies and mandated areas. The research study explores the ways in which the use of the concept of native labor contributed to reifying social inequalities across the global color line and to affirming colonial structures. Apart from the general study of the engagement with native labor within the organization, the study lays a special focus on the case of India, showcasing the complex relations between the realities of a colonial territory and the international organization's contested universal approach.

The ILO, created in 1919 at the peace conference in Versailles, had a tripartite structure comprised of workers, employers, and governments. Over the years, it developed a strong expertise in the field of labor policy, pushed for better conditions for workers in its member states, and aimed to establish universal labor standards. Its initial focus laid on industrial labor in Western countries, but due to the efforts of various philanthropist and anti-colonial actors, the ILO also installed a very small working group to study labor conditions in colonial territories (Kutsche & Lindner, 2024). The labor of workers in colonies and mandated territories was referred to as native labor and came with different labor rights, thus establishing a form of racialized double standard.

Following debates on forced and compulsory labor as well as on slavery and indentured labor that attracted public attention in Europe and North America, the ILO was mandated by the League of Nations to develop regulations on

forced labor in 1926. This led to the installment of a body of experts, mainly consisting of former colonial administrators, which developed a Native Labor Code regulating the use of forced labor. The Forced Labor Convention was finally issued in 1930 but ratified by many governments only in the 1950s. While it obliged the signatories to abolish forced labor for private purposes, many exceptions were made (e.g., forced labor was still allowed for infrastructure projects in the colonies). In the years following World War II, the study of "native labor conditions" in the ILO underwent a conceptual change, now being referred to as "labor in non-metropolitan territories." Still, the bodies of expertise established during these years mostly reproduced discourses emphasizing the assumed racialized difference between workers in the Global South and the Global North, while now, at the onset of formal decolonization, drawing on theories of economic development instead.



#### **Chinese Indentured Labor as New Slavery: Perspectives from South Africa and China (Prof. Dr. Tu Huynh, Yang Fan)**

This study investigates the concept of *new slavery*, introduced by Liberal Party members in the British Parliament and echoed by white<sup>3</sup> laborers and their trade unions in South Africa to oppose the recruitment of Chinese indentured labor for the Transvaal's gold mining industry in the early 1900s. While Liberal Members of Parliament (MPs) aimed to protect Chinese laborers from exploitation, white trade unionists used the term to racially exclude the Chinese from employment opportunities they saw as rightfully theirs.

In China, the modern foreign-style press reported on the issues emerging from the debates over the introduction of Chinese laborers in the Transvaal. This study explores how Chinese journalists' translation and interpretation of the demand for Chinese laborers by mining capitalists, white laborers' racial perceptions of Chinese labor as a

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we capitalize the spelling of "Black" when referring to the history and racial identity of people of the African diaspora and Africa, as requested by Black communities around the world. "White," on the other hand, deliberately remains uncapitalized. While the term equally refers to a constructed racial identity, its capitalization is often defended by white supremacists and we do not wish to subtly lend legitimacy to such beliefs.

threat, and oppressive labor conditions reinforced or diverged from the English notion of new slavery. We ultimately argue that the reports contributed to increased consciousness among the Chinese reading public of the exploitation and inequality experienced by the Han people in relation to the Qing Manchu rulers, a process crucial to the revolution that ended dynastic rule in 1911.

Relying primarily on Chinese sources, the research highlights the critical role of language and translation. Through the steps of translating from classical to vernacular Chinese and then to English, the research reveals subtle linguistic nuances expressing different forms of labor exploitation and belonging related to social status and race. For example, various Chinese terms can all be translated to the English slavery/slave. Investigating these Chinese terms unfolds a historical social status system dividing people into three groups: *jianmin* [inferior], *pingmin* [common people/commoners], and a third for royalty and high officials. While it is uncertain which of the first two groups the Chinese indentured laborers belonged to, this finding shows a deeply unequal society and the inadequacy of Western frameworks, like class, to understand labor dynamics in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese society.

Further analysis of Chinese journalists' writings builds on both literal and cultural translation, embodying a process of transculturation. This is evident in the frequent use of the term *huagong*, generally referring to Chinese laborers overseas with a long history in Southeast Asia, over *nuli*, a term for slavery. The dehumanization, exploitation, and resilience of *huagong* were viewed as analogous to *dongwu* [animals], such as *chongyiniuma* [insects, cattle, and horse]. Where *nuli* was used, it was more commonly linked with *heiren* [black people], conveying the existing racialization of Black people as slaves. Further communication of racial dynamics between Chinese, Africans, and Europeans in the colonial context can be gleaned from references to those who enslaved Black people and saw *huagong* as a threat or abused them as *bairan* [white people].

Through their reports, these journalists not only informed the Chinese reading public about international labor exploitation but also drew parallels to domestic issues of inequality and oppression under the Qing Manchu rulers. Alongside the translated news, the press published Chinese editorials advising Chinese people not to go to South Africa's mine, using the term *huangzhongren tongbao* [yellow race compatriots] to intimate their common belonging to an imagined "yellow emperor." This intricate process of translation and cultural interpretation highlights the complex dynamics of race, labor, and national identity that shaped the Chinese understanding of colonial labor exploitation and inequality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



#### Debates on Trafficking in Persons and Slavery in Cameroon (Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican, Dr. Jonathan Ngeh)

Trafficking in persons is a legal concept framed by national and international policymakers and has been applied in different parts of the world, including Africa (Adepoju, 2005). Implemented in the so-called Palermo Protocol, which is part of a broader UN convention against transnational organized crime, the concept refers to the recruitment and transfer of persons by means of coercion or deception for the purpose of exploitation. At the heart of this study are public and legal debates about *trafficking in persons and slavery* in Cameroon and how they relate to forms of exploitation and social inequality. The study investigates how the concept of trafficking in persons and slavery is understood and used by different parties in Cameroon, including policymakers, legislators, civil society organizations, journalists, and individuals who have experienced trafficking. It further explores how the current policy framework contributes to the questioning or reinforcing of existing structures of exploitation along the lines of gender and generation.

Interim findings suggest that the discourse surrounding human trafficking can be seen as part of an extensive process of problematizing and

racializing Southern migration. It is embedded in other structures of domination, namely patriarchy and classism. Consequently, migrant workers from the same region or country can have different experiences of exploitation due to differing intersections of nationality, gender, and class. The increasing privatization of migration regulation, particularly in the context of migration from Cameroon and other African countries to the Arab Gulf States, has allowed profit maximization to overshadow concerns for migrant workers' rights in the migration industry. Similarly, the focus of national and international human trafficking campaigns on prosecuting and regulating migration negatively impacts the poor more than the well-connected as ordinary Cameroonians in already precarious economic situations are most likely to face the brunt of migration restriction.

Due to the country's bilingual (French and English) and bijural (French civil law and English common law) system, the incorporation of the Palermo Protocol in Cameroon's legislation has entailed diverse conceptual and linguistic convolutions. For example, findings suggest that the complex translation process between French and English of the country's anti-trafficking law has resulted in the use of the term slavery in the law's English version, whereas the French version operates with the notion of *traite* [trafficking]. The exact phrase "trafficking in persons and slavery" in the English version of the law was first introduced in 2005 with a focus on the possible exploitation and abuse of children sent from rural areas to stay with relatives in the city. In 2011, the legislation was adjusted to include adults, as women and youths were also exposed to the dangers of abusive work arrangements, particularly in a transnational context. Recently, the case of Cameroonian women exploited as domestic workers in the Gulf States, who publicized their experiences of physical and sexual abuse, has refueled debates (e.g., Ngeh, 2024; Nkwi, 2018). Policymakers and legislators are very aware of the close links between poverty, social inequality, and high-risk migration and have been working on an integrated policy framework. Yet the current

legislation does not provide the necessary instruments to assist the victims of human trafficking, but rather contributes to their further exploitation, driving them into new abusive arrangements.



**Development Fostering Social Inequality? A Study on Labor Arrangements in Ethiopia's Manufacturing Sector (Prof. Dr. Meron Zeleke, Redeat Bekele, Rediet Tadele)**

The study seeks to understand the role of the Ethiopian state and national development policies in producing and reproducing social inequalities. It studies the concept of *development through cheap/abundant labor* against the backdrop of the rising manufacturing sector in Ethiopia. In particular, it focusses on the empowerment of female workers and their responses to labor exploitation.

Ethiopia follows a developmental state model with the objective of ensuring equitable economic development and social justice. It has adopted an ambitious national vision of becoming a lower-middle-income country by 2025. Centered around neoliberal policies promoting privatization and the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), Ethiopia's policies have enhanced new avenues for capital accumulation for investors involved in the textile and garment manufacturing industry. For example, the National Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II), covering the period from 2015–2020, focused on ensuring rapid, sustainable, and broad-based growth through enhancing manufacturing sector productivity (Oqubai, 2015). The state sponsored the construction of mega-industrial parks, attracting well-known global brands from Europe, the United States, and Asia. A major selling point used by the Ethiopian government to attract FDI is the country's *cheap/abundant labor*. However, the much-touted employment opportunities created by these manufacturing industries are not matched by decent working conditions, thus contributing to growing economic inequality. The study critically interrogates the paradox of a government committed to economic development

and social equality while simultaneously promoting policies that exploit workers in the manufacturing sector, thereby reproducing inequality. The study addresses the following questions: How does the government's concept of development contribute to reducing or increasing social inequality in Ethiopia? What are the working conditions of factory workers? What informal and legal strategies do these workers use to advance their interests in the workplace?

Initial findings suggest that the women employed in the garment and textile factories under study often work overtime to meet their daily targets that are set along investors' delivery timeline. The workers receive a very low wage as there exists no legally set minimum wage for the private sector in Ethiopia. While the Ethiopian government and employers argue that female workers' employment in these industrial parks carries the potential for their empowerment, the women interviewed see otherwise. For them, the Amharic term *mebkat*, loosely translated as empowerment, has different connotations. It entails having decent working conditions, earning enough money to be able to invest in one's life aspirations, and being able to reject something that goes against one's own will. The research thus shows that if unmatched with decent working conditions, the simple employment of women as a developmental strategy does not guarantee their empowerment in the sense of *mebkat*, but further increases gender- and class-based social inequalities. ■

## 4. Comparative Findings

The preliminary findings suggest emerging patterns and tendencies relevant to the four concepts of *native labor*, *new slavery*, *trafficking in persons and slavery*, and *development through cheap/abundant labor*. These findings specifically shed light on power asymmetries between the Global North and South, as well as on a range of actors positioned differently within social hierarchies. The studies identify particular structures and processes of exploitation that uphold and perpetuate these power imbalances, such as colonialism, racialization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Furthermore, they demonstrate how these structures and processes intersect with gender and/or class/social status to produce varying experiences of labor exploitation. Contrary to a simple narrative of exploitation and abuse by the powerful, the analysis uncovers instances and processes of contestation by all actors involved, thus revealing variation and transformation in the concepts and forms of labor exploitation under study.

The presentation of these initial findings is organized in two sections. We first provide an overview of the different actors involved, the power asymmetries at both global and local levels, and the different forms of contestation of the concept by the affected communities. In a second step, we discuss the role of the global structures that uphold either existing or emerging forms of labor exploitation.

### Actors, Power Asymmetries, Contestation

In all four cases, the concepts under study originated in the Global North. At the same time, a wide range of actors of different provenances were involved in negotiating the concepts with varying outcomes. It will be shown, however, that the actors are positioned differently in relation to centers of power, with actors from the Global North being in a stronger position to shape


concepts and discourses. Despite the powerful position of countries and actors in the Global North to control, define, and introduce concepts regulating global capitalist labor relations, often to their advantage, our preliminary findings also indicate contestations by those exploited. Some of the contestations were subtle, such as the use of vernacular concepts that are critical of simple binary representations inherent in the externally introduced concepts.



In the case of native labor, the concept was introduced by the ILO, headquartered in Switzerland, and influenced by racialized colonial discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe. Within the ILO, the concept was mostly developed and applied by white members of its staff as well as so-called experts recruited from European colonial administrations. The only critical commentary on colonial labor conditions came from a handful of Indian workers' delegates during the ILO's annual International Labour Conferences. Apart from this, there was no room for colonized subjects to voice their opinions. However, the work of the ILO was also observed and influenced by third parties. Different actors from civil society (e.g., missionaries, churches, NGOs, political parties, individuals) contacted the ILO and tried to impact the organization's policies. Groups which had been well-known and established in the international scene for a longer time were most successful in this endeavor. Activists of color (from the United States and Europe) also reached out to the ILO to discuss their view of native labor. They understood the term as a synonym for colonized workers; unlike their white counterparts, however, they connected it with demands for protection and sometimes even decolonization. Their efforts remained unsuccessful.


Nonetheless, the meaning of the concept of native labor remained a topic of discussion both within the ILO and in exchange with outside actors.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and despite finding its way into the official publications and conventions of the ILO, the concept's meaning was not stable. Internally, the ILO used the terms native labor, colonial questions, and colored labor interchangeably, thus revealing the concepts' ambiguous nature. From the 1940s onwards, a paradigm shift within the ILO connected to changing world politics took place (Maul, 2012). The discourses on colonial labor conditions continued to be developed under a different term, namely "labor in non-metropolitan areas." The main factors for this change in terminology were not so much local contestations but major political events, such as World War II and the subsequent Cold War, as well as the beginning of the decolonization process.

 The concept of new slavery—derived from the idea of a new form of slavery—emerged in nineteenth-century Britain. It was first mentioned in relation to Indian indentured laborers in the British colonies after the abolition of slavery. Later, allegations that the Chinese indentured labor system proposed for the Transvaal was potentially akin to slavery were brought forward by Liberal Party Members of the British Parliament. This claim was supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Parliamentary debates, whose opposition to the use of Chinese laborers implicated the church in the controversy. The division among the churches on this issue was evident in South Africa, where the Congregation of Ministers in Natal and the Witwatersrand Church Council supported the use of Chinese indentured laborers, viewing it as an opportunity to proselytize. Conversely, white South African trade unionists spoke out against the recruitment of Chinese indentured laborers, masking their racism and xenophobia under the guise of anti-slavery politics. In this debate, the Liberal Party MPs reminded the British Foreign Office of Britain's treaty obligation under the 1860 *Peking Convention* to create regulations with the Qing Chinese government to protect their subjects recruited and transported to foreign lands. Furthermore, Chinese government officials, laborers, and journalists actively engaged in

discussions and negotiations about these labor conditions and the concept of new slavery.

Translating from English sources, the modern foreign-style Chinese press, including newspapers, magazines, and *xiaobao* [tabloids], reported on South Africa's labor recruitment, oppressive mine conditions, labor protests at the mining compounds, and the Qing government's role in enabling these practices. These foreign-style newspapers used editorial strategies and cultural packaging to appeal to the Chinese public, a shift facilitated by Confucian-educated intellectuals with Western ties serving as editors and journalists (Judge, 1997; Mittler, 2004). Benefiting from Shanghai's extraterritorial status, exempt from Qing press laws, this era also saw new technology revolutionize publishing, enabling mass production and wide distribution to meet market demands. In this context, *xiaobao*, with origins in the Northern Sung Dynasty, gained new significance (Yeh, 2007; Zhao & Sun, 2018). Unlike commercial newspapers extending beyond Shanghai, *xiaobao* offered localized content, region-specific news, and accessible material for readers of varying backgrounds. These papers ranged from official to those with political reformist or revolutionary agendas (Fang, 2013; Xiong, 2018). For instance, papers that printed stories concerning South Africa's Chinese labor recruitment included *Xinmin Congbao*, founded by journalist and reformist Liang Qichao, which advocated for modernization and political reform in late Qing China and disseminated these ideas among the Chinese diaspora and intellectuals (Cao, 2023) as well as *Zhengyi Tongbao*, edited and published by Deng Shi in Shanghai in 1902, which had a revolutionary outlook (Hon, 2022).

 The legal concept of trafficking in persons emerged in the year 2000 and was pioneered by the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) with the United States and the European Union having considerable influence on its drafting (Ngeh & Pelican, 2024; Shoaps, 2013). In Cameroon, several influential actors have been involved in the global campaign against human



trafficking. These include international actors, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the U.S. Embassy, and a number of (mostly U.S.-based) advocacy organizations. They collaborate with Cameroonian non-governmental and civil society organizations as well as the Cameroonian government, including the anti-trafficking inter-ministerial committee (IMC) which coordinates the national campaign against human trafficking.

Although these actors are united in their support of the anti-trafficking framework, they have different views of what constitutes human trafficking and how it can be curbed. Two crucial disagreements have emerged between the government of Cameroon and its external partners. A first concern relates to the language in the legal text of the Cameroonian anti-trafficking law, instituted in 2011, which makes no distinction between human trafficking and human smuggling. U.S. officials in Yaoundé explained that the lack of this distinction prevented the law from reflecting an essential aspect of the Palermo Protocol. Second, Cameroonian officials in the government's inter-ministerial committee argued that, in a departure from the current framework, local traditions and the Cameroonian context should be considered when revising the anti-human trafficking law. They criticized the Palermo Protocol, on which the Cameroonian law against human trafficking is based, as Eurocentric, explaining that the Euro-American understanding of trafficking in persons may collide with what they consider practices of African solidarity. A frequently mentioned example is the widespread practice of bringing a poor relative from the rural areas to assist in the urban household, an arrangement that can be read either as an opportunity for access to schooling and personal betterment or a potentially deceptive and exploitative arrangement. Since real-life instances for both interpretations exist, formulating a culturally sensitive legal text is part of the ongoing deliberations and negotiations.


 Finally, the Ethiopian government strategically employs the concept of development via cheap/abundant labor to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) for building factories. This strategy capitalizes on the comparative advantage of low labor costs to make the country an attractive destination for foreign investors, especially in labor-intensive industries such as manufacturing. The government's interpretation of development is informed by the perspectives of development practitioners in the Global North. It associates the idea of development with fairness, empowerment, and social justice, while also embracing neoliberal economic policies of privatization and deregulation. Besides the Ethiopian government, international organizations, workers, and labor unions are parties to the discussion on development and the related notion of empowerment.

Governmental actors draw on the concept of empowerment to advertise factory work among women from rural areas with limited access to education and income. They argue that female workers will feel economically and socially empowered when working in the industrial parks under study. This view aligns with conventional understandings of development, suggesting that involvement in paid work helps to empower women, as the income generated could break down patriarchal norms, change gender roles, and improve women's bargaining power. Various international organizations, such as the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Worker Wellness Alliance (WWA), as well as Ethiopian non-governmental agencies working on women's empowerment, tend to emphasize the elements of women's agency and autonomy in regard to paid work in the industrial parks. Their interventions focus on raising legal awareness, including of the basic rights of workers, and on offering basic skills training; these interventions are believed to equip the workers with negotiation power. Conversely, female factory workers in Ethiopia negotiate their own understanding of


empowerment, using the local equivalent *mebkat* in Amharic. As different actors hold different understandings of empowerment, *mebkat* is complex to define or translate. Yet, for the women working in the factories, it implies the need for decent living and working conditions and thus differs from the typical themes in government discourses. Their understanding of empowerment aligns more closely with that of the labor unions, for whom empowerment entails having the power to fight for one's own rights, to choose whether to accept or decline a request for overtime work, and to negotiate the terms and conditions of work. Yet the workers' labor union is still at an infantile stage as they have long been confronted with resistance by investors and the government.

### Global Structures Reproducing Labor Inequalities

We view the power asymmetries between states in the Global North and South and between actors who occupy different positions of influence as anchored in specific global structures that sustain them. The structures we identify are colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism. They intersect with other structures of in- or exclusion, notably race, gender, and class/social status. We identified colonialism and capitalism as relevant global structures cutting across the projects focusing on new slavery and native labor as well as neoliberalism in the projects studying human trafficking and development.

 The concept of native labor originated from and was embedded in colonial structures. Moreover, the concept was entirely based on racist perceptions of Black people and people of color common at the time in the Global North, highlighting the intersection of colonial and racial domination. The different bodies of the ILO, like the Governing Body, the Labour Office and the delegations to the International Labour Conferences almost entirely consisted of white members. Through a diverse set of theories and justifications, the Office's staff together with the national delegations created a separate system of

labor legislations for racialized workers in dependent territories which was based on their perceived otherness as non-white laborers. Still, even among the white ILO experts, there existed uncertainty about the exact meaning of the term native. Most discussions evolved around the role of Black workers from Africa, but they also discussed whether Asian people were meant to be included in the term native. The uncertainty about the inclusion of Asian workers in the category of native labor suggests that colonized people were viewed and treated differently, resulting in different experiences of labor exploitation. Drawing on scientific racial theories of evolutionary stages, some members argued that Black workers from Africa were on a different and lower stage in the evolutionary process than certain Asian peoples and therefore different rules for work should be applied. Others wanted to apply the concept of native labor more broadly and used it for all workers in dependent or colonized territories. The global structures of colonialism and racialization thus intersected.

 Asian indentured labor, referenced in the concepts of new slavery and *huagong*, was an integral part of the emergent liberal global economy that followed the period in which slavery was abolished. Although abolition did not occur simultaneously in all European colonies, it did for those under British rule, thus enlarging the plantation colonies' demand for cheap labor. Britain responded by allowing labor recruitment from India and China. The Transvaal (compared to Natal) was a latecomer to introducing indentured laborers in gold production. These laborers were not only important to the revitalization of the Transvaal's post-war economy, but also to the maintenance of the international gold standard that underpinned international free trade. The debates on new slavery were thus deeply entrenched in structures of capitalism, but also drew out non-economic concerns about the Transvaal's reconstruction which were primarily racial. Capitalists were concerned with how to secure employment privileges for white laborers and maintain white supremacy in a colonial settlement, which was not particular to South

Africa at that time. The debate over who could be classified as cheap unskilled labor—the crux of the new slavery debate—revealed that laborers for capitalist reproduction were not simply laborers, but were laborers deemed as inferior, justifying low pay and cruel treatment.



Neoliberalism plays a key role in the debate on trafficking in persons and is here understood as "a pervasive and increasingly global ideology, associated with the favoring of free market competition and private property rights, reduction or abolishment of government intervention and expenditure, and valuation of individual 'freedom of choice'" (Carlquist & Phelps, 2014, p. 1231). Neoliberalism spurs the demand for cheap and disposable migrant workers who are recruited into economies without workers' rights and benefits. It also stimulates the privatization of migration regulation which has allowed profit maximization to overshadow concerns for migrant workers' rights. For example, the Cameroonian government has limited involvement in the regulation of migration from Cameroon and in negotiating on behalf of Cameroonian migrant workers in the Gulf States. This is significant because the Gulf states' policies towards migrants largely depend on bilateral agreements with the migrant's home country. This leaves the fate of Cameroonian migrants in the region entirely dependent on the labor migration regulations of the Gulf states which firmly adopt neoliberal economic ideals. Moreover, the focus on prosecution and regulation in the global human trafficking campaign negatively impacts the poor more than the well-connected. Here class/social status comes into play and intersects with gender. Ordinary Cameroonians in already precarious economic situations are the ones who are most likely to face migration restrictions. Moreover, domestic workers, who are predominantly female, suffer the worst cases of exploitation and abuse (Ngeh, 2024). Critical studies indicate that the global campaign against human trafficking is informed by notions of racial hierarchy and discourses that problematize the transnational mobility of racialized groups (Kempadoo & Shih,

2023; Mahdavi, 2023). This is reflected in the situation of labor migrants in the Gulf states, where racist and gendered notions openly inform labor market practices (Longva, 1997; Ngeh & Pelican, 2018).



The intersections of neoliberalism and patriarchal structures are central to understanding the discourses and practices pertaining to the model of the developmental state in Ethiopia. By advertising the existence of cheap/abundant labor to foreign investors and the diaspora, the Ethiopian government enables the exploitation of workers in factory parks. Female workers are a special target of this campaign due to their disadvantaged position in Ethiopian society due to the dominant patriarchal system. Often deprived from educational and professional pathways, girls and women are made responsible for the economic support of their families to enable the advancement of their male family members (Zelege, 2018). By capitalizing on their vulnerability, governmental actors thus stabilize existing patriarchal structures and embed them into a neoliberal logic of empowerment through precarious labor. The logics of development and empowerment are further supported by the patronizing rhetoric of international development institutions from the Global North. The study therefore reveals collaboration between the Ethiopian government and foreign investors from the Global North and China builds on the neoliberal patriarchal exploitation of female workers.

Figure 3 conceptualizes the intersections of global structures and vectors of exclusion that contribute to sustaining structures of inequality in the different contexts under study. ■

|                                 | <br><b>Native Labor</b> | <br><b>New Slavery</b> | <br><b>Human Trafficking</b> | <br><b>Development</b> |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Colonialism</b>              | •  | •   |  |   |
| <b>Capitalism</b>               | •  | •   |  |   |
| <b>Neoliberalism</b>            |  |   | •  | •   |
| <b>Race/<br/>Racialization</b>  | •  | •   | •  |   |
| <b>Gender/<br/>Patriarchy</b>   | •  |   | •  | •   |
| <b>Class/<br/>Social Status</b> | •  | •   | •  | •   |

Figure 3: Global Structures Reproducing Social Inequalities Across the Four Studies of the Research Unit

## 5. Conclusion

In this report, following a summary of the four studies, we outlined the role of institutional and individual actors in the processes of negotiation, translation, adaptation, and strategic uses of concepts of labor exploitation. All concepts under study originated in the Global North, implying a general power asymmetry in the position to shape the concepts and discourses surrounding labor exploitation. Nonetheless, our studies also demonstrate resistance on the part of subjects of exploitation, often taking the form of linguistic contestations using vernacular concepts to alternatively describe and negotiate their labor situation. A second highlight of the report was the role of global structures linking our studies. We found that the concepts of native labor and new slavery were embedded in structures of colonialism, racialization, and capitalism. For human trafficking and development via cheap/abundant labor, neoliberalism intersected with patriarchy, classism, and, partly, notions of racial hierarchy. It is especially the intersection of power asymmetries based on these global structures that stabilizes and reproduces forms of social inequality. Further answers to the overarching research question of our research unit—why attempts aimed at increasing equality often have contributed to generating more durable inequalities—will be discussed in our forthcoming publication in *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* (2024). In it, through different case studies by members of the research unit and associated scholars, we reconsider Therborn's (2013) and Tilly's (1999, 2001) theories of mechanisms and types of inequality and connect them to our findings about the inequalities inherent in concepts aimed at tackling labor exploitation. ■

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### **Editorial Support**

Nico Wilkins

### **Layout and Design**

Constanze Alpen - Department of Public  
Relations & Communication, Faculty of Arts  
and Humanities, University of Cologne

Halima Kamara, Ulrike Wesch

### **Publisher**

Department of Social and Cultural  
Anthropology, University of Cologne

### **Series**

Cologne Working Papers in Social and Cultural  
Anthropology No. 10, ISSN 1864-7766

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