
LKI *Policy Briefs* are extended analyses on policy issues

Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the UK Fishing Industry: How a Two-Tier Visa System Allows Exploitation and Abuse

Sarah Barber

April 2026

Abstract: *This study examines the circumstances of Sri Lankans who migrate to work in the United Kingdom's fishing industry. Under the two-tier transit visa system, many Sri Lankan fishers experience exploitation and abuse, which includes poor working conditions, wage theft, document retention, physical and psychological abuse. This policy brief examines how the transit visa system institutionalizes inequality, perpetuates systemic exploitation, and undermines labour laws and ethical recruitment standards. It calls for urgent reforms to ensure equal protections, transparent oversight, and pathways to justice for migrant workers who sustain the UK's fishing economy, with recommendations for both the UK and Sri Lankan governments on how they can ensure they meet their human rights obligations towards Sri Lankan fishers.*

Sarah Barber is a UK-based Social Worker and is currently studying a master's degree in Human Rights and Democratization jointly at Mahidol University in Thailand and the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka. She is carrying out her Research Internship component at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI) in Colombo. The opinions in this Policy Paper are the author's own and not the institutional views of LKI. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the position of any other institution or individual with which the author is affiliated.

Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the UK Fishing Industry: How a Two-Tier Visa System Allows Exploitation and Abuse

Sarah Barber*

Contents

1.0	Introduction.....	4
2.0	Workers in the UK Fishing Industry	4
3.0	What is the UK Transit Visa?.....	5
4.0	How Does This Affect Sri Lankan Fishers in the UK?	6
4.1	Recruitment Debts.....	6
4.2	Pay.....	6
4.3	Living and Working Conditions	7
4.4	Physical and Verbal Abuse	7
5.0	The Human Rights Context	7
6.0	The Role of the Sri Lankan Authorities in the UK	8
7.0	Policy Recommendations.....	8

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation/Acronym	Definition
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
FLEX	Focus on Labour Exploitation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MMO	Marine Management Organization
SLBFE	Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

The gender-neutral term ‘fisher’ has been used throughout this document as an alternative to the gendered ‘fisherman’. The term ‘migrant fisher’ is used in the same context as ‘migrant worker’, to highlight a specific legal, human rights and labour context.

1.0 Introduction

Imagine for a moment the life of a fisher from a coastal community in Sri Lanka; perhaps someone from Negombo, Batticaloa or Galle. Due to financial pressures, he has made the decision to travel thousands of miles to work in the UK fishing industry, after hearing that there's good money to be made there. Conditions are difficult, the weather is very cold and the work is physically draining, although this is what he was expecting.

What he was not prepared for was the abuse he experiences: being sworn at, told he's useless and physically beaten. When the ship is in port, he is made to do extra cleaning work at the vessel owner's home, even though none of the UK fishers have to do this. He is paid a quarter of what the UK fishers are, despite them all doing the same job and sometimes his wages are withheld with no explanation. He is told that if he complains to anyone, he will be deported as an 'illegal immigrant' and never be allowed to work in the UK again. So, he remains quiet, worried about what will happen if he reports it.

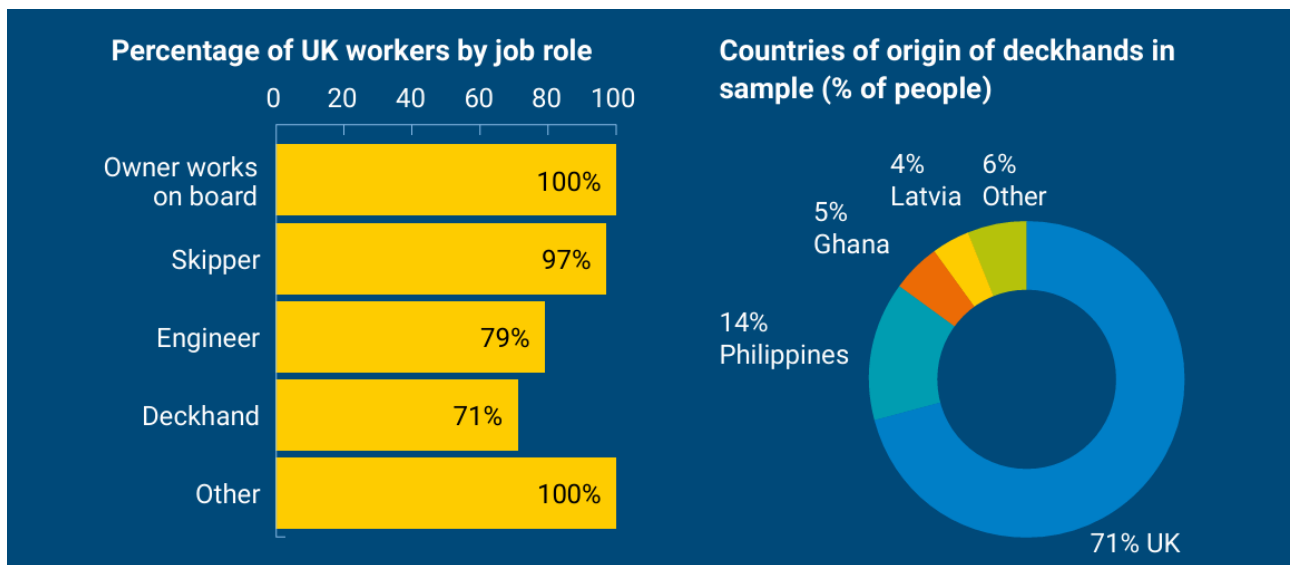
The above scenario is unfortunately not a one-off instance of poor practice, but a widespread pattern of exploitation and abuse of migrant fishers, including those from Sri Lanka, on UK vessels. Despite repeated warnings from human rights organizations and fishing experts, this continues to happen (McVeigh, 2022; Cundy, 2023). This policy brief will explore the underlying reasons and discuss potential measures to stop continued mistreatment of migrant fishers in the UK.

2.0 Workers in the UK Fishing Industry

The fishing industry is an important component of UK's national economy, with an average annual income of £1.1 billion (Marine Management Organization, 2024). Of the 22,000 people in the industry, around 7,263 are employed as full time fishers (Wright, 2025). In the UK, fishing is viewed as a difficult and dangerous profession and often struggles to attract local workers, leaving the industry increasingly reliant on migrant workers to fill vacancies (Sparks and Zhou, 2025).

Although the UK government does not collect official data on the number of migrant workers employed on UK registered fishing vessels, it is estimated that there are at least 2000 non-European Economic Area (EEA) citizens employed in the UK fishing industry, which equates to 9% of the total workforce (Focus on Labour Exploitation, 2024). Of the individuals employed directly as fishers on UK vessels, 14% are from outside of the UK, with this rising to 29% for those employed as deckhands (the lowest paid position).

This number only looks set to increase, with vessel owners reporting that it is more cost-efficient for them to employ migrant fishers, rather than local workers (Murphy and Quintana, 2025).



Source: Seafish (2025). Note that the 'other' category for country of origin includes fishers from Sri Lanka, India and other countries.

3.0 What is the UK Transit Visa?

Currently, the most common framework for fishers from outside of the EEA to work on UK vessels is the Code 7 leave permission, generally referred to as the seafarers' transit visa (Motova-Surmava, 2023). Despite the name, this is not an actual visa, but a legal permission under section 8 (1) of the Immigration Act 1971, which is designed to allow fishers to transit through the UK before joining a vessel bound to fish outside of UK territorial waters. In the fishing industry, this has historically been used to give fishers up to 48 hours to join the vessel they are employed on, before this vessel then moves outside of UK waters to fish.

The transit visa was never intended for use by fishers living and working within the UK and does not grant migrant fishers any rights to live, study or work in the UK (International Transport Workers Federation, 2022).

In 2022, the UK government clarified that migrant fishers who work within 12 nautical miles of the UK coast must be employed under a skilled worker visa (The Immigration Regulations, 2023), although the transit visa could continue to be used for fishers who work exclusively outside of the 12-mile limit. But the nature of fishing means that vessels are chasing a moving resource and may move in and out of this arbitrary distance limit multiple times over the course of an expedition, which is something the skipper (captain) has full control over. By allowing the use of transit visas on UK vessels which fish beyond 12 nautical miles, the very nature of fishing means they are still being utilized for fishing closer to the UK coastline.

Regardless of whether they fish within or beyond this distance, nearly all migrant fishers in the UK today hold only a transit visa, rather than a skilled worker visa (Decker Sparks, 2022).

In 2025, a new announcement stated that from 31st December 2026, skilled worker visas would no longer be allowed for use in the fishing industry. The expectation is that future fishing vacancies should be filled by UK workers. But with UK-based recruitment still being a huge problem, it looks likely that vessel owners will continue to rely on migrant workers, with the only option being the continued use of the transit visa (Seafish, 2025).

The main issue with the transit visa is that if someone works in the UK under this visa, they are not legally recognized as being employed in the UK. This means that migrant fishers under transit visas are not entitled to the same pay or benefits as UK or EEA fishers, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

4.0 How Does This Affect Sri Lankan Fishers in the UK?

As the UK government does not record official numbers of the nationalities of migrant fishers working on UK vessels, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how many Sri Lankan fishers may be impacted. A 2017 study estimated that 0.9% of all migrant fishers in the UK were Sri Lankan (Seafish, 2017), with more recent research suggesting it is at least 3.7% (Decker Sparks, 2022). This increase in Sri Lankan fishers seeking work on UK vessels may be due to a number of factors, including the need for more non-EU workers post Brexit, as well as increased migration push factors due to the 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

The most recent report available from the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) confirmed that a total of 3,281 workers from Sri Lanka worked in the UK. However, there is no breakdown on which industry these workers were employed in, so it is unclear how many of these individuals ended up working in the UK fishing industry (SLBFE, 2024). In addition to this, fishers on transit visas may not be formally registered with the SLBFE, which is a further gap in the data.

Although the number of people affected is relatively small, the exploitation and abuse of any individuals must be taken seriously.

4.1 Recruitment Debts

Even before arriving in the UK, migrant fishers can accrue huge debts to employment agencies in their home countries, particularly those which are unregulated or illegal. According to recent research, the average debt owed by migrant fishers who worked in the UK was between £730 and £2700 (Rs 304,000-1.2 million) and 83% of migrant fishers acquired some form of debt during their recruitment process (Decker Sparks, 2022).

As per the articles outlined in the ILO C188 Work in Fishing Convention, recruitment agencies are prohibited from charging fishers for expenses associated with the recruitment process; instead, these should be paid by vessel owners or the employing company. However, it remains common practice for migrant fishers to be expected to pay these fees themselves. These recruitment debts make migrant fishers particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as they are more likely to feel they have to accept poor working conditions in order to pay back their debts.

4.2 Pay

According to a recent study, migrant fishers on UK vessels are paid £3.51 (Rs 1,461) per hour on average (Decker Sparks, 2022) which is well below the UK national minimum wage of £12.21 (Rs 5,097) per hour (UK Government, 2025). Sri Lankan migrant fishers are also paid less on average than those from other origin countries, with the hierarchy of pay being as follows:

1. Filipinos
2. Ghanaians
3. Sri Lankans and Indians (no difference in pay)
4. Indonesians

The UK's Equality Act 2010 prohibits paying individuals different rates for performing identical roles and discrimination based on race or ethnicity, making the pay disparities between different groups of fishers illegal.

4.3 Living and Working Conditions

As the transit visa system does not give migrant fishers the right to live in the UK, they must usually remain living onboard for the entirety of their 10–12-month contracts. Often conditions on board are unsuitable for longer-term living, with limited access to washing or cooking facilities (Decker Sparks, 2022). In winter, it can be very cold due to a lack of proper heating, yet migrant fishers have no option but to remain on board or risk immigration penalties.

In some cases, vessel owners keep hold of migrant fishers' passports and other important documents, which is often an indicator of forced labour (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2025). In addition to this, migrant fishers require the skipper's permission to leave the vessel, which is often severely restricted. These factors make it difficult for fishers to access medical or other essential services and there have been cases where migrant fishers were denied treatment for injuries sustained whilst working (Cundy, 2023). Limited mobility also prevents migrant fishers from seeking help if they face exploitation or abuse (Phelan et al, 2022).

Migrant fishers usually live on the boat full-time and are often required to do additional tasks, such as cleaning or repairing equipment; jobs that UK fishers usually aren't expected to complete. Some Indian and Sri Lankan fishers were even made to carry out unpaid domestic chores in the homes of skippers or vessel owners, in addition to their usual fishing responsibilities (Decker Sparks, 2022). This was in clear violation of the fishers' rights to have adequate rest time and they were not paid overtime for this additional work, highlighting how some migrant fishers are taken advantage of in the UK fishing industry.

4.4 Physical and Verbal Abuse

In a 2022 study, 35% of migrant fishers on UK vessels reported regular physical or sexual abuse, with two participants stating that they were the victims of violent sexual assaults. Other forms of abuse experienced by migrant fishers included being urinated on and having intimate photos taken of them as a form of blackmail to prevent them from reporting abuse.

In addition to the physical assaults, 62% of migrant fishers reported experiencing regular verbal abuse, which included racial abuse (Decker Sparks, 2022). Because migrant fishers under the transit visa system are vulnerable to immigration penalties and deportation if they report abuse, this is hugely underreported with two thirds of migrant fishers stating they have not or would not report abuse, for fear of losing their jobs and being sent home (Decker Sparks, 2022).

5.0 The Human Rights Context

The ILO 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up imposes obligations on states to eliminate all forms of forced labour, discrimination and to ensure the rights of workers. As an ILO-member state, the UK is bound by these principles and should do everything within its power to ensure that UK employers respect, protect and fulfil the rights of workers, including all migrant workers.

In the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 is the cornerstone of domestic human rights legislation, as it incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into UK national law. The Human Rights Act prohibits slavery and forced labour, as well as any form of

discrimination based on nine protected characteristics, including race, religion and gender. The exploitation of migrant fishers is considered to be a breach of their human rights, a view which is supported by Leigh Day solicitors, who are bringing a judicial review case regarding the use of transit visas in the UK, stating that their ongoing use is a violation of article 4 of the ECHR, regarding slavery and forced labour (Leigh Day, 2023).

In addition to this, the UK has also ratified the ILO C188 Work in Fishing Convention (2007), which sets minimum standards for working conditions, rest periods, safety and work agreements for all fishers working on commercial vessels. Under ILO C188, the UK government must conduct inspections of vessels to ensure adherence to human rights laws and impose penalties on vessel owners who do not comply. However, experts continue to argue that the continued use of the transit visa in UK fishing allows for human rights abuses that are in direct violation of C188.

6.0 The Role of the Sri Lankan Authorities in the UK

The High Commission of Sri Lanka in the UK, like all consulates, is there to aid and support its citizens. In the case of migrant workers, this can include help with passports, visas, emergency support, legal assistance or repatriation. Where there are concerns about trafficking or exploitation, the consulate will work with UK authorities such as the police and immigration to identify and assist victims (IOM UN Migration, 2021).

However, there can be significant barriers to accessing these services for migrant fishers who have experienced exploitation and abuse. Migrant fishers operate many miles offshore, which limits their ability to access consular services, including those available by telephone. Moreover, the threat of immigration penalties or further harm discourages many migrant workers who experience abuse from reporting such incidents. If consulates are unaware of concerns, they are unable to provide assistance.

An additional problem is that Sri Lankan fishers in the UK remain hidden. As neither the UK or Sri Lankan governments keep statistics on how many Sri Lankan fishers work on UK vessels, it is difficult to ascertain how widespread exploitation and abuse is. Without this key information, it can be difficult to identify victims or provide them with much-needed support.

7.0 Policy Recommendations

The UK Government Should:

1. Commit to a Complete End to the Transit Visa System in the UK.

Instead, this should be replaced with a specific Fishing Work visa, which applies to all migrant fishers employed on UK vessels, regardless of if they work within or beyond the 12 nautical mile limit. The pay, benefits and working conditions of this visa must be in line with that granted to UK fishers, as well as all national laws regarding minimum wage and working standards.

All migrant fishers should have access to the National Health Service as part of this visa.

The new fishing Work Visa would not restrict fishers to a specific vessel, allowing them to change employer as needed (FLEX, 2025).

2. Introduce a ‘Workplace Justice’ Visa

For migrant fishers currently under transit visas, a ‘workplace justice’ visa should be introduced. This would allow fishers who have ongoing legal complaints against exploitative employers to retain their permission to work in the UK (on another vessel). This could take the form of New Zealand’s Migrant Exploitation Protection Visa, which allows migrant workers to work for any employer whilst their complaints are being investigated (Sehic and Vicol, 2025).

3. Improve Enforcement Powers and Monitoring of Labour Standards

There needs to be regular, proactive monitoring of labour regulations on board all UK vessels, to ensure that safety, working hours and minimum wage standards are consistently met.

The new Fair Work Agency needs to prioritize the fishing sector and undertake mandatory monitoring of all UK fishing vessels.

4. Collect Data Regarding Migrant Fishers who Work in the UK

The UK government should keep records of how many migrant fishers work in the UK, their countries of origin and which visas they are working under. This will facilitate greater oversight to ensure that appropriate policies and support are implemented.

The Sri Lankan Government should:

1. Establish a Bilateral Agreement with the UK for the Fishing Industry

Work with the UK government to develop a bilateral agreement between the two countries that specifically focuses on the fishing industry. This would allow greater collaboration and oversight regarding the rights of migrant fishers.

2. Collect Data on Sri Lankan Fishers who Work in the UK

This should include details on how many fishers leave to work in the UK, the visas they are employed under and which fishing vessels they plan to work on. This would allow for a greater understanding of how many Sri Lankan fishers are impacted by the transit visa system.

3. Increase Regulation of Recruitment Agencies

Strengthen oversight of recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka to ensure that fishers are not charged illegal fees or made to pay recruitment costs which should be covered by the vessel owner or employing company.

4. Ratify ILO C188 Work in Fishing Convention

This would help ensure that labour conditions and safety standards are met, encourage fairer recruitment process and strengthen legal protections for all fishers, including those who work outside of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

One of the greatest concerns regarding the ongoing use of the transit visa in UK fishing is how it creates a distinctly hierarchical system; where pay, working conditions and treatment depend on which country a fisher originates from, with UK fishers at the top and non-EEA fishers at the lowest level. By allowing a legal loophole where migrant fishers on transit visas are not technically employed in the UK, the system allows for widespread exploitation and abuse that largely occurs under the radar.

Migrant fishers in the UK work hard under difficult and often dangerous circumstances. Without them, there would be significant economic and practical implications for the fishing industry, as well as for thousands of consumers, brands and businesses. One of the cornerstones of the UK's equality legislation is that every individual in the same role receives equal pay and working conditions and can undertake their job free from discrimination and abuse. Yet when it comes to migrant fishers, this is still not the case.

Sri Lankan fishers in the UK fishing industry are particularly vulnerable as there is very little information currently known about them, including numbers of fishers and the vessels they are employed on. Evidence indicates that a significant number of Sri Lankan fishers have experienced exploitation and abuse whilst working in the UK, yet their voices remain unheard. To remedy this, it is vital that both the UK and Sri Lankan governments keep accurate data, so exploitation of Sri Lankan fishers can be monitored and ultimately prevented.

The most pressing issue is for the UK government to end the transit visa system and instead implement a Fishing Work visa. This would help ensure that all fishers, regardless of country of origin, receive fair pay and treatment in the UK fishing industry. This is not only legally the correct solution, but also an imperative from a human rights perspective.

References

- Cundy, A. (2023). The Fishermen. *Financial Times*. [Filipino fishermen in the UK live lives of peril and loneliness](#)
- Decker Sparks, J. and Zhou, M. (2025). Lost in Transit: Philippines Migrant Fishers in the United Kingdom Fishing Industry. *International Labour Organization*. [Lost in transit: Philippines migrant fishers in the United Kingdom fishing industry | International Labour Organization](#)
- The Equality Act 2010. [Equality Act 2010](#)
- Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) (2024). Closing the Loophole: Exploitation of Migrant Fishing Workers. [24.10.22 Fishing Loophole Briefing](#)
- The Human Rights Act 1998. [Human Rights Act 1998](#)
- International Labour Organization (2025). ILO Indicators of Forced Labour: 2025 Revised Edition. [ILO indicators of forced labour | International Labour Organization](#)
- The Immigration (Offshore Worker Notification and Exemption from Control [Amendment] Regulations 2023, No. 346, s43, Nationalities and Borders Act 2022 (2023). [The Immigration \(Offshore Worker Notification and Exemption from Control \(Amendment\)\) Regulations 2023](#)
- ILO (1998). ILO 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up. [ILO_1998_Declaration_EN.pdf](#)
- ILO (2007). C188 Work in Fishing Convention. [C188 - Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 \(No. 188\) | International Labour Organization](#)
- IOM UN Migration (2021). IML Information Note on Consular Assistance. [iml_consular_assistance1.pdf](#)
- Leigh Day (2023). Legal Challenge to UK Transit Visa System that Leaves Migrant Fishers Victim of Human Rights Abuses. [UK Transit Visa system challenged for leaving migrant fishers vulnerable](#)
- Marine Management Organization (2024). UK Sea Fisheries Annual Statistics Report 2023. [UK sea fisheries annual statistics report 2023 - GOV.UK](#)
- McVeigh, K. (2022). Migrant Workers ‘Exploited and Beaten’ on UK Fishing Boats. *The Guardian*. [Migrant workers ‘exploited and beaten’ on UK fishing boats | Workers' rights | The Guardian](#)
- Motova-Surmava, A. (2023) Access to Labour in Fishing Sector 2023: Online Survey Findings. *Seafish*. [Access to Labour in fishing sector 2023, online survey findings — Seafish](#)
- Murphy, S. and Quintana, M.M. (2025). 2024 Employment in the UK Fishing Fleet. *Seafish*.
- Phelan, K., Gardner, A., Selig, E.R. and Decker Sparks, J. (2022). Towards a Model of Port-Based Resilience Against Fisher Labour Exploitation. *Marine Policy*, 142, article 105108.
- Seafish (2017). Working on UK Fishing Vessels: The Legal Framework and Support for Fishers. [seafishinsight_workingonukfishingvessels_201711.pdf](#)
- Seafish (2025). *Briefing Note: Skilled Worker Visa Changes – Impact on Fishing Industry (November 2025)*. [Briefing Note - Skilled Visa Changes \(Nov 25\) — Seafish](#)
- Sehic, A. and D.O. Vicol (2025). Safeguarding Sponsored Workers: a UK Workplace Justice Visa, and Other Proposals from a Six-Country Comparison. *Work Rights Centre*. [Safeguarding sponsored workers: a UK Workplace Justice Visa, and other proposals from a six-country comparison | Work Rights Centre](#)
- Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2024). Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment 2024. [SLBFE | Years 2024](#)
- Wright, D. (2025). *2024 Economics of the UK Fishing Fleet*. Seafish. Publication 36534. [2024 Economics of the UK Fishing Fleet — Seafish](#)

* The author is a Research Intern at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI), Colombo. The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are the author's own and do not represent the institutional views of LKI or any other affiliated institution.