From 'elites' to 'everyone': re-framing international mobility scholarship to be all-encompassing

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From 'Elites' to 'Everyone': Re-framing International Mobility Scholarship to Be All-encompassing

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Abstract: This article argues that the view of international mobility in the management and organization literature has been too restrictive in focusing only on high status workers. This view needs to be widened to an all-encompassing perspective that is not limited or restricted in terms of the number, types or status of people engaged in working internationally. In particular, it argues that there are millions of low status international workers that, with some few exceptions, we have largely ignored. Not only does it mean that scholars are failing to explore the complete picture, it adds to the research-practice gap between those scholars and the practitioners who have to manage workers of all status levels. The article points out the areas where our knowledge is lacking and suggests a 'road-map' for future research to overcome these critical gaps.

Key words: expatriates; international HRM; international mobility; migrants; status

Much of the international human resource management (IHRM) scholarship has been concerned with the management of 'elite' international workers, high-status expatriates assigned by private sector multinational enterprises (MNEs) to work in foreign countries (Dowling, Festing and Allen 2013; Kaufman 2007). These are predominantly people from developed societies, highly educated and paid high salaries, whose occupational movement across national borders is largely unrestricted, and who, for the most part, are welcomed by the receiving host nation as 'talent'. We know a lot about such international workers - about the kinds of people they are, their issues and careers, and about the HRM processes involved in their management (see, for example, McNulty and Selmer 2017; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen and Bolino 2012). Studies of these elite international workers – commonly referred to as assigned expatriates or AEs (McNulty and Brewster 2017a) and self-initiated expatriates or SIEs (Selmer, Andresen and Cerdin 2017) - are embedded within the wider context of international HRM, a field that in turn sits within the broader discipline of 'HRM'.

Both international HRM and HRM more broadly are largely ‘elite-focused’. Consider, as an example that the most popular topic in HRM is talent management (Collings, Mellahi and Cascio 2019), with an avowed focus on the top two or three percent of the workers within an organization. It is no surprise then to find that in the narrower specialty of international HRM the focus has also been on ‘elite’ workers in the form of high-status expatriates (McNulty and Brewster 2019). Here, we argue that a continued focus on elites has limited additional value.

We understand that there are several reasons why high-status expatriates have dominated the scholarship of our field. First, as in international HRM specifically, and the larger field of HRM generally, most of the evidence about global workers comes from the Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) countries (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan 2010): these are, however, only a small minority of all the countries in the world where international workers exist. Second, the evidence about international workers tends to come from large private sector multinationals (Fang, Jiang, Makino and Beamish 2010; Levy and Reiche 2018) and therefore concentrates on the people that they deem to be their international workers, their ‘expatriates’ (see Takeuchi 2010) – almost all of whom, given the costs of employing them, are in ‘elite’ categories of employment. Consequently, with our research efforts facilitated through MNEs access and co-operation, scholarship has focused on managing the elite.

Undoubtedly, the scholarship of elite expatriation has served the international HRM field well, establishing clear areas of concern for these international workers' wellbeing (adjustment, compensation, repatriation, among others) (Brietenmoser, Bader and Berg 2018; Hippler, Haslberger and Brewster 2017; Kim, Saldanha Halliday, Zhao, Wang and Von Glinow 2018), as well as opportunities for international workers' careers, including the development of their personal capital and professional development (Dickmann, Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Tanskanen and Tornikoski 2018; Suutari, Brewster, Dickmann, Mäkelä, Tanskenan and Tornikoski 2017). This research also evidences a direct link to the concerns of the MNEs about how these workers are to be managed, and, indeed, direct parallels have been drawn between expatriate management and talent management more generally (Cerdin and Brewster 2014; Collings 2014), and between expatriate management and return on investment (McNulty and De Cieri 2016), even if it is little researched in practice. We know from this large body of research that elite expatriation remains the single most effective

development tool that MNEs have (Mäkelä, Suutari, Brewster, Dickmann and Tornikoski 2016), and that the experience of international mobility increases the individual's career capital. For the vast majority of high-status expatriates, even those who leave their original company upon repatriation, international mobility has a positive effect: Objectively they have more promotions, and subjectively they are confident that the experience has been good for their continuing employability in the international labor force (Mäkelä et al. 2016; Suutari et al. 2017). In sum, elite international work is commonly used as a lever for high-status expatriates' career, even if the company they are, or were, working for does not necessarily get the (long-term) benefit (Lazarova and Caligiuri 2001).

Why, then, do we suggest that the focus on elites may be a potentially flawed approach? We argue in this article that the narrow focus on elites needs to change because, as our evidence show, HRM specialists in MNEs and in many local businesses that employ workers from different countries do not just manage elite international workers. The point we make is that the entire international workforce consists of a much larger number of international workers beyond an elite minority of high-status expatriates: there are around 250 million people in the international workforce and only a few millions of those are the elite expatriates (OECD 2017; IOM 2017). We suggest it is time to overcome our scholarly fascination with, and focus on, elites: Noting that, until we do, our international HRM scholarship remains at risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant.

The continued focus on an elite minority may be one of the reasons that there are ongoing discussions about the 'disconnect' between management scholars and practitioners - who manage the *entire* workforce rather than an elite group (see, for example, Bartunek and Rynes 2014; Rynes, Colbert and O'Boyle 2018). This is, arguably, a particular problem for studies of international mobility that have for decades resisted paying any significant attention to the large majority of the internationally mobile workforce that exists outside of the small cohort of elites. In simple terms, a (continued) focus on elites is a potentially flawed approach because it ignores all *other* internationally mobile workers - workers who are employed in vast numbers in the international labor force and for whom labor mobility is a regular and often critical component of their livelihood. The companies and individuals that employ them can, and do, reap significant benefits. We need to understand more about their HRM.

We start this article by noting the prevalence of the focus on elites in studies of international HRM. We highlight the research gaps that exist, and then set the stage for re-framing IHRM to cover the entirety of the international labor force. We conclude by suggesting a 'roadmap' for future international HRM research that is, we believe, more comprehensive, more relevant and more exciting. This is especially appropriate for scholars and doctoral students wishing to take the research field in new and important directions, to inspire them to blaze a trail of relevant research that matters not just to the Academy and their own teaching, but also to the world at large.

Current status of expatriate research: The (flawed) focus on elites

It is an undeniable fact that more people live and work outside their own home country now than at any time in history. Although the numbers involved are uncertain and disputed, it is estimated to amount to around 3.3% of the world's total population (OECD 2017; IOM 2017), or more than one quarter of a billion people (UN DESA 2020), with an increase of over 50 million in just the last ten years (UN International Migrant Stock 2019). The majority of these are workers (ILO 2015). In the UK, as an example, the fastest growing category of foreign-born workers is in low-skilled sectors and occupations, such as transport drivers and food, drink and tobacco process operators (Rienzo 2015). In the Middle East and Far East regions, as examples, foreign labor constitutes a substantial proportion of the workforce; 91% of the resident population in Dubai (De Bel Air 2018), and over one-third of the resident labor force in Singapore (Ministry of Manpower 2020a; 2020b).[1] In each case, the overwhelming majority of international workers are in the low-status category (World Bank Group 2016), and nearly all are expatriate workers employed in the country on a temporary basis, being expressly forbidden as a condition of their work permit to seek permanent residency or citizenship as migrants. Importantly, these countries would economically fail in their current form without the input of low-status foreign labor (see Bal 2016), which brings into stark perspective our argument that research about non-elite international workers is sorely needed. Given the poor tracking and recording in some countries, and the sheer number of people crossing borders without documents, it is possible that all these figures are, in fact, underestimates.

Approximately 70% of all internationally mobile people are of working age (20–59 years), and every second person is a woman (UNDP 2018). There is a political reaction to these rising numbers: some governments see them as a threat and try to restrict entry to their countries (e.g., BREXIT; Dennison and Geddes 2018), while others aim to attract them. Almost half of the governments worldwide have policies in place to increase immigration for qualified workers (UNDP 2018), but the demand from employers in many developed countries for unskilled workers, willing to do the jobs that locals prefer not to, is increasing too.

We can categorize international workers into two groups. First, there is the group of high-status international workers, namely, the traditionally researched *expatriates* and the group of the less researched but important *skilled migrants*.

High-status expatriates

Although consultancy reports (BGRS 2017; Deloitte 2017; AIR Inc 2019) lead us to believe that the high-status expatriates group continues to grow, especially as new business players from the developing countries become MNEs and send people abroad (KPMG 2018; Zhu, De Cieri, Fan and Zhang 2018), the same consultancy evidence seems to indicate that other forms of international mobility are growing much faster (Air Inc 2020; BGRS 2020; Deloitte 2019).

We can divide high-status expatriates into two broad categories: assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). This key distinction is based on who takes the initiative for the move to another country (McNulty and Brewster 2019)[2]. Assigned expatriates are sent by an employing organization, whereas self-initiated expatriates go to another country on their own initiative.

AEs are sent by their organization to achieve organizational purposes (Harzing 2001). In the vast majority of cases they are accompanied by their immediate family members and the sending organization provides a generous salary, allowances for housing and children's schooling costs, health insurance and protection, additional allowances for home visits, and perhaps a car and club memberships (ECA International 2020). Such workers are carefully managed over a long period of time by 'Global HRM departments' or specialists, with

particular attention paid to how to retain them (Reiche, Kraimer and Harzing 2011), repatriate them (Chiang, van Esch, Birtch and Shaffer 2018), manage their careers (Breitenmoser, Bader and Berg 2018; Suutari et al. 2017), and overcome accompanying family challenges (Shaffer, Joplin and Hsu 2011; Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer 2010). AEs cost their organizations a lot. Consequently, such expatriates are in managerial or specialist technical positions where they can generate significant returns (Harzing, Pudelko and Reiche 2016).

As most of the research has been conducted on AEs, there is often an assumption that the term ‘expatriates’ refers solely to this group. Sometimes, indeed, the literature uses terms such as ‘expatriate managers’ or ‘expatriate executives’ to imply that people in high level positions are the only types of expatriates there are. The assumption is wrong. Most expatriates in the world do not share this situation: but the paradigm in the minds of many scholars is hard to change (see McNulty and Brewster 2017).

Self-initiated expatriates were first identified in the scholarly literature by Suutari and Brewster (2000), who noted the different routes to SIE status: SIEs could apply for advertised positions in another country and move there when their application was successful; they could move to another country and look for work when they got there (common among the foreign partners of local citizens and trailing partners of expatriates); they could go as students and then get fulltime work after graduating; and so on. The better educated SIEs are valuable ‘boundary-spanners’ for MNEs, often having spent more time in the host country than the typical AE, having learnt the local language and absorbed the local culture (Furusawa and Brewster 2018).

Over the past two decades research on SIEs has grown fast – perhaps encouraged by the fact that many academics are SIEs and that online samples (although weak) are much easier to collect than samples through MNEs who are increasingly unwilling to support such research. Even here, however, the focus has been almost exclusively on those in professional occupations, looking at issues ranging from their willingness to go (Andresen, Biemann and Pattie 2015) and pay and rewards (Kim, Halliday, Shao, Wang and Von Glinow 2018), to the purposes for which they are used by MNEs (Tharenou 2015) and why they repatriate (Tharenou and Caulfield 2010). Somewhat illogically, Cerdin and Selmer (2014) have tried to include high-status as part of the definition of SIEs, despite the fact that most SIEs sit at the 'bottom of the pyramid', a point we elaborate in the next section.

Expatriates, generally sent and employed on contracts for three to five years, are not the only type of high-status international workers. There are others who work abroad for short periods of time ranging from a few hours or overnight, to a few days or weeks, and perhaps for months, that have received much less attention: short-term assignees (Starr and Currie 2009; Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm 2005), international business travelers (Suutari and Brewster 2009), and international commuters (Mäkelä, Saarenpää and McNulty 2017). We know little about these people compared to other types of elite international workers, save for them being sent abroad by companies (assigned), but sometimes (in the case of international business travel or commuting, for example) being self-sponsored. This category of foreign labor consists of people who travel outside their own country for work, while maintaining their residence rights and home and family life in their own or another country. Such workers are rarely accompanied by family members (Suutari, Brewster, Ruisala and Syrjakari 2013). Although they are neither expatriates nor migrants, the types of international work they undertake offers opportunities as well as challenges for their organizations (Mäkelä, Bergbom, Tanskanen and Kinnunen 2014; Starr 2009), so they too need to be covered by the organization's international HRM policies and practices. Some of the issues they face include pay and rewards, and sometimes taxation when working in other countries for a specified number of days in a year, which subsidiary HRM departments are often poorly trained to manage, potentially resulting in double payment of taxes, fines for companies, arrest at airports for travelers, and so on (AIR Inc 2020; Cartus 2018). There are also family issues for the at-home dependents (Baker and Ciuk 2015; Starr and Currie 2009), and questions of work–life balance for the travelers themselves (Mäkelä, Kinnunen and Suutari 2015).

Highly qualified migrants

Unlike expatriates, migrants intend to settle in their new country, to stay there throughout their career, and to bring up their children as citizens of that country.[3] The limited number of studies of migrants in the business and management literature have once again focused on the elite (Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin and Suutari 2012; Cerdin, Abdeljalil-Diné and Brewster 2014), including migrant CEOs (Legrand, Al Ariss and Bozionelos 2018). A widespread assumption is that expatriates are white, western, highly qualified and highly paid, whilst

migrants belong to minority groups, are eastern, poorly educated and low paid (Darity and Mason 2004), but, breaking away from the popular prejudices, and from the all-encompassing but managerially unhelpful UN definitions, it is clear that migrants, like expatriates, can exist at any status level. What distinguishes the two groups for the purposes of business and management research is the temporal dimension, or *time*: expatriates are in the country temporarily whereas migrants intend to settle and to stay there a long time. Some highly qualified migrants move specifically to carry out their profession in another country (Cerdin, Abdeljalil-Diné and Brewster 2014), and most are economic migrants, moving to another country for a better standard of living and/ or lifestyle (Tharmaseelan, Inkson and Carr 2010). These are the migrants that many governments work hard to attract to their country, leading to 'brain drain' from poorer countries and 'brain gain' for the richer ones they have moved to (Saxenian 2005). However, it is by no means unknown for migrants to be unable, because of lack of accepted qualifications, different standards or sheer prejudice, to take up the regular occupation they had at home: Bizarrely termed in the literature 'over-qualification', rather than 'under-employment' (Harvey 2012; Landolt and Thieme 2018), medical doctors working as taxi drivers in their new country is not unknown. Again, our studies of migrants tend to be of these highly qualified (or sometimes, rather inaccurately termed, high skilled) migrants (Al Ariss and Syed 2011; Zikic 2010).

Desired studies of expatriates: The forgotten majority

Our discussion so far mirrors the discussion in the management and organizational literature. We have focused on the elite and, more by implication than intent, ignored the majority. This is a luxury that practitioners do not have: They must manage the whole workforce, even if the pressure currently is to focus on the 'talent'. Mobility for work has never been only, or even mainly, for the highly qualified and well-paid. Indeed, international mobility is most frequently undertaken by some of the poorest people from some of the poorest countries on Earth. Consider the willingness to move to another country for work among Indians (90%) and Brazilians (70%). In Bangladesh, approximately 3.5 million people left the nation from 2006 to 2011 to seek work abroad, mostly on temporary labor contracts (BMET 2015). There are also efforts by the governments of North America and Europe to recruit Filipinos as nurse assistants for their growing elderly populations (Strack, Booker, Kovacs-Ondrejkovic, Antebi

and Welch 2018). Despite the demand, these low-status workers have featured very little in our scholarly discourse.

Of course, we do not suggest that there have been no studies of internationally mobile workers other than of the elite. We note below that there is a small but growing interest in the many millions of non-elite international workers. Some of them are low-status expatriates or, as they have been dubbed, 'hidden' expatriates (Haak-Saheem and Brewster 2017) - often invisible to many people in their world and certainly to scholars. Others are low-status migrants, attracted to lower paid jobs in their new country, seeing it as offering a better standard of living and a more fulfilling life than even higher status jobs in their original country (McNulty and Brewster 2017; Özçelik, Haak-Saheem, Brewster and McNulty 2019; Wang 2004). Yet others are refugees – people who have been driven out of their home country by natural disaster or more commonly by war, ethnic cleansing or political conflict (Reade, McKenna and Oetzel 2019). Some of these people spend the rest of their lives hoping that things will change and they can go 'back home': Many of them, particularly as their children settle into local school systems or they get valuable work, put down roots in the new country (Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel 2017; Gericke, Burmeister, Lowe, Deller and Pundt 2018). Most migrants relocate with their families or aim to bring family members to join them once they are settled, although there may be considerable delay depending on the legal system in their new country (İçduygu and Diker 2017).

Low-status international workers usually work as much as they can for as many hours in a week as they can to send a high proportion of their limited income home to their families in poorer countries, and then, at some point, they must return home. The sums that they send home are staggering: These are some of the lowest paid people in the country they work in, but in 2018 they transferred well over US$500 billion to the low- and middle-income countries that they came from (and where often their family members still are; World Bank Group 2019).

These remittances amount to far more than the total amounts of aid sent by rich countries to poor ones and are significant elements of GDP in, for example, India, the Philippines, and Bangladesh (World Bank Group 2016). At a personal level, the sums sent home may be small in terms of the (rich) host countries these workers live in but can be significant in the (poor) home countries they come from, providing for otherwise unobtainable education opportunities for children or health care for elderly parents. These

low-status workers live geographically separated from members of their family, often in miserable working and living conditions (Chan 2011; Chia and Zaccheus 2012; Özçelik et al. 2019) for the sake of these benefits.

As with the elite, there are many personal and professional benefits gained by such individuals when working abroad, but there are many who are exploited and subjected to varying extremes of injustice arising from an absence of any decent, even basic, form of HRM (Australian Government 2016; Connell and Burgess 2013; Erdoğdu and Toksöz 2013).

Our point here is that the narrow focus on elites needs to change because HRM specialists in MNEs do not just manage elite international workers in the form of high-status expatriates and skilled migrants. It is an undeniable fact that the majority of the international workforce consists of low-status international workers, people for whom international mobility is a necessity for their work, and often their survival, and for whom many governments around the world rely on for their country's economic success and prosperity. As illustrated in Figure 1, the sheer numbers of low status international workers that show up as expatriates and migrants in employment warrants that we pay them more attention than they have received to date. The vast majority are working in low-status roles, as cleaners, beauticians, domestic workers, security guards, drivers, and construction and agricultural workers (Haak-Saheem and Brewster 2017).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

These international workers have been largely ignored in the business and management literature and received almost no attention in the field of international HRM. When considered, they have been categorized almost exclusively as unskilled or low-skilled migrants (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013) – or as 'labor migrants' or 'migrant workers' (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia 2013; Platt, Baey, Yeoh, Khoo and Lam 2017). There are, of course, variations to this pattern, seen for example in the European Union where every citizen has rights to reside, work and have full citizenship status in all the other member states; but the fact remains that the overwhelmingly majority of low-status international workers do not reside in, or even come from, the EU (UNDP 2019). The numbers of low-status international workers exceed even the best estimates by the UN and OECD. Getting any solid evidence is particularly difficult, and not helped by wavering and dubious definitions of constructs (Weiner and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020), nor the clandestine and undocumented nature of entry and exit methods of many workers (Geddes 2005). Definitional problems aside, as a

proportion of the world's population, the number of low-status international workers is substantial, often over 10% of the total population in any nation (Bal 2016; Spindler-Ruiz 2020). The largest numbers reside in just a few countries in the Americas, Middle East and Asia (Asis and Piper 2008; Frantz 2013; Siniavskaia 2015), but they exist everywhere. Low-status international workers move to another country looking for work or hoping for work or, if facilitated through agencies or middlemen, in order to take up pre-arranged offers of contract work.

Fixing weakness in HRM scholarship

Those charged with managing HRM within organizations are often focused on the elite (or "talent"). Most global HRM specialists are experts at managing the compensation and tax arrangements of high-status expatriates, and sometimes highly qualified migrants, but rarely look beyond that. As we have shown, our international HRM scholarship has pandered to this concentration on the elite. Lower status international workers, despite many also being expatriates, receive none of this specialized HRM support. This situation frequently arises because these workers are generally subsumed into local workforces and managed as if they are locals, despite their being foreigners and not holding any rights to citizenship (Özçelik et al. 2019). This means that, often, the capabilities they can bring to the organization (the language skills they may possess, their inter-cultural experience, and their contacts) are similarly ignored. And so are any problems they may have in assimilating to the new work environment, or in living apart from their families, or in resolving employment disputes. Many such workers are very much under their employers' control – it is normal for employers or agencies to hold the passport of such workers (Fillinger et al. 2017), to retain some of their earnings until the time they leave the contract and therefore usually the host country, and sometimes to not pay outstanding sums at all (see, as an example, Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics 2011).

MNEs are often either confused, or ready to exploit confusion, over which country's employment law applies to many of these international workers (Bhagwati and Srinivasan 1983). Migrants, as permanent residents in their new country, are protected by its legislation, but expatriates as temporary residents (except for the diplomatic immunity of foreign government staff) are frequently afforded no such right. When low-status workers have their pay stolen from them (Salleh 2017; Teicher 2020) or otherwise face pay disputes with their

foreign employer (Justice Without Borders 2017; Seow 2016), it is common practice for these workers to be repatriated against their will and then forced to fight their claim across international borders, which they can ill afford to do (Malit and Naufal 2016). In the host country, low-status expatriates do not have access to the welfare system made available to citizens or (some) highly qualified migrants, being forced instead to use support from charities and NGOs to address their employment issues (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics and TWC2 2010). We illustrate these disparities in Figure 2, comparing host/ new country legal protections between citizens and international workers and using immigration status as a key criterion. Importantly, some highly qualified migrants (as illustrated), particularly in the initial stages of their employment, may have no access to host country legal protections until such time as they become permanent residents or citizens.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The point here is that working internationally is not always a victimless undertaking for low-status people working to earn a decent living in order to survive and to support their families. In terms of both the value to the organization and the well-being of the individual, it is not hard to argue that there is a potentially important role for HRM specialists here. We are just beginning to explore some of these areas (Haak-Saheem and Brewster 2017; Ozcelik et al. 2019) and much more is needed.

A roadmap for future international HRM research

The international labor force includes everyone who lives and works outside their home country but who is not yet, or has only recently become, a citizen of the host country. It includes people that hold temporary or permanent residency without holding citizenship (expatriates; McNulty and Brewster 2017b), those seeking permanent residency and citizenship (migrants and particularly highly qualified migrants; Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013; Crowley-Henry and Ariss 2018), and others, such as refugees (Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel 2017). It is the management of all these international workers that concerns us in this article. Much of what we know from studies of elite expatriation and migration can be applied to the forgotten majority of what we term ‘everyone else’ in the international workforce; but much cannot. It is time for the field of international HRM to look beyond elites and to take a broader and all-encompassing look at everyone in the international labor force.

A key argument we make is that the context and the nature of international transitions are crucial: Different situations and different types of international workers at varying levels of status have very different experiences of international mobility and require different forms of HRM. Unfortunately, we still know very little about the circumstances and the HRM challenges presented by low-status international workers in major and popular parts of the world such as North America, Europe, or the Pacific. We know almost nothing about those for whom working abroad is for survival and necessity in regions such as the Middle East, Asia, South America or Africa.

We appreciate that there has been much work on these members of the international workforce in other disciplines, and that there is the beginning of research on these topics in the management and organization field, some of which we have noted already and more of which is noted below. But there is just not enough. Given the numbers involved, the number of organizations affected, and the importance of these people for our economies and for our and their well-being, we need to pay them more attention.

Proper scholarly attention being paid to the study of low-status international workers has the potential to extend and build upon prior research about international work in general, including the types of HRM they should receive and how they should be managed. Although this article provides an overview and rationale as to why we need more research about low-status international workers, more systematic and empirical research is needed to increase our understanding of the specific challenges MNEs face when employing them and how these challenges can be overcome. We propose several research areas that may help advance conceptual and empirical development related to these challenges (see Table 1 for a summary), which we hope will open up new areas of research for people who deserve much more of our scholarly attention.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Establishing the employment criterion

In this article we are concerned with international HRM, meaning that future research needs to restrict its focus to those that are legally entitled to reside and work abroad, which consequently excludes some refugees without papers and those in illegal employment or irregular migration (human trafficking, underground workers and those in the grey or

informal economy; Geddes 2005)[4]. As the field of international HRM is concerned only with actual or potential members of the workforce, it is important to also exclude students, retirees, general travelers and tourists as well as virtual workers (see McNulty and Brewster 2017b). Accordingly, if there is no business element in terms of an employment criterion, then there is no opportunity to meet the management element of international HRM. Such a distinction is necessary to ensure that research about international workers is conceptually clear (Cappelli 2012) and that inferences drawn from it can be assessed and compared across studies (Bono and McNamara 2011). Without such clarity, confusion and misinterpretation are likely to arise.

Notwithstanding the above, international employment is facing significant challenges. We know, for example, that the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) data indicate that the previous more-or-less continuous growth each year in the amount of international business being conducted came to an abrupt halt in 2008 as a result of the global financial crisis and has hardly recovered since (UNCTAD 2017; UNCTAD 2020). Recent political developments involving right-wing populist movements in the USA and Europe (Rodrik 2018), such as the trade war with China and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) backlash by US President Trump (McDonald-Gibson 2018), and the UKs decision to leave the European Union ('Brexit'; Simpson, Finch and Chellel 2018), may reduce it even more. The global pandemic – the COVID-19 crisis – ongoing as we write, has prolonged trade tensions among major economies more generally and is unlikely to be followed by any sort of swift recovery (*The Economist* 2020). Even as lockdowns lift, there are reasons to worry about ongoing international travel restrictions and increased fears of infection among workers themselves that negatively impacts on global output

Given the ever more integrated nature of the world economy, we need more research to understand the implications of these economic trends for international HRM, where there is likely to be a slower increase in the number of assigned expatriates sent by MNEs and a correspondingly greater increase in both: (a) the pressures for migration and low-status expatriation from countries that fail to get the foreign direct investment they need; and (b) the pressures for MNEs to increase their use of alternative (cheaper) international workers,

including ‘non-employees’ such as expatriate gig workers (Collings and Isichei 2018; Meier 2017).

Widening the context

Future research is needed to address questions that pertain to international mobility in atypical contexts. There is a critical gap in our knowledge, for example, about international work beyond corporate contexts. Sorely needed is a broader, less traditional view of international work experience across all kinds of business and not just the corporate MNE, including those employed in the public sector and non-governmental organizations. Such research can more fully capture the nuances of low-status international employment, which has the potential to offer more detailed, practitioner-relevant implications that captures the context-specific nature of low-status work.

While research on working internationally has thus far yielded some important and compelling findings, much of it has been focused on North American and European perspectives (Caligiuri 2000; McNulty and Selmer 2017; Stahl and Cerdin 2004). The idea that international work involves people only from rich developed Western countries going to poorer Third World countries has been outdated for some time, and the rise of MNEs from emerging economies (Horwitz and Budhwar 2015) has meant the need to rethink many of our assumptions about the international mobility of workers more generally. As an example, we note that little of the literature has concerned itself with the growth of international mobility in the Asia-Pacific region (ECA International 2015; Strack et al. 2015) despite that on the most recent *Forbes* Global 2000 list of publicly traded corporations, the Asia-Pacific region led with 792 companies, approximately 42 per cent of the entire list (Murphy 2018). China and Hong Kong-based companies alone accounted for 291 of those on the list, with two Chinese companies taking the No. 1 and No. 2 spots globally. Expanding the conceptualization of international workers across several geographical regions (e.g., Ozcelik et al. 2019) further enhances measurement, analysis and comparison of findings and ‘best practice’ (see, e.g., TWC2 2015), thus leading to a richer understanding of the meaning, significance and application of HRM practice in organizations that employ such workers.

Further areas of interest that require our attention are international workers that do not show up as foreign labor through official (typical) routes and schemes (such as 'immigration') but as graduating international students, family members of ‘official’ international workers,

and refugees, all of whom have an impact on the labor market and a right to work in many countries, as well as a moral right to receive some form of HRM (Salt and Millar 2006).

Addressing status stereotypes in HRM practice

Multifaceted conceptualizations of low-status international work are useful for capturing the complexity of the employment relationship – a relationship that changes depending on the status of the workers involved and thus takes on different meanings for HRM in practice. Thus, within the low-status groups there will be differences depending on sector (construction, care work, home-based work, etc), nationality, gender, religious beliefs, visa eligibility, and so on.

Drawing from stereotype theory, which asserts that individuals' simplified beliefs about categories of people may result in prejudice and rigid generalizations about preferences and abilities (Brigham 1971), the employment relationship for low-status international workers is typically represented by an absence of HRM practice. Commentaries suggest that (status) stereotypes result in the dehumanization of the employment relationship as a result of the capitalization of labor (Ciupijus 2010; Inkson 2008), where only high cost labor ('expatriates') are seen as deserving of the sophisticated HRM offered by global mobility specialists. These stereotypes have undoubtedly left low-status international workers exposed to varying degrees of discrimination at the hands of employers and agencies (McCollum and Findlay 2018), as well as governments (commonly seen, for example, in the segregation of low-status workers from local populations), and which we assert has potentially placed the research and practice of international HRM in moral 'limbo'. We know from NGO and consulting reports, for example, that many low-status workers are institutionally (and legally) disempowered to deal with workplace violations, with low (or no) levels of voice and union representation (Frantz 2013). Many face considerable obstacles in furnishing evidence to substantiate wage-theft claims due to a lack of access to documentation such as contracts, timesheets, and salary slips (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics 2017; Justice Without Borders 2017). Many more report not having seen or signed employment contracts, in some cases being deliberately withheld by their employer to ensure there is no paper trail (Aleksynska, Aoul and Petrencu 2017).

Future research is needed to address questions that ask, for whose purpose does HRM serve? Bauman (1990; 1991) asserts that the moral impulse of HRM should be concern for

the welfare of employees in the pursuit of a more humane workplace, but as de Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris (2012) suggest, HRM often loses its way in favor of the 'moral' requirements of the business. The real question here of course is one of ethics, and, as authors, we do not take a neutral stance. From our perspective, and from those of others (Legge 1998; Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern and Stiles 1997; Woodall and Winstanley 2001), HRM is undeniably about managing *people* such that how they are managed should reflect (at the very least) the tenets of 'decent work', integrity, and dignity. If HRM does not have a moral element because it pretends, for example, to be scientific, or morally neutral, or to be practicing an 'alternative' ethical approach, that is not just amoral, it is immoral. The distancing of HRM practice as a result of practitioners' compliance with and duty to organizational directives, that in turn results in a lack of justice oriented HRM (Folger and Cropanzo 1998) for lower categories of international workers that typically need it the most, is inexcusable. We thus agree with definitions of HRM that assert human resource management at its core is not just about improving profits and pay-outs for wealthy owners, but about balancing the varying interests of owners, governments, society *and* employees for everyone's benefit (Beer, Boselie and Brewster 2015; Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn Mills and Walton 1984). We urge future researchers to explore the barriers to justice oriented HRM for low-status international workers arguing that, if it is of no concern to international HRM practitioners and of no interest to international HRM scholars, are we sure we have got our priorities right?

Drawing on cross-disciplinary studies

The international HRM field will benefit from drawing on research about international workers that sits in other disciplines, where there is a substantial and increasing body of knowledge available that provides us with a better understanding of the various categories of international worker and the effects that they have in the organizations that employ them. Only a very small portion of this research is situated within international HRM, with much of it found in corresponding disciplines such as sociology, human rights, and humanitarian aid (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Hannaford forthcoming; Wo Lai 2018), economics, geography, and demography (Batista and Narciso 2016; Christian and Namaganda 2018; Koh and Sin forthcoming; Ruhs 2016), and migration (Correa-Velez, Barnett and Gifford 2015; Ewers and Dicce 2016; Malit and Naufal 2016). Some research can also be found in gender studies (Kilkey, Perrons and Plomien 2013; Moya 2007).

These are areas of research that are largely ignored in studies of international HRM, but which offer rich insights into the complexity of foreign labor and its HRM issues and concerns. As a result, the field of international HRM has adopted a narrow research focus, save for some excellent studies that have recently brought together the fields of migration and international HRM to focus on skilled migrants (Zikic 2015). Missing from this narrow focus is a deeper understanding of the HRM situation of distinct but related categories of international worker in other communities of practice, including nurses in Sweden, aid workers in Somalia, academics in Shanghai, and domestic workers in Dubai.

Applying new theories

In seeking to understand and facilitate better HRM practice for low-status international workers, researchers need to explore the effects of HRM on workers' behavior and attitudes. Here, we need innovative application of new theories that have so far been sparsely covered in our management and organizational research. Promising approaches include stakeholder theory (Goodpaster 1991; Greenwood and Freeman 2011), power dynamics (De Schutter 2013; Townley 1993), and organizational justice theory (Colquitt 2012; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter and Ng 2001; Ozcelik et al. 2019). Also appropriate are theoretical perspectives examining vulnerable workers (Connell and Burgess 2013; Gleeson 2009) and decent work (Mallett 2018) – issues that tend to disproportionately plague low- and semi-skilled international workers especially.

There are, particularly perhaps, related issues about the rights of low-status international workers that engage in this level of labor movement - issues of exploitation, victimization, and coercion (Baey and Yeoh 2015; Crane 2013; Gleeson 2015b; Goh 2019). Workplace abuse and violence are not uncommon – but rarely reported (da Conceição Figueiredo, Suleman and do Carmo Botelho 2018). A goal of future research should be to generate a comprehensive framework of analysis, that allows for the analysis and comparisons of HRM of all types of international itinerants (Banai and Harry 2004) as well as the intersection of human rights, labor rights and business outcomes for low-status international workers (Arnold 2010; Wettstein 2012).

We urge scholars to explore more specifically through empirical and theoretical studies the tension that exists between government policies, labor rights and the enforcement of labor laws (Gleeson 2015a). These are under-researched areas in an era when more labor migration is currently at an unprecedented high level, no doubt fueled by the cheaper cost of travel and

digital technology to support being ‘far away’ from home, alongside calls for ‘more rights’ for those that undertake international mobility for their livelihood (Ruhs 2013; 2016). Our goal is to start a conversation and contribute to analysis and debate.

Looking forward: A final word

Like others (e.g., Kostova, Roth and Dacin 2008) we have set ourselves a goal in this article that is far from modest, but we believe it to be important and we believe that opening up the topic to debate is a necessary first step. Our intention here has been to be deliberately provocative, by raising questions and starting the discussions that scholars in international HRM need to have about the scope, and the importance and the relevance, of our subject. We want to direct scholars to a contemporary research agenda about international mobility that extends beyond what has gotten us to this point and that can help the field stay relevant in a quickly changing world.

If we are even partly right about the importance (and the fascination) of spreading international HRM beyond the elitist field that it currently occupies, it may be that we are, by awful mischance, addressing this issue at precisely the right moment in history. In many ways we wish we were not but the COVID-19 crisis has emphasized the crucial role played in all our lives by low-status workers (Fernandes 2020). Our lives have, during the time that we have been writing this article, been stripped back to the simple essentials and there is now much greater awareness that it is very often non-elite workers who are providing the key, sometimes lifesaving, services. These are the ordinary workers, not the ‘talents’ in our currently closed businesses, who are responsible for collecting and distributing food, cleaning the hospitals and public spaces, getting nurses back and forth to medical facilities, disposing of household and other rubbish, and looking after our children and elderly relatives. Typically, these are workers most of us take for granted in our everyday lives but who, at this critical point in time, have become the glue that keeps communities going – despite being untrained for the risky circumstances they find themselves in. Many of them work in occupations that sit at the lower end of the income spectrum but whose wage rates and industrial protections were not designed to factor in hazardous work conditions, which for some could result in their own death. It is telling that when we are driven back to the basic, lower level needs of Maslow’s hierarchy (food and water, shelter, love and belonging) it

becomes apparent that without the ordinary workers in our society whose job it is to provide basic physiological needs, we would be in desperate straits indeed.

Many of the non-elite workers in our local environment will be international workers, but there is a wider argument here about the international workforce in general. Senior managers responsible for sending elite workers around the world will be asking themselves, having managed for some months without so many expatriates, whether they really need to go back to the old ways. Is it necessary to fill every senior position abroad with an expensive expatriate? Hasn't relying on electronic communication and the skills, abilities and loyalty of local managers (Banai and Reisel 1993) worked pretty well? Undeniably, it has been considerably cheaper. What about the enormous numbers of international business travelers? There has always been a question-mark over what impact they could really have by flying into a situation they could not understand in detail, second-guessing the local senior staff who did understand it, making decisions that would impact on those staff considerably, and then flying out to leave the locals to deal with the outcomes (Banai 1992). It is well-accepted that these international business travelers (IBTs) cannot fly considerable distances at large expense to simply meet with the local managers and defer decision-making to them by trusting their judgement. IBT, by its nature, expects that managers fly into situations to make changes and to 'fix' something – despite that they do not stay around to see the impact of their decisions.

Let's think about this also from the point of view of the business traveler (and their family). Do they want to risk relocating to a new country or flying in and out of major cities for their work when they are aware that they might get 'quarantined' upon arrival and will be unable to go home for several weeks (Chinazzi et al. 2020; Gostin and Wiley 2020), and then quarantined again away from their family when they get back home? It is entirely possible that a lot of them will argue that getting their work done through Skype or Zoom or the company video-conferencing system has worked reasonably well, and they have been able to achieve what was necessary despite not physically going anywhere – so much so that they intend to keep doing it that way.

While the high-status elite expatriates and international business travelers may be able to change how they work, it is an option that is much less available to those engaged in low-status work as expatriates or migrants. It is not possible, for example, to pick crops, or clean buildings, or care for elderly people at a distance, no matter how much communications

technology is available. In some jobs, and typically those that are menial or manual, workers need to be there on the ground. For the low-status worker (and their family), there is likely to be a strong feeling that they have not got a choice: The amounts of money that they can earn working in a developed country may be small by local standards but, compared to home, it may be enough to sustain a large extended family. That money cannot be earned at a distance. Additionally, leaving the host country to return home, even for a short period of time until a pandemic is over, will result in the cancellation of their work visa and the loss of a much-needed job, for which most cannot afford the fees to reapply nor the travel costs associated with returning to the host country for work.

Critically, the governments charged with hosting these workers are often ill-prepared to keep them safe and healthy, given that many workers live in over-crowded and unhygienic dormitories with limited possibilities for social distancing to stem infection from sanitation, food and water (Paul, Samantra and Aravindan 2020), and thus increasing the risk of outbreaks (Ratcliffe 2020). These workers are also typically excluded from national health programmes, often through the arbitrary dismissal of health care claims by employers (Justice Without Borders 2017) or swift repatriation (while still sick) to get rid of the 'problem' (TWC2 2016). This exclusion makes early detection, testing, diagnosis, contact tracing and seeking care for pandemic illnesses extremely difficult (World Health Organization 2020) – resulting (as we have seen in Singapore, for example) in thousands of infections among low-status international workers in just a matter of weeks (Yea 2020). Our point here is that the COVID 19 situation brings into view the vulnerable nature of the employment situation for low-status international workers, where institutionalized neglect is common (Fillinger et al. 2017), issues of precarious work and unfree labor are ignored (Yea 2017), and choice appears to be a luxury few possess.Looking forward, at least a short way, we foresee a future in which management and organizations may very well adapt to a steady decline in the number of elite international workers moving around the world – while, correspondingly, the number of low-status internationally mobile workers may continue to increase. We do not suggest anything dramatic, noting that this will most likely be a continuation of current trends rather than a radical break, but the trajectories are clear. Even if that were not to be the future and everything somehow went back to exactly how it was, we believe that the case for broadening the scope of international HRM to reflect the reality of what the practitioners and policy-makers need to manage larger, more varied and complicated international workforces

than just those included in the elite is a powerful one. If our prediction about the future is correct, then the case becomes unanswerable – and ripe for further research.

Notes

[1] These statistics are in comparison to, for example, Malaysia at 9.5% (World Bank Group 2013), South Korea at 3% (Roh 2014), and Australia at 1% (Australian Government 2016). Across the EU countries, foreign workers made up 7.4% of persons in employment in 2015 (Eurostat 2016).

[2] Some have argued that MNE employees can choose where they want to go (Altman and Baruch 2012), but that evidences a serious lack of construct clarity and understanding of how MNEs work.

[3] We recognize, of course, that people can switch between these categories: some who start as expatriates stay on and some who aim to be migrants leave. There is little research on these transitions (Ramboarison-Lalao, Brewster and Boyer 2019) but the fact of fungibility only makes the importance of clarifying who is being studied at any point in time more important.

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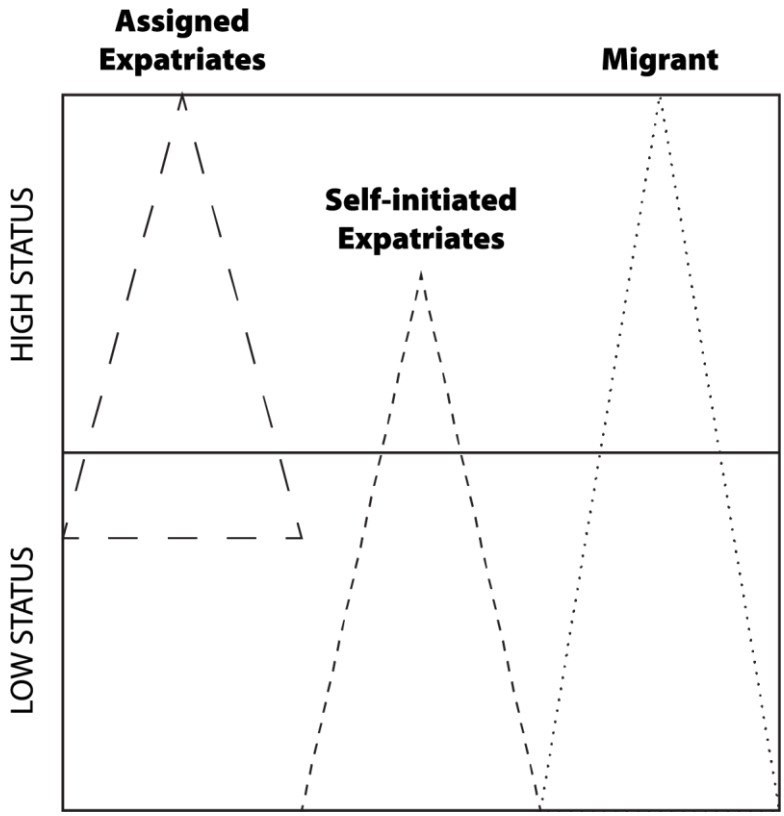

FIGURE 1, Ratios of assigned expatriates and low status international workers such as self-initiated expatriates and migrants in employment.

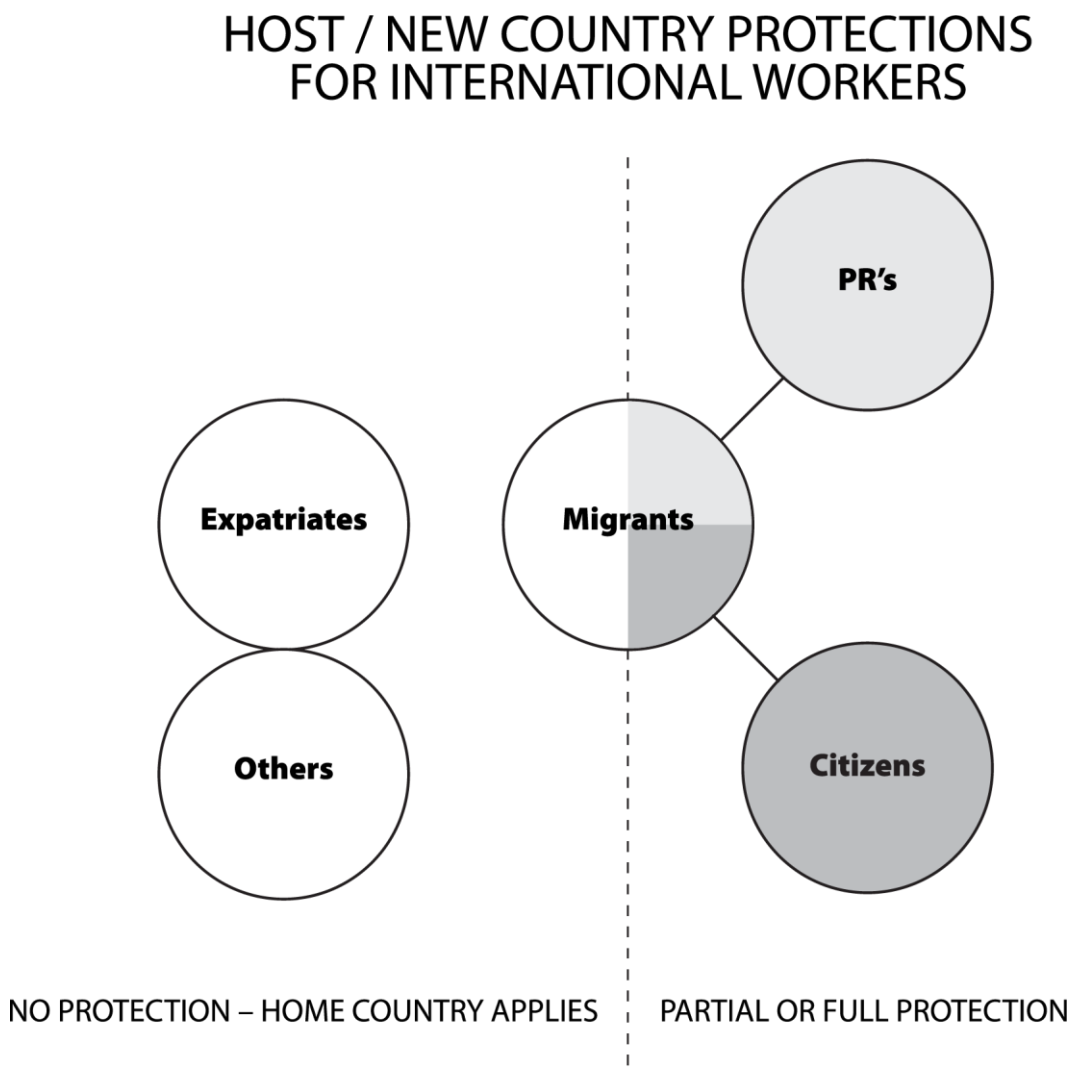

FIGURE 2. Comparing host/ new country protections between citizens and international workers

TABLE 1

Future Directions for International HRM Research

Theme	**Research Topics**
Construct clarity about the	1. Restrict the focus only to people that are legally entitled to

employment criterion	reside and work abroad; restrict research to the study of those in employment, i.e., if there is no business element, then there is no opportunity to meet the management element of international HRM.
Construct clarity about international workers	2. What are the characteristics of 'everyone else' / the 'forgotten majority' in the foreign labor force - Who are they? Where are they located? 3. Consider international workers that do not show up through typical routes and schemes such as immigration - How is their mobility for work facilitated?
Implications of economic trends for international HRM	4. Examine global economic trends and their impact on international employment including changes in categories of workers deployed, or employed, abroad. Economic trends include trade wars, Brexit, worldwide recessions, and the 2019 global pandemic.
Widen the context of what it means to 'work internationally'	5. Understand international work experiences across all kinds of business (not just the MNE), including those employed in the public sector and non-governmental organizations. 6. Expand the conceptualization of low-status international work across several geographical regions.
Address status stereotypes in international HRM	7. To what extent does the employment relationship change depending on the status of the workers involved? Does HRM in practice take on a different meaning according to the status of the workers involved? 8. Investigate organizational, agency and State barriers to justice oriented HRM for low status international workers. 9. Examine issues of exploitation, discrimination, coercion, and voice for low status international workers.
HRM and ethics	10. For whose purpose does HRM serve? 11. Explore workers' moral right to receive some form of HRM.
Cross-disciplinary studies	12. Draw on studies from disciplines outside the international HRM field, such as economics, geography, sociology, demography, and migration.
Development and application of theory	13. Explore the intersection of human rights, labor rights and business outcomes for low status international workers. 14. Innovative application of new theories such as stakeholder theory, power dynamics, and organizational justice, and the concepts of vulnerable workers and decent work.
Policy development	15. Examine the tension between government policies, labor rights and the enforcement of labor laws for low status workers.