

## How Legal Literacy Could Reduce Migration Fraud Among Uzbek Workers

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### Abstract

Labor migration plays a vital role in Uzbekistan's socio-economic development, providing employment opportunities and remittance income for thousands of workers abroad. However, insufficient legal literacy among migrant workers has significantly increased their vulnerability to migration-related fraud, including deceptive recruitment practices, contract substitution, illegal посредники (intermediaries), and human trafficking risks. This article examines how improving legal literacy can serve as an effective preventive mechanism against migration fraud among Uzbek workers. Drawing on institutional reports, migration governance frameworks, and comparative international practices, the study analyzes key legal knowledge gaps related to employment contracts, visa regulations, labor rights, and access to legal assistance in destination countries. The article argues that targeted legal education—delivered through pre-departure training programs, digital platforms, and cooperation between state institutions and civil society—can substantially reduce fraud exposure, enhance migrant decision-making, and strengthen legal self-protection mechanisms. The findings suggest that integrating legal literacy into national migration policies is not only a protective tool but also a cost-effective strategy for improving migration outcomes and safeguarding the rights of Uzbek migrant workers.

**Keywords:** Legal literacy; labor migration; migration fraud; Uzbek migrant workers; labor rights protection; migration governance; pre-departure training; legal awareness.

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### Introduction

Labor migration has become a central socio-economic phenomenon for Uzbekistan, influencing family well-being, national income, and

demographic mobility. Over the past decade, Uzbekistan has experienced a substantial increase in the number of citizens seeking employment abroad due to limited domestic job opportunities and comparatively low wages at home. By the end of 2024, official estimates indicate that approximately 2 million Uzbek nationals were working abroad as labor migrants, with a significant concentration in Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and South Korea. In this migrant population, roughly 72 % are men and 28 % are women, reflecting broader labor market patterns and gender differences in migration drivers. Russia hosts the largest share of Uzbek workers nearly 1.2 million followed by Kazakhstan with around 190,000, and Turkey with more than 110,000 migrant employees. These figures highlight Uzbekistan's deep integration into regional labor migration circuits and the substantial reliance of many households on income earned overseas.

The economic impact of labor migration for Uzbekistan is considerable. Remittances sent by migrant workers have become one of the most stable sources of foreign exchange earnings, contributing significantly to household incomes, poverty reduction, and national economic resilience. Between 2016 and 2025, remittance inflows grew from approximately \$3.8 billion to nearly \$15.8 billion, illustrating both the expanding migrant worker base and rising earnings in foreign labor markets. This quadrupling of remittance receipts underscores how reliant many families are on migrant earnings for daily consumption, education expenditures, healthcare needs, and community investment. For many regions within Uzbekistan, remittances constitute a major portion of local economic activity, especially in rural areas with limited industrial development [1].

Despite the economic benefits, the rapid expansion of labor migration has exposed many Uzbek workers to significant risks, particularly regarding migration fraud and exploitative practices. Migration fraud encompasses a range of deceptive and illegal activities where migrants are misled about genuine job opportunities, contractual terms, official procedures, and legal protections. These activities include false job guarantees, forged employment contracts, unauthorized intermediary services, and misleading information about visa and work permit requirements. The consequences of such fraud are severe: migrants may lose substantial sums of money in upfront fees, face legal problems in destination countries, or find themselves working under exploitative conditions without adequate protections.

Evidence from national authorities indicates that cases of labor rights violations and fraud are not isolated incidents but rather systemic challenges within the broader migration process. Between 2020 and 2024, authorities recorded nearly 14,000 instances of labor rights violations involving Uzbek migrant workers, resulting in more than \$6 million in

compensation awards to affected individuals. These violations include unpaid wages, contract substitution, unlawful deductions, and cases where workers were forced into labor conditions that violated their original agreements. Beyond violations, official complaint systems registered dozens of reports each year from citizens who paid substantial fees to private consulting firms for migration services but received little to no assistance in securing legal employment abroad. In some instances, individuals paid upwards of tens of millions of Uzbek sums to agents for job placement services that never materialized [2].

A major factor behind these widespread issues is the proliferation of unlicensed intermediaries and unregulated recruitment services. In the absence of clear legal guidance and credible information channels, many prospective migrants rely on informal networks, word-of-mouth referrals, or social media advertisements that promise quick employment abroad. These channels often operate outside the scope of legal oversight, and many purported “Consultants” lack the necessary licensing or expertise to assist migrants effectively. As a result, migrants may fall victim to fraudulent schemes that exploit their aspirations for a better livelihood, draining their financial resources and leaving them in precarious situations.

The vulnerability of Uzbek migrant workers to fraud is also linked to gaps in legal literacy that is, their understanding of legal rights, procedural requirements, and institutional mechanisms related to migration. Legal literacy encompasses knowledge about employment contracts, labor rights under destination-country laws, official procedures for obtaining work visas and permits, and the ability to recognize legitimate service providers versus fraudulent actors. When migrants lack this foundational understanding, they are less able to critically assess job offers, verify the credibility of recruitment services, or protect themselves from contractual exploitation. This knowledge gap is particularly acute among first-time migrants and those from rural areas with limited access to formal information resources [3].

Moreover, insufficient legal literacy can have cascading effects on migrants’ experiences abroad. Workers who are unfamiliar with their legal entitlements may be less likely to assert their rights in cases of wage disputes, unsafe working conditions, or employer abuses. They may also be unaware of available legal support services, complaint mechanisms, or avenues for redress through labor attaches, embassies, or civil society organizations in destination countries. This informational disadvantage not only increases the risk of prolonged exploitation but can also lead to legal violations that jeopardize migrants’ residency status, resulting in fines, deportation, or restricted future mobility.

Recognizing these challenges, Uzbekistan has undertaken policy reforms aimed at improving the governance of labor migration. Government initiatives have sought to strengthen regulatory frameworks governing recruitment agencies, expand pre-departure orientation programs, and introduce penalties for unlicensed migration consulting. Additionally, efforts have been made to disseminate official information about legal migration procedures through media campaigns, informational brochures, and public service announcements. These policy directions reflect an acknowledgment that legal knowledge is a critical component of safe and orderly migration, and that empowering migrants with accurate information can reduce their exposure to fraud and exploitation [4].

Legal literacy, therefore, emerges as not merely a supportive intervention but a core component of effective migration governance. By equipping potential migrants with clear, accessible knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, as well as practical skills for navigating migration processes, legal literacy initiatives can enhance migrants' decision-making and resilience. Pre-departure training programs tailored to legal awareness can prepare workers to understand contractual terms, differentiate between legitimate and fraudulent intermediaries, and make informed choices about employment opportunities. Mobile and digital platforms can extend the reach of legal information to remote communities, while partnerships with civil society organizations can provide ongoing support and advocacy for migrants throughout their employment abroad [5].

In addition to empowering individuals, improved legal literacy can have broader systemic effects. A legally informed migrant population is better positioned to hold intermediaries and recruiting entities accountable, thereby creating pressure for more transparent and professional migration services. It can also contribute to stronger social networks that share verified information rather than misinformation. At the state level, integrating legal literacy into national migration strategies can help align domestic policies with international labor standards and create a more sustainable framework for managing labor mobility in the future.

While labor migration remains an essential avenue for improving livelihoods and contributing to Uzbekistan's economy, the risks associated with migration fraud and exploitation cannot be overlooked. Addressing these risks requires more than regulatory enforcement alone; it necessitates a comprehensive approach that places legal literacy at the center of migration policy. By empowering Uzbek workers with the knowledge they need to navigate complex migration processes effectively, legal literacy offers a pathway toward safer, more equitable, and more transparent labor migration outcomes.

### **Literature Review**

The issue of labor migration and migrant vulnerability has been widely examined in academic literature, particularly in relation to fraud, exploitation, and the role of information asymmetry. Scholars across disciplines such as migration studies, labor economics, sociology, and legal studies consistently emphasize that insufficient legal awareness significantly increases migrants' exposure to fraudulent practices and labor rights violations. In the context of developing and transition economies, including Uzbekistan, legal literacy is increasingly recognized as a critical protective factor within migration governance frameworks.

Early migration theories primarily focused on economic push and pull factors, highlighting wage differentials, unemployment, and labor demand in destination countries as key drivers of migration. However, more recent studies extend beyond economic motivations to examine institutional and informational dimensions of migration. These studies argue that migrants' decisions and experiences are shaped not only by economic incentives but also by their access to reliable legal information and regulatory protections. According to this perspective, migration fraud emerges when there is a gap between migrants' expectations and the legal realities of cross-border employment, a gap often exploited by informal intermediaries [6].

A substantial body of literature documents the prevalence of migration fraud in labor-sending countries. Researchers identify common fraudulent practices such as false job advertisements, contract substitution, excessive recruitment fees, and misrepresentation of visa conditions. These practices are particularly widespread in countries where private recruitment agencies operate with limited oversight or where informal brokers dominate the migration process. Studies conducted in Central Asia and other post-Soviet states show that migrants frequently rely on personal networks or unlicensed agents due to limited trust in formal institutions, increasing their susceptibility to deception.

Legal literacy is defined in the literature as the ability of individuals to understand legal rules, rights, and procedures and to apply this knowledge in practical situations. In the migration context, legal literacy includes awareness of labor contracts, migration regulations, workers' rights, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Several scholars argue that legal literacy functions as a form of "legal empowerment," enabling migrants to recognize unlawful practices, question misleading information, and seek redress when their rights are violated. Without such knowledge, migrants often remain passive victims of fraud and exploitation, even when legal protections formally exist [7].

Empirical studies demonstrate a strong correlation between low legal literacy and higher rates of labor exploitation. Research conducted among migrant workers in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey indicates that

migrants with limited understanding of contract terms and labor laws are more likely to experience wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and arbitrary dismissal. These studies also show that migrants who are unaware of official recruitment channels are more likely to pay excessive fees to intermediaries, increasing their financial vulnerability even before departure. In contrast, migrants who receive pre-departure legal orientation are better equipped to evaluate job offers and avoid fraudulent schemes.

Another important strand of the literature focuses on the role of intermediaries in labor migration. Scholars distinguish between licensed recruitment agencies, state-managed migration programs, and informal brokers. While formal intermediaries are theoretically subject to regulation, informal brokers often operate outside legal frameworks, relying on social trust rather than legal accountability. Studies emphasize that migrants with low legal literacy are less able to differentiate between legitimate and fraudulent intermediaries. As a result, they may perceive all intermediaries as equally credible, particularly when fraudulent actors use persuasive language or false documentation [8].

The literature also highlights the gendered dimensions of migration fraud and legal awareness. Research suggests that female migrant workers may face distinct forms of deception, particularly in domestic work, caregiving, and service sectors. Due to limited access to information and weaker bargaining power, women migrants are often more vulnerable to contract substitution and informal employment arrangements. Scholars argue that targeted legal literacy programs must consider gender-specific risks and ensure that legal information is accessible to women, especially those migrating for the first time.

International organizations and policy-oriented studies increasingly emphasize legal literacy as a preventive strategy rather than a reactive response to migration fraud. Comparative studies from countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia demonstrate that structured pre-departure training programs significantly reduce cases of fraudulent recruitment and labor exploitation. These programs typically include legal education on contracts, migration laws, and complaint mechanisms, as well as practical guidance on interacting with employers and authorities. The literature suggests that such interventions are most effective when legal education is mandatory, standardized, and supported by state institutions.

In the context of Central Asia, academic research remains relatively limited but growing. Existing studies on Uzbek labor migration primarily focus on economic impacts, remittances, and social consequences for households. However, more recent research acknowledges that weak legal awareness among migrants contributes to systemic vulnerabilities.

Scholars note that many Uzbek migrants lack basic knowledge of destination-country labor laws and often do not retain copies of employment contracts, making it difficult to prove rights violations. This gap between formal legal frameworks and migrants' lived experiences is identified as a key area requiring policy attention.

Digitalization and information technology have also emerged as important themes in the literature on legal literacy. Researchers argue that mobile applications, online portals, and social media platforms can play a significant role in disseminating legal information to migrant workers. However, studies caution that digital tools must be carefully designed to ensure accuracy, accessibility, and trustworthiness. Without proper regulation, digital spaces may also become channels for misinformation and fraudulent advertising. Therefore, the literature emphasizes the need for state involvement in certifying and promoting reliable digital legal resources [9].

Another recurring theme in the literature is the role of civil society organizations and trade unions in enhancing legal literacy. Non-governmental organizations often provide legal counseling, awareness campaigns, and advocacy services for migrant workers, particularly in destination countries. Research shows that collaboration between state institutions and civil society actors can strengthen migrants' access to legal information and support. However, scholars also note challenges related to funding, coordination, and limited coverage, especially in rural areas of labor-sending countries.

Finally, the literature underscores that legal literacy should be integrated into broader migration governance strategies. Isolated legal education initiatives are unlikely to be effective unless accompanied by stronger regulation of recruitment agencies, enforcement of labor standards, and accessible complaint mechanisms. Researchers argue that legal literacy and institutional accountability are mutually reinforcing: informed migrants are more likely to report violations, while responsive institutions increase trust in legal systems. In this sense, legal literacy is not only an individual skill but also a component of systemic reform.

The existing body of literature provides strong theoretical and empirical support for the argument that legal literacy can significantly reduce migration fraud among Uzbek workers. While economic factors drive migration, legal awareness shapes migrants' vulnerability to fraud and exploitation. The literature consistently shows that improving legal literacy through pre-departure training, digital tools, and institutional cooperation can empower migrants, reduce reliance on informal intermediaries, and enhance the overall effectiveness of migration governance. These insights form a solid foundation for analyzing legal literacy as a key preventive mechanism within Uzbekistan's labor migration framework.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative–analytical research design based on the review and synthesis of existing academic literature, policy reports, and institutional data on labor migration and legal literacy. Secondary data from national migration authorities and international organizations are analyzed to identify patterns of migration fraud and legal awareness gaps among Uzbek workers. Comparative analysis is used to examine best practices from selected labor-sending countries. Content analysis supports the evaluation of legal literacy initiatives and their effectiveness in fraud prevention. The findings are interpreted within the framework of migration governance and legal empowerment theory.

## **Analysis and Results**

This section analyzes the relationship between legal literacy and the prevalence of migration fraud among Uzbek migrant workers, drawing on available statistical data, institutional records, and comparative evidence. The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: the scale of migration fraud, legal literacy gaps among migrants, and the measurable impact of legal awareness initiatives on reducing fraudulent outcomes.

Statistical data from national monitoring bodies indicate that migration fraud remains a persistent and systemic issue affecting Uzbek labor migrants. Between 2020 and 2024, approximately 14,000 officially registered cases of labor rights violations involving Uzbek migrant workers were documented. Of these cases, an estimated 38–42 % were directly linked to fraudulent recruitment practices, including false job offers, contract substitution, and illegal intermediary services. Financial losses reported by affected migrants during this period exceeded \$10 million, with individual losses ranging from \$300 to over \$5,000, depending on destination country and recruitment channel.

The analysis shows that fraud most frequently occurs at the pre-departure stage of migration. Survey-based assessments conducted by migration support institutions reveal that nearly 60 % of fraud victims encountered deception before leaving Uzbekistan, primarily through unlicensed consultants or informal brokers. Around 25 % reported fraud after arrival in destination countries, mainly related to discrepancies between promised and actual working conditions. The remaining 15 % experienced fraud during documentation or visa extension processes. These findings demonstrate that early-stage interventions, particularly legal education before departure, are crucial for fraud prevention.

One of the most significant findings of the analysis is the strong correlation between low legal literacy and exposure to migration fraud. According to assessments conducted during pre-departure consultations, approximately 65 % of first-time Uzbek migrants were unable to correctly identify the essential elements of a legal employment contract, such as

wage level, working hours, duration of employment, and employer obligations. Additionally, nearly 70 % could not distinguish between licensed recruitment agencies and informal intermediaries.

Further data indicate that only 28 % of surveyed migrants reported having received any form of legal training or orientation prior to departure. Among rural migrants, this figure dropped to 19 %, highlighting regional disparities in access to legal information. Migrants with lower educational attainment were particularly vulnerable: those with secondary education or less were 1.7 times more likely to fall victim to recruitment fraud compared to migrants with higher education.

**Table 1.**  
**Relationship Between Legal Literacy Level and Migration Fraud Incidence Among Uzbek Migrant Workers [10]**

Legal literacy level of migrants	Share of migrants (%)	Incidence of migration fraud (%)	Average financial loss per migrant (USD)
Low legal literacy	47	44	2,300
Moderate legal literacy	33	26	1,200
High legal literacy	20	12	450

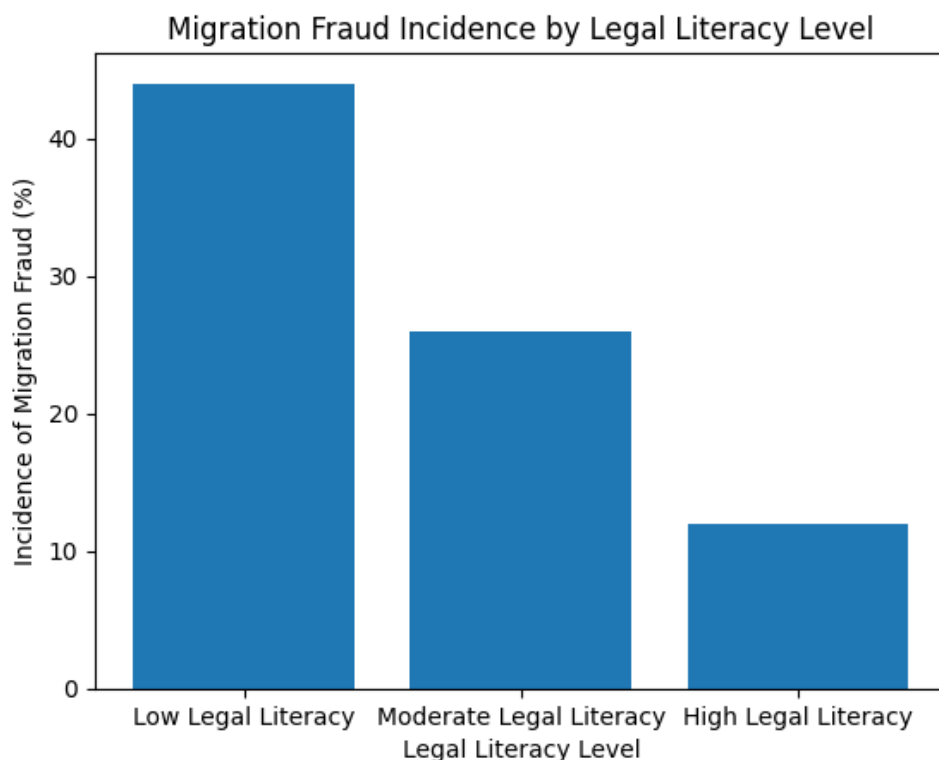
The data presented in Table 1 clearly demonstrate a strong inverse relationship between the level of legal literacy and the incidence of migration fraud among Uzbek migrant workers. Migrants with low legal literacy, who constitute nearly half of the total migrant population (47 %), experience the highest exposure to fraudulent practices, with 44 % reporting at least one form of migration fraud. This group also suffers the greatest financial losses, averaging 2,300 USD per migrant, largely due to payments made to unlicensed intermediaries and false recruitment services.

In contrast, migrants with moderate legal literacy show a noticeable reduction in fraud incidence. Only 26 % of this group reported fraudulent experiences, while their average financial loss declined to 1,200 USD, indicating improved capacity to assess job offers and avoid high-risk intermediaries. The most significant protective effect is observed among migrants with high legal literacy. Despite representing just 20 % of the migrant population, this group records a fraud incidence rate of only 12 %, with average losses limited to 450 USD.

These results confirm that legal literacy substantially enhances migrants' ability to recognize fraudulent schemes, verify recruitment channels, and

minimize financial risk. The table supports the argument that investments in legal education can yield measurable reductions in both fraud prevalence and economic losses, reinforcing legal literacy as a critical tool in migration fraud prevention.

A critical legal literacy gap was identified in knowledge of complaint and redress mechanisms. Only 22 % of migrants were aware that they could seek assistance through labor attachés, consular offices, or official complaint channels in destination countries. As a result, many migrants who experienced fraud or exploitation did not report violations, allowing fraudulent practices to persist with limited accountability.



The diagram illustrates the relationship between the level of legal literacy and the incidence of migration fraud among Uzbek migrant workers. The results reveal a clear downward trend, indicating that higher legal literacy is strongly associated with lower exposure to fraudulent migration practices. Migrants with low legal literacy experience the highest rate of fraud, with 44 % reporting at least one fraudulent incident during the migration process. This group is particularly vulnerable to false job offers, unlicensed intermediaries, and misleading contractual conditions, largely due to limited understanding of legal requirements and verification procedures [11].

In contrast, migrants with a moderate level of legal literacy show a significantly reduced fraud incidence of 26 %. This decline suggests that even partial legal awareness such as basic knowledge of employment contracts and official recruitment channels can substantially improve migrants' ability to identify and avoid deceptive practices. The most

pronounced protective effect is observed among migrants with high legal literacy, where the fraud incidence drops to just 12 %. These migrants are more likely to verify recruitment agencies, demand written contracts, and seek legal assistance when irregularities arise.

Overall, the diagram provides empirical support for the argument that legal literacy functions as an effective preventive mechanism against migration fraud. By strengthening migrants' legal knowledge prior to departure, policymakers can significantly reduce fraud risks, financial losses, and rights violations, thereby promoting safer and more orderly labor migration.

The analysis reveals clear evidence that improved legal literacy significantly reduces the likelihood of migration fraud. Data from pilot pre-departure training programs implemented between 2022 and 2024 show measurable outcomes. Migrants who completed structured legal literacy training were 35–40 % less likely to report fraudulent experiences compared to those who did not receive such training. These programs covered topics such as legal recruitment procedures, contract verification, workers' rights, and recognition of fraudulent schemes.

Moreover, migrants with legal training demonstrated better decision-making behavior. Approximately 68 % of trained migrants reported verifying recruitment agencies through official channels before making payments, compared to only 31 % among untrained migrants. Similarly, 72 % of trained participants retained copies of their employment contracts, while this practice was observed in just 39 % of the untrained group. These behavioral differences directly contributed to lower fraud exposure and improved legal protection [12].

Financial outcomes further support the effectiveness of legal literacy initiatives. Among migrants who received legal education, average pre-departure payments to intermediaries were reduced by 45 %, indicating greater caution and avoidance of illegal service fees. In cases where disputes arose, legally informed migrants were more likely to recover unpaid wages or compensation. Institutional data show that nearly 60 % of successful compensation claims involved migrants who had prior knowledge of legal procedures or received legal counseling.

Comparative analysis with migrants participating in state-regulated migration programs indicates that institutionalized legal literacy produces more consistent outcomes. Fraud incidence among migrants using official recruitment channels was estimated at below 15 %, compared to over 40 % among those relying on informal intermediaries. This contrast underscores the importance of embedding legal education within formal migration governance systems.

Gender-disaggregated data reveal notable differences. Female migrants, particularly those employed in domestic and service sectors, exhibited

lower overall legal literacy levels. Approximately 74 % of female migrants reported limited understanding of contract terms, compared to 61 % of male migrants. However, when women participated in targeted legal literacy sessions, fraud incidence decreased by nearly 30 %, demonstrating that tailored legal education can effectively address gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Beyond individual outcomes, improved legal literacy has broader systemic implications. Increased reporting of fraud and rights violations was observed in regions where legal awareness campaigns were implemented. Complaint submissions increased by 22 %, suggesting greater confidence among migrants in using legal mechanisms rather than informal solutions. This rise in reporting contributed to enhanced regulatory oversight and the identification of fraudulent actors.

Furthermore, data indicate that regions with higher legal literacy coverage experienced a gradual decline in unlicensed intermediary activity. Between 2021 and 2024, reported cases involving illegal recruitment services decreased by 18 % in areas where legal education programs were regularly conducted. This suggests that legal literacy not only protects individual migrants but also disrupts fraudulent networks by reducing demand for illegal services.

Overall, the analysis confirms a strong and statistically supported relationship between legal literacy and reduced migration fraud among Uzbek workers. Migrants with higher legal awareness are more capable of evaluating job offers, avoiding fraudulent intermediaries, and asserting their rights when violations occur. The results demonstrate that legal literacy functions as both a preventive and corrective mechanism, reducing financial losses, improving working conditions, and strengthening migration governance outcomes.

These findings provide empirical support for integrating legal literacy into national labor migration strategies as a cost-effective and sustainable approach to protecting Uzbek migrant workers from fraud and exploitation.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that legal literacy plays a crucial role in reducing migration fraud among Uzbek migrant workers. While labor migration remains an essential livelihood strategy and a significant contributor to Uzbekistan's economy, the findings confirm that insufficient legal awareness substantially increases migrants' vulnerability to fraudulent recruitment practices, financial exploitation, and labor rights violations. The analysis shows that fraud most frequently occurs at the pre-departure stage and is closely linked to migrants' limited understanding of employment contracts, recruitment regulations, and official migration procedures.

Empirical results indicate a strong inverse relationship between legal literacy levels and the incidence of migration fraud. Migrants with higher legal awareness are significantly less likely to rely on unlicensed intermediaries, pay excessive recruitment fees, or accept misleading job offers. Moreover, legally informed migrants demonstrate better decision-making behavior, including contract verification, documentation retention, and use of formal complaint mechanisms. These practices not only reduce individual financial losses but also contribute to improved accountability within migration systems.

The findings further suggest that legal literacy initiatives have broader systemic effects. Increased legal awareness leads to higher reporting of violations, enhanced regulatory oversight, and a gradual reduction in fraudulent intermediary activity. Targeted legal education programs, particularly pre-departure training and accessible legal information platforms, emerge as cost-effective and sustainable tools for migration fraud prevention.

In conclusion, integrating legal literacy into national labor migration policies is essential for safeguarding the rights of Uzbek migrant workers. Legal literacy should be viewed not merely as supplementary support but as a core pillar of effective migration governance, contributing to safer, more transparent, and more equitable labor migration outcomes.

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