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Migration, Human Supply Chains, and the Multinational Enterprise: Confronting an Overlooked Global Mobility Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 2 decades, multinational enterprises (MNEs) have significantly increased their reliance on migrant workers in lower-skilled jobs within global supply chains (GSCs)—a phenomenon largely overlooked in global mobility scholarship. In this provocation paper, we aim to broaden the scope of traditional debates in this field by introducing the concept of *human supply chains*, originally coined by labor-law scholar Jennifer Gordon (2017). We adapt and extend this concept to focus on MNEs as research targets, defining it through the policies and/or practices aimed at transnational labor recruitment, management, and retention applied to migrant workforces in their GSCs. We advocate for the need to engage with this critical topic in global mobility research and outline key pathways for future inquiry.

1 | Introduction

In today's interconnected global economy, the contributions of migrant workers are embedded in virtually all sectors. An estimated 169 million migrant workers make up approximately 5% of the global workforce (IHRB 2022). Persistent labor demand drives most international migration. This demand arises from structural transformations caused by aging populations, increased levels of education, and declining birth rates, all of which combine to reduce the availability of local workers willing to undertake lower-skilled jobs (de Haas 2023).

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) are especially affected by lower-skilled labor shortages because they have traditionally structured their global supply chains (GSCs) based on criteria such as access to a low-cost labor pool. However, in the 21st century, many of the previously low-income countries have developed into middle- or even high-income economies (de Haas et al. 2020; Skeldon 2018). Today, MNEs in these locations are increasingly recruiting migrant workers. This has contributed to significant new migration patterns, such as Filipino workers in Hungary, Bangladeshis in Malaysia, or Central Americans in Mexico (Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022; Hajro et al. 2023).

Historically, studies on global mobility have focused on high-skilled corporate and self-initiated expatriates, with MNEs as the research focus (Cooke, Wood, and Saunders 2022; Harzing 2001; Suutari and Brewster 2000). More recently, this research has begun to shift to high-skilled migrants (Dietz et al. 2015; Guo and Al Ariss 2015) and high-skilled refugees (Lee et al. 2020; Szkudlarek, Nardon, and Min Toh 2021). By including the latter two groups global mobility scholarship has made considerable progress. Nevertheless, at the same time, the continued invisibility of migrant workers in lower-skilled jobs highlights a significant gap in our knowledge (Cooke et al. 2019; Cooke and Wood 2024). This is despite the reality that today globally the greatest demand is not for high-skilled employees but for workers in lower-skilled jobs (de Haas 2023).

Milda Žilinskaitė and Aida Hajro have contributed equally to this paper.

In this provocation article we introduce the concept of human supply chains (HSCs)—originally coined by labor-law scholar Jennifer Gordon (2017)—to broaden the scope of the debate in the literature on global mobility. We adapt and extend Gordon's concept, positioning MNEs as key research targets. Our definition of HSCs encompasses *the policies and/or practices aimed at the transnational labor recruitment, management, and retention of migrants in lower-skilled jobs within the GSCs of MNEs.*

In the following sections we elaborate on HSCs in MNEs and outline the associated complexities. We then summarize the relevant research on global mobility and explain why HSCs have been all but ignored in this literature. Finally, we delineate three areas that deserve our scholarly attention: the intermediary system behind the global migration business, the human costs of it, and the role of MNEs as potential change agents. The research pathways we offer can and should be put into policy and practice, an advocacy that aligns with the call by Aguinis and colleagues (2022) for more focus on translating descriptive management research into prescriptive and normative work.

2 | Human Supply Chains: Origins and Definition

Since the 1970s, MNEs' offshoring and nearshoring practices—the former meaning moving the production overseas; the latter, to nearby countries of the home market—have been associated with low-cost labor availability in lower-income countries (Buckley 2014; Narula and Lee 2024). In the 21st century, many of these countries have become middle- or high-income economies, a transition reflected in the annually updated country classifications based on gross national income per capita published by the World Bank Group.[1]

This economic shift has led native populations in these countries to increasingly avoid low-wage, low-status jobs. For MNEs, relocating existing infrastructure—such as factories, natural resource extraction sites, or GSC logistics networks—away from these countries is both costly and impractical (Vargas-Hernández 2023). As a result, many of them have been lobbying governments to revise immigration policies to attract migrant workers to fill lower-skilled job vacancies (Gordon 2022; Lee 2019). For instance, as China's cheap labor reserves are gradually being depleted, companies with factories there are recruiting migrant workers from Laos, Myanmar, and several African countries (Chan and Selden 2017; de Haas 2023). Similarly, MNEs operating in former Eastern bloc countries in Europe, such as Hungary and Czechia, are now bringing in workers from as far afield as Mongolia and Nepal (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2016; Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022).

This phenomenon is not novel: it was observed by Ernst Georg Ravenstein in the earliest known modern scholarly work on migration, *The Laws of Migration* (1885). Ravenstein noted that in 19th century Britain, industrialization caused people from the rural suburbs of big cities to move closer to the city centers, leaving behind labor gaps that were then filled by rural-urban migrants from more distant villages. Today, this pattern is replicated on a global scale, with migrants from middle-income countries moving to high-income countries. The resulting labor gaps in middle-income countries are then filled by migrants from economically poorer nations (de Haas et al. 2020; Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2012). Because of these developments, more migration today takes place between developing and emerging economies "one level up" in the economic development hierarchy (de Haas et al. 2020). Notably, from 2013 to 2019, it was middle-income countries that experienced the largest (almost 8%) increase in immigration (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021).

The implications for MNEs—which today face not only the "global war for talent" (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001) but, increasingly, also the "global race for labor" (Žilinskaitė and Hajro 2022)—are immense. This global mobility of workers has resulted in extremely complex transnational migrant recruitment networks. The visa programs of almost all migrant-receiving countries require that companies hire workers while they are still in their places of origin (e.g., in Nepal, if Nepalese are recruited to factories in Malaysia). Few MNEs have their own recruiters—up to 80% of global recruitments of migrant workers for lower-skilled jobs are attributed to intermediaries (Gordon 2017). Additional brokers are often contracted to issue the required documents, conduct medical tests, organize transit within applicants' home countries as well as their cross-border travel, and manage migrant workers' accommodations during their stay abroad (Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022). Furthermore, because migration for lower-skilled jobs is mostly time-restricted, many of these steps to reestablish eligibility to apply for a new visa must be repeated every time after a worker finishes a contract and returns home (Pellerin 2015).

To summarize the various migrant worker recruitment-related issues under one umbrella definition, labor-law scholar Jennifer Gordon in 2017, coined the term *human supply chain*, which she defined as "a transnational network of labor intermediaries ...whose operation undermines the rule of law in the workplace, benefitting U.S. companies by reducing labor costs" (Gordon 2017: 445). Her definition of HSC specifically concerns transnational recruitment of migrants to work in lower-skilled, or "blue collar," jobs that typically do not require formal qualifications beyond secondary schooling (Gordon 2017).[2]

Gordon attributes the abuses in migrant recruitment for lower-skilled jobs mostly to the lack of effective government oversight. Focusing on U.S. regulation of migrant recruitment, she advocates enactment of state policies that make every participant in the supply chain for migrant workers legally liable for any abuses. In short, her main contributions lie in putting the spotlight on labor intermediaries and advocating for state intervention in global labor recruitment.

We build on Gordon's work, but we also extend and amend it. Our point of departure is that MNEs have a vital role to play in changing the difficult landscape of labor migration (Farbenblum and Nolan 2017). The actions of MNEs impact the entire regional or global supply chains that they orchestrate, including their first-, second-, and third-tier suppliers (Buckley and Liesch 2023). Migrant workers can be present anywhere in the GSCs, from sourcing raw materials to manufacturing and distribution. They may work directly in company-owned factories,

be managed by suppliers, or fall between the cracks of formal employment (Cooke and Wood 2024). We thus define HSCs in MNEs as policies and/or practices aimed at recruiting, managing, and retaining migrant workers employed in lower-skilled jobs in the GSCs (see Figure 1 for more details).

3 | Migration of Workers in Lower-Skilled Jobs and Global Mobility Research

Since an in-depth assessment of the literature on global mobility is beyond the scope of this provocation article, we draw on the systematic reviews by Cooke et al. (2019), Andersen (2021), and Fan et al. (2021), as well as the most recent special issue on the topic (Minbaeva et al. 2024). Their analyses unanimously agree that, historically, corporate expatriates have been the population of globally mobile employees of most concern to global mobility research. Some authors even argue the field has become "synonymous with the study of high-status expatriation" (Brewster and Haak-Saheem 2022). This can be largely attributed to business scholars' interest in improving the knowledge base that makes MNEs more competitive (Chang, Gong, and Peng 2012; Harzing et al. 2016; Minbaeva et al. 2024).

Other internationally mobile populations have recently attracted the attention of global mobility scholars. For example, MNEs are nowadays increasingly acknowledged to rely on high-skilled migrants to fill their staffing needs; with that acknowledgment comes recognition that the journeys and career paths of these migrants are not analogous to the experiences of corporate expatriates (Guo and Al Ariss 2015; Hajro et al. 2021). Furthermore, the increasing involvement of MNEs in refugee reception and support has prompted more business studies on forced migration, although here, too, the focus has been mostly on the high-skilled among the refugees (Lee et al. 2020; Szkudlarek, Nardon, and Min Toh 2021).

In contrast, MNEs' practices required to recruit, manage, and retain migrant workers for lower-skilled jobs are very much a secondary consideration if they are considered at all. In our search for studies focusing on migration for lower-skilled jobs through the global mobility lens, we identified only three articles. The first two are: a qualitative exploration of a family-oriented view on well-being of migrant workers (Haak-Saheem et al. 2022) and a quantitative study on the impact of organizational support for migrant workers, addressed from the psychological contract perspective (Haak-Saheem, Woodrow, and Brewster 2023). Both were conducted in the United Arab Emirates. The third study we identified, by Cooke et al. (2022), examines the employment relations of migrants in lower-skilled and undocumented jobs within Chinese-owned small businesses in South Africa. None of these studies is explicitly on recruitment, management, and retention of migrant workers in MNEs' global supply chains.

Thus, we agree with Cooke and Wood (2024) that migration for lower-skilled jobs remains largely unexplored within our field. We propose three interrelated explanations for this. First, there is a persistent preference in this literature toward studying high-skilled internationally mobile employees, largely driven by the value they create for MNEs (Cooke and Wood 2024). This trend may also be a symptom of gradual siloization of research on global mobility in the past 50 years (Fan et al. 2021). As research fields grow larger and mature, they tend to become "more inward-looking and self-referential" (Buckley et al. 2017: 1046). Global mobility scholarship is no exception: It draws heavily on its own previous literature, established theories, and methodologies (Brewster et al., 2016; Fan et al. 2021). This may have led, at least to some extent, to an inadvertent oversight of the migrant workforces in lower-skilled jobs, which are not typically considered part of the discussions on global talent, knowledge transfer, and MNEs' performance.

Second, there may be an unspoken avoidance of getting involved in migration as a research topic because of its strong political ramifications. Misconceptions about it are widespread in the media and in public discourse. Examples of such misconceptions are that migrants "steal" jobs of local workers, drive down wages, and that they mostly move through illegal

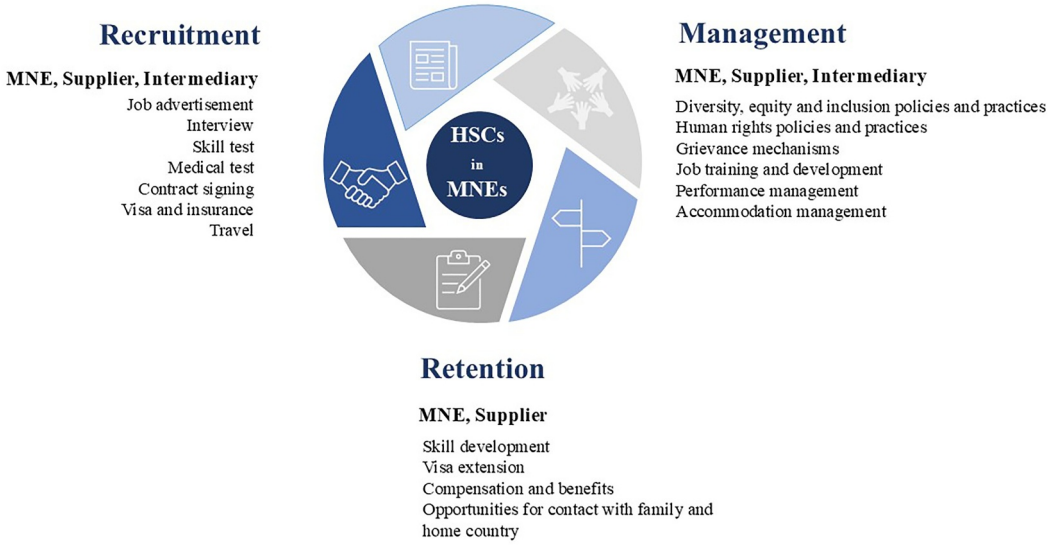

FIGURE 1 | The transnational labor recruitment, management, and retention of migrants in lower-skilled jobs within the GSCs of MNEs.

channels (Chomsky 2007; de Haas 2023). Even though scientific evidence refutes these myths, they continue to make such a contentious issue of migration for lower-skilled jobs that some researchers may be unprepared or unwilling to address the topic (McGahan 2020).

Finally, it could be inferred that global mobility scholars have refrained from studying migration for lower-skilled jobs because of the methodological challenges involved. Most migrants work in geographically remote areas such as factories on the outskirts of cities (Pellerin 2015). Many live in migrant-worker dormitories and have little visibility even in the local communities (Pottler et al. 2021). That is, they may seem to be hard to access. However, studies by Haak-Saheem, Cooke, and their coauthors show it is possible to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on this worker population. Empirical work also abounds in other disciplines (e.g., sociology, political science, labor law, industrial relations) that have investigated migrant worker populations outside MNE contexts. A variety of methods have been used, including interviews (e.g., Anderson and Hancilová 2011; Yea and Chok 2018), ethnographic observations (e.g., Constable 2022; Holmes 2012), policy analyses (e.g., Lee 2019; McDowell 2009), intervention studies (Apers et al. 2023), and mixed methods (e.g., Farbenblum and Berg 2017; Pereira 2013; Platt et al. 2017).

In short, the neglect in the global mobility literature of migration for lower-skilled jobs is a gap in scholarship that demands rectification. In the remainder of this provocation article, we build, when possible, on the existing business and management research. When it is nonexistent, we draw on work in other disciplines to suggest a way forward. In addition, we explore resources such as the databases of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and reports by industry alliances and leading human rights organizations like the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) dedicated to migration issues in GSCs. By studying HSCs in MNEs, global mobility scholarship can broaden its scope and develop much needed research-informed advice on best practices.

4 | Addressing Challenges in Human Supply Chains Through Global Mobility Research

The complexity inherent to HSCs in MNEs requires a deeper understanding of multiple actors at different levels: migrant workers, different operational departments in MNEs, suppliers, recruitment agencies, policymakers, and civil society. To maintain the focus of this provocation article, we have organized the remainder of it around three pressing topics: the intermediary system behind the global migration business, the human cost, and MNEs as potential change agents. We have further divided each section into current knowledge and future research paths to deepen theoretical debates and inform practice. In addition, we draw attention to relevant UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets (United Nations 2015), thus echoing a call by Cooke and Wood (2024) for more phenomenon-driven research on the role of MNEs in the realm of sustainable development.

4.1 | The Intermediary System Behind the Global Migration Business

Origins, Regulation, and Costs of Migrant Recruitment: Demand for labor has long determined the patterns of global migration (de Haas 2023). In the decades after World War II, state-assisted systems typically shaped international labor migration. Examples are the guestworkers' programs in Western Europe or Brasero in the U.S. All were designed to provide numerous workers for lower-skilled jobs in advanced economies (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2012). Since the early 2000s, however, privatization has largely replaced these state programs, with recruitment agencies performing an intermediary function (de Haas et al. 2020; Pellerin 2015). Cross-border labor recruitment became a big-budget business that includes commercial gains for numerous actors and generates thousands of jobs (Salt and Stein 2002).

The exact number of migrant worker recruitment agencies globally is hard to estimate. Asian countries alone have thousands (Farbenblum and Nolan 2017). Some are unlicensed, which means that an unknown number of migrant workers move through channels outside of, or on the edge of, legal frameworks (Gordon 2017; Pellerin 2015). For example, undocumented workers make up a big segment of the labor migration from Indonesia to Malaysia and from Myanmar to Thailand. In both cases, causation is attributed to governmental barriers to legal entry and to the demands of firms for workers without regard for their legal status (de Haas et al. 2020).

Yet when we look at the global statistics, most migrants cross borders legally, with work permits in hand (de Haas 2023). Still, problems abound. The business model of the migrant recruitment agencies is typically based on requesting payments for job offers, in other words, dependent on selling jobs to those seeking employment abroad (IHRB 2022). What migrants pay varies widely. Moving from Central America to Mexico can cost USD100, but from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia can exceed USD4,000 (World Bank 2024). A recent study revealed that Nepalese workers aspiring to migrate to the EU are required to pay around €7000 to recruitment agencies. Using Nepal's GDP per capita as a point of reference, it would be akin to an individual from Western Europe paying around €150,000 in recruitment fees (de Haas 2023).

To pay their way, many workers turn to private moneylenders whose monthly interest rates can be excessive, thus negating much of the hoped-for financial gain that motivated the workers in the first place (UNODC 2015). Some leading MNEs have committed to reimbursing the costs of recruitment and adopted the "Employer Pays Principle," which requires that "the costs and fees associated with recruitment, travel and processing of migrant workers from their home community to the workplace, including through to return when the relocation is not permanent, shall be covered by the employer" (IHRB 2019: 2).

Finally, although state programs have been largely replaced with recruitment agencies, federal policies still are a major influence on how migration occurs across different geographic locations in which MNEs operate. Bilateral agreements between countries are typically used to define the terms of worker

migration. Such agreements assure destination countries a flow of laborers for the industries located there, whereas originating countries use the bilateral agreements to protect their citizens in these foreign jobs (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2012; Pellerin 2015). However, although in some countries of origin, like the Philippines, governments are closely involved in protecting their overseas workers, in other countries, like Bangladesh or Nepal, state regulations of their migrant workers' safety and well-being are weak or unenforced (de Haas et al. 2020; Deshingkar et al. 2019).

Future Research: Convergence-Divergence Debates in International Staffing, Internalization of Migrant Recruitment, and Implications for SDGs 1 & 10. The complexity of the intermediary system driving the global labor migration raises numerous questions that could be explored through the lens of global mobility research. For example, examining HSCs in MNEs may contribute to the ongoing debate on convergence versus divergence in international staffing practices (e.g., recruitment and onboarding). The central question in this debate is whether these practices are trending toward universal standards. Cost-effectiveness and simplification of the transfer of people within firms are among the many reasons for MNEs to standardize some their international staffing practices (Cooke et al. 2019; Fan et al. 2021). However, given the clear differences between countries, MNEs must also adjust accordingly (Brewster et al. 2016). This will result in varying degrees of convergence and divergence in international staffing practices of migrant workers across different settings. Using the above examples of the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Nepal, an MNE that seeks to bring workers from these three countries to their factories across different locations must make a country-by-country assessment of bilateral state agreements and have different internal practices in place. Furthermore, sudden changes in one government's restrictions of migrants' mobility may require corporate intervention at levels of coordination and expertise incommensurate with the states' policies in other locations. Exploring these intricacies will enhance current discussions of convergence-divergence and deepen our understanding of the nature of MNE international staffing practices for foreign workers across countries.

A significant knowledge gap also concerns the decision of some MNEs to internalize migrant worker recruitment—that is, introduce new human resource units across various countries specifically for this purpose—instead of outsourcing it to intermediaries (Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022). Scholars could examine this dilemma from the internalization theory perspective that posits that MNEs internalize imperfect external markets to the point at which the costs of further internalization outweigh the benefits (Buckley and Casson 1976). In general, we know next to nothing about the global glut of migrant recruitment agencies and how MNEs interact with them.

Finally, tackling these questions can generate important insights for business practices. For instance, what kind of key performance indicators can MNEs use to monitor responsible recruitment practices across the different locations? What motivates MNEs to adopt the Employer Pays Principle despite the increase in recruitment costs? What internal processes need to be in place to support its implementation? More research on these topics could lead to the development of risk assessment toolkits and due diligence measures. In addition, a better understanding of bilateral treaties could help the leaders of MNEs to make more informed decisions about where and how to recruit migrant workers. Research-informed solutions to these questions could contribute to the SDGs 1 "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" and 10.7 "Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people."

4.2 | The Human Cost

Precarity, Gender, and Labor Migration to Conflict-Affected Regions. From the international development perspective (see de Haas 2023; Skeldon 1997), migration is viewed as "an expression of the human aspiration for dignity, safety and a better future" (UN 2013). However, it is well-documented that migration can also lead to high human cost.

The most frequent means of exploitation of migrant workers in GSCs is financial. The debt incurred before they even leave their countries of origin leaves many workers with little to support themselves and their families and ultimately with little to show as a result of their migration (Salt and Stein 2002). Besides the high initial fees, many recruitment intermediaries have been implicated in corruption for confiscating migrant workers' passports in their destination countries and for jettisoning promised contracts upon arrival and replacing them with different ones that include less favorable employment conditions and reduced wages (Deshingkar et al. 2019; Farbenblum and Nolan 2017).

In their workplaces (whether MNEs' factories directly or suppliers' facilities), migrant workers are exposed to various forms of precarity. They are more likely to be employed in 3D occupations than native workers, a term used by the ILO to describe jobs that are "dirty, degrading, and dangerous" (ILO 2024). Large-scale surveys have revealed that migrant workers frequently lack access to information about workplace protection and occupational health services (Cremers 2022). They are often employed without sufficient protective equipment and safety training. Moreover, many firms exploit migrant workers' willingness to work irregular and long hours. As one employer stated, "they're prepared to come in at seven in the morning and finish at 10 at night if you ask them to" (Thompson, Newsome, and Commander 2013: 134). Another widely documented issue is accommodation. Many live in employer-provided housing, which is often in poor conditions, with eight or more workers sharing a room and a bathroom (Sunam 2023).

The human cost of migration is especially high for women, who account for more than 40% of the migrant workforce (IHRB 2022). They encounter additional gender-specific complexities, including sexual harassment and exploitation, throughout all stages of migration (Holliday, Hennebry, and Gammage 2019). Studies in countries like Bangladesh have shown that women migrants are often excluded from male-dominant social support networks for recruits. This exclusion denies them information about their basic rights and as a result often causes them to accept worse employment conditions

abroad than their male counterparts (Dannecker 2005). A particularly thorny issue is pregnancy testing as a precondition to apply for overseas work. Such tests, although banned in many places, are still legal in some countries (Mendoza 2018; Freeman et al. 2023). And if a woman becomes pregnant while working overseas, she may not only lose her job and income but also face deportation. Furthermore, those female migrant workers who already have children, unlike skilled female expatriates, must almost always leave their children behind in the care of others (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009).

Finally, a very recent phenomenon that is yet to be explored is the link between labor migration, human cost, and geopolitical conflicts. For instance, as of the writing of this article, Israel's suspension of work permits for tens of thousands of Palestinians because of the ongoing conflict has opened job opportunities for workers from countries like India. Thousands of young men have applied at recruitment centers in India to secure employment in Israel. Large construction companies are also seeking to recruit workers from Mexico, Kenya, Malawi, and Uzbekistan to revitalize the construction sector in Israel (Ramachandran 2024). The same phenomenon has also been observed in eastern Ukraine and other conflict-affected countries (Bloomberg News 2024). The human costs of these developments are still unknown but could be immense.

Future Research: High Road Human Resource Practices and Conservation of Resources Theory in the Context of Migration, and Implications for SDGs 5 & 8. Understanding the human costs of migration should be at the heart of global mobility research. Literature on corporate expatriates has primarily emphasized what Kochan and his colleagues termed "high road" human resource strategies (Kochan 2006; Somers 2019). These strategies focus on human-centric policies to boost employees' engagement, productivity, and innovation, thus benefiting both staff and organizational success. On the other hand, "low road" strategies are more instrumental, prioritizing cost-cutting and minimal employee investment, and potentially resulting in poor job quality and high turnover. Evidence shows the "low road" approach is more prevalent for migrant workers in lower-skilled jobs who frequently experience a lack of dignity and care similar to the experiences of other marginalized groups (Cremers 2022).

This opens several important questions for research: What diverse forms of precarity are experienced by migrants and how do they compare to or differ from other marginalized workers in GSCs? What are the potential losses of "key levers of human development and broader development contributions from migration" (IHRB 2022: 20) and how could "high road" human resource strategies mitigate them? Furthermore, retaining migrant workers in offshore and nearshore locations is crucial for MNEs because high turnover leads to a loss of experience, skills, and further exacerbates labor shortages. Currently, many countries issue work visas to migrants for 3 to 4 years, with a possibility to renew them. It is far more cost-effective to renew visas of already trained and experienced workers than to find and recruit new ones. Examining the connection between "high road" human resource strategies, migrant worker well-being and retention, and the long-term productivity of firms would address a significant research gap in our understanding of global mobility.

Another black box yet to be opened concerns the consequences of prolonged separation from family on (female) migrant workers' well-being. Can the potential prospects of improving the long-term financial well-being of relatives back home compensate for the psychological hardships? A theoretical lens for examining this question and the implied tradeoffs may lie with the conservation of resources (COR) theory that has already been deployed in research on expatriation (Halbesleben et al. 2014; Hobfoll 2002). Much of human behavior, according to this theory, reflects an evolutionary drive based on the acquisition and conservation of the resources necessary for survival. Health, self-esteem, family, and a sense of a purposeful and meaningful life are considered in COR theory as the most-valued resources. This is because of the utility of these resources in responding to immediate needs such as stress relief or as a repository of responses to future needs (Hobfoll et al. 2018). How migrant workers express these appraisals remains unexplored and deserves attention.

As for practice-oriented research, numerous questions deserve exploration. What HSC strategies should MNEs have in place to detect, address, and prevent the exploitation of migrant workers? What is the role of escalation policies (i.e., written procedures that guide managers on how to escalate the flow of alerts and assign responsibility in case of an incident such as a violation of human rights)? Another key element is informing migrant workers of their rights. Absence of information and grievance mechanisms in their native language makes it challenging for migrant workers to navigate their environment. What policies and/or practices need to be in place to make sure that these workers are aware of their rights and that their voices are heard? Finally, as we already implied above, virtually nothing is known about migration to conflict zones and the role of MNEs in this context.

In brief, we believe an untapped opportunity exists to leverage global mobility research to address the human costs of migration and develop innovative HSC solutions. Finding answers to questions we put forth in this section, in turn, could contribute to SDGs 5.2 "Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of explotation"; 8.5 "Full employment and decent work with equal pay"; and 8.8 "Protect labor rights and promote safe working environment for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment."

4.3 | MNEs as Potential Change Agents

Policy Frameworks Relevant to HSCs in MNEs and Corporate and Industry Best Practice Examples. MNEs are subject to considerable criticism regarding human rights and social sustainability, and rightly so (Cooke and Wood 2024). Thorough knowledge and control of all aspects of its GSC is a test for any single firm. Also in business scholarship, our understanding of the impact of MNEs on the lower tiers of supply chains is

limited, partly because sourcing and production have become inherently complex (Engelbertink and Kolk 2021).

However, MNEs remain the entities best positioned to exert control over their first-, second-, and third-tier suppliers, including migration intermediaries (Farbenblum and Nolan 2017). This is also reflected in adoption of state policies mainly targeting MNEs, such as the 2015 UK Modern Slavery Act, the 2021 Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the U.S., and most recently, the 2024 EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). The last one is the most comprehensive and perhaps the most ambitious effort to promote responsible corporate behavior among large firms operating within and outside the EU. The directive requires MNEs to identify, address, and remediate adverse human rights impacts, including those on migrant workers, throughout their GSCs (Jäger, Durán, and Schmidt 2023; Lennarts 2023). The CSDDD is closely linked with the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), both of which serve as cornerstone policies in the EU's strategy to foster sustainable business practices. The latter requires MNEs to disclose information on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, including safeguarding the rights of all workers within their GSCs (EUR-Lex 2022).

Some MNEs have been leading the way through corporate measures even before the previously mentioned policies were put in place. One of the first companies to set HSC guidelines was HP Inc., which in 2014 issued a policy titled "HP Supply Chain Foreign Migrant Worker Standard Guidance Document." It includes practices related to transitioning to direct recruitment when feasible, monitoring recruitment agencies, implementing the employer pays model of recruitment fees, establishing responsible worker on-site management, and increasing human resource capabilities at supplier sites (Hewlett Packard 2016).

Another example is IKEA's engagement in its extended supply chains in Thailand, a major global exporter of natural rubber. The rubber industry, like other key export sectors, depends heavily on migrant labor. IKEA supported its upstream supplier, Tat Win, a latex concentrate producer based in Thailand, in implementing the Employer Pays Principle. This initiative involved conducting interviews with over 100 migrant workers from Myanmar who were employed by Tat Win and using blockchain-based technology to identify recruitment issues and gather worker feedback on employment conditions. A senior manager from IKEA at that time stated: "For us, it is important to create a positive social impact for everyone across the IKEA value chain which includes working with others to define fair and responsible wage practices and gaining an in-depth understanding of the recruitment journey of migrant workers" (IOM 2021).

A third example involves collaboration between Unilever and PepsiCo, two otherwise competing MNEs in consumer goods. In 2023, a social audit revealed that 95 migrant workers at a Malaysian packaging supplier, under contract to both Unilever and PepsiCo, had paid recruitment fees to obtain their jobs. Together, the two MNEs immediately engaged with the supplier to formulate an appropriate corrective action. They leveraged their influence and expertise to ensure that the supplier implemented a more robust worker repayment strategy, refined its recruitment practices, and enhanced its due diligence efforts (PepsiCo 2023).

Apart from these individual company examples, there has been an increase in recent years in the formation of industry associations that deal with issues related to HSCs. An example is the Responsible Business Alliance in the electronics sector or the Consumer Goods Forum. These alliances enable more rapid information sharing, the creation of shared HSC standards, and coordinated auditing practices. Additionally, they provide companies with self-assessment tools and organize supplier training (Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022). A further important actor in this realm is the World Employment Confederation (WEC), comprising national associations from 50 countries and also some of the largest recruitment companies, like the Adecco Group, ManpowerGroup, and Kelly Services (Hajro et al. 2023). In total, WEC represents more than 220,000 human resource service agencies and four million human resource specialists (WEC 2024). They are expected to adhere to the ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention that advocates, among other things, specifically for protection of migrant workers (ILO 1997; WEC 2022).

Future Research: Ethics, Social Sustainability and Migration, and Implications for SDGs 16 & 17. Global mobility scholarship can offer a fertile ground for developing a significant stream of research on the underexplored role of MNEs in the realm of migration and social sustainability. For years, researchers in the business and management literature have debated how far firms should go beyond mere compliance in GSCs. The dilemma is whether to follow only regulatory requirements or to proceed to embrace more proactive ethical practices (Kolk 2016).

As Pfeffer (2010), among others, noted, a key research issue is whether implementing social sustainability practices results in net costs for companies, thereby reducing their competitiveness, or if the benefits surpass the costs involved. Thus, how can MNEs improve HSC standards while simultaneously promoting social sustainability and maintaining competitiveness at both the firm and supply chain levels? Can both ethical and strategic motivations serve to address the current HSC challenges? These questions are not without provocation, given that many MNEs have been implicated in violations of migrant workers' human and labor rights. We hold that it is within the capacity of global mobility scholarship to develop research that directs "what" to solve and "how" (Kuhn 1962/2012, cited in Bansal and Song 2015).

Another related question is whether MNEs should step out of supplier relationships in which they do not have enough control over treatment of migrant worker or continue these relationships and work on gradually improving them. Likewise, for how many layers of human resources within its GSC should an MNE take responsibility? A useful research lens to examine this is "cross-stream literacy," introduced by Puffer et al. (2020). It refers to a focal MNE's interactions with a wide set of stakeholders within its GSC, including upstream and downstream suppliers. The cross-stream literacy can vary from neglect and mere compliance (i.e., not having a shared supplier code of conduct, failing to assert GSC leadership, being passive in communicating with suppliers) to displaying a strong strategic and moral orientation and leadership throughout the supply chain. MNEs that have high cross-stream literacy not only know who their suppliers across different tiers are but also take a

TABLE 1 | Recommendations for future research and practice.

Key themes	Research topics	Implications for business practice	Relevant to UN SDGs[a]
The Intermediary system behind the global migration business	• MNEs' interactions with migrant recruitment agencies • Convergence-divergence debate viewed through the HSC lens • Direct hiring versus outsourcing of migrant worker recruitment and the internalization theory of the MNE	∘ Identifying key performance indicators MNEs can use to monitor responsible recruitment practices across different locations ∘ Providing practitioners with a business case for adopting the employer Pays principle ∘ Supporting the development of risk assessment toolkits and due diligence measures ∘ Assessing effectiveness of existing responsible recruitment tools, such as B4IG fair recruitment toolkit for employers and service providers	 
The human cost	• Forms of precarity experienced by migrant workers, and how these compare to or differ from other marginalized workers in GSCs • HSCs complexities that hamper human development contributions from labor migration • Gender-specific questions of HSCs • Application of the conservation of resources theory to the study of labor migration	∘ Introducing HSC strategies that detect, address, and prevent the exploitation of migrant workers ∘ Designing appropriate escalation policies across GSCs ∘ Developing policies and practices that empower migrant workers and ensure their voices are heard ∘ Raising awareness about the human risks and corporate liabilities of labor migration to conflict zones	  
MNEs as Potential change agents	• The role of MNEs in the realm of labor migration and social sustainability • Compliance-driven versus normative approaches to HSCs • Evolving policy landscapes and their implications for HSCs • Boundary spanning activities of MNEs, for example, participation in industry alliances and world employment confederation	∘ Developing practice-oriented insights on how MNEs can balance between local laws and stricter international standards and policies such as EUCSDDD ∘ Identifying key success factors in working with suppliers to improve HSCs ∘ Assessing the effectiveness of shared industry alliance codes of conduct, such as the RBA code of conduct, in the context of HSCs and supporting MNEs in their implementation efforts	 

[a]SDG icons in this table are used in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Use of the SDG Logo Including the Color Wheel, and 17 Icons* (Sept. 2023) by the United Nations Department of Global Communications.

proactive stance toward investigating, communicating, and investing in HSC improvements.

These research themes can also provide a roadmap for practitioners that lays out how existing corporate policies and/or practices can be leveraged to improve cross-stream literacy. Regarding the recent policies that we have described above, researchers could also develop practice-oriented insights on how MNEs should balance between adhering to local laws and following stricter international standards and expectations (e.g., in Malaysia, the regulations regarding maximum working hours are considerably more lenient than the international standards?) A further question is: Can MNEs with positive records on HSCs leverage their reputation to enhance their employer branding, and if so, how?

In addition to the lack of research on the HSCs of individual MNEs, we know very little about boundary-spanning activities

that seek to generate positive social impact beyond the company walls, such as MNEs' participation in cross-industry initiatives. Industry alliances are generating a form of peer pressure (Hajro, Žilinskaitė, and Baldassari 2022). Practice-oriented research could examine the effectiveness of supplier codes of conduct created by industry associations for their member companies. It could also examine the collective enforcement of due diligence requirements and the tools and resources these alliances offer to assist companies in adhering to new policies such as the CSDDD. These questions are also at the core of SDGs 16.6 "Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" and 17.16 "Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multistakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources."

Table 1 provides an overview of the research recommendations stemming from the three topics we have covered—the intermediary system behind the global migration business, the human cost, and MNEs as potential change agents.

5 | Conclusion

Our underlying question throughout this provocation piece has been, what if we took HSCs in MNEs seriously? We illustrated why sustained labor demand is "the most important root cause of all, the *sine qua non* of large-scale migrations" (de Haas 2023: 113). We explained the origins of HSCs and why transnational recruitment, management, and retention of migrant workers is crucial to MNEs. Our answer to the underlying question and our call to scholars is twofold: first, studying HSCs in MNEs would complement and enhance existing theories in global mobility scholarship; second, more importantly, it would positively impact lives. Business and management scholars have studied global mobility for more than 5 decades. They are thus well-positioned to tackle the many questions we put forth in this article and to guide the actions of business leaders who deal with labor migration. By redirecting our research efforts toward what is important today, we have an opportunity to create long-term sustainable approaches to one of the most pressing challenges of managing people.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

[1] For example, in 1999, in the low-income and lower-middle income categories, respectively, East Asia and the Pacific included 8 and 11 countries, Europe and Central Asia 9 and 11, Latin America and Caribbean 2 and 16, Middle East and North Africa 1 and 10, South Asia 6 and 2, and Sub-Saharan Africa 38 and 4 countries. By 2022, these numbers decreased to: 1 low-income and 13 lower-middle countries in East Asia and the Pacific, 4 lower-middle income countries in Europe and Central Asia, 4 lower-middle income countries in Latin America and Caribbean, 2 and 8 in Middle East and North Africa, 1 and 6 in South Asia, and 22 and 19 in Sub-Saharan Africa. The same patterns can be observed with the numbers of countries whose economies rose from middle-to upper-middle or high-income (Hamadeh et al. 2022; The World Bank 2024).

[2] The International Standard Classification of Occupations categorizes these occupations as skill levels 1 and 2, whereas skill levels 3 and 4 require more technical or managerial education (ILO 2008). Migrant workers employed in skill levels 1 and 2 typically have no education beyond secondary schooling (although they may have extensive occupational experience). However, some tertiary educated migrants also end up in HSCs because of the income inequality between countries or because of their hope of eventual career progression abroad (Cremers 2022; MAC 2018).

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