

WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN LIBERIA

A Legal Analysis



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Acronyms

AU	African Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DWA	Decent Work Act
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FPT	Federation of Petty Traders
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOL	Government of Liberia
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ILO	International Labor Organization
INCHR	Independent National Commission on Human Rights
IWUL	Informal Workers Union of Liberia
LISGIS	Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services
LNDWU	Liberia National Domestic Workers Union
LRWTU	Liberia Rural Workers Trade Union
LLC	Liberia Labor Congress
LLSF	Liberia Labor Force Survey
LRA	Liberia Revenue Authority
MWA	Market Women Associations
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoL	Ministry of Labor
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection
OSH	Occupational safety and health
PPRA	Pen-Pen Riders Association

Nap BnHR	National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights
NPTU	National Petty Trader Union for Women
NTUM	National Trade Union Movement
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SVA	Street Vendors Associations
TUAW	Trade Union for Agricultural Workers
UN	United Nations
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Executive Summary

Workers in the informal economy constitute an essential pillar of Liberia's economic and social development. Estimates from the World Bank indicate that up to 90 percent of Liberia's population works in the informal economy, contributing approximately 40 percent of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹ In the country as a whole (including the agricultural sector), 68 percent of all employed persons work in the informal sector. The rates of informal employment are much higher in rural than urban areas, and much higher for females than for males.² Despite their significance, these workers do not enjoy the same level of labor and social protection as those in the formal economy and face persistent barriers in accessing justice, social security, safe and healthy working conditions, and the enjoyment of their labor rights.

In recent years, Liberia has taken important steps to strengthen its labor governance systems. Key reforms include the enactment of the Decent Work Act of 2015, which repealed and replaced earlier labor laws and sought to align domestic labor legislation with international human rights and labor standards.³ The GOL has also integrated informal economy concerns into broader national development plans such as the ARREST Agenda for Inclusive Development (AAID), and partnered with international actors to promote skills development and financial inclusion. Liberia's ratification of 27 International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions and several core human rights treaties further demonstrate a commitment to improving labor protection.

However, these efforts remain fragmented and insufficient. The Decent Work Act 2015 should apply to all workers, including those in the informal economy, but its provisions overwhelmingly focus on the formal sector. No regulations, codes of practice, or policies have been issued to guide the application of the Act to workers in the informal economy. As a result, informal workers continue to operate without meaningful protections relating to working conditions, employment security, occupational safety and health, collective bargaining, or social security.

This legal analysis also finds significant gaps in Liberia's compliance with its international human rights obligations. Although Liberia ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2004, it has not submitted its initial report, overdue since 2006. This lack of reporting makes it difficult to assess whether Liberia has taken concrete steps to protect the rights of informal workers, as required under the Covenant. Similar gaps exist with respect to other labor and human rights mechanisms.

Informal workers themselves often lack awareness of their rights. A recent survey by the Office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) conducted in Grand Cape Mount County found that 72.2 percent of informal workers were unaware of Liberia's labor laws, while 81.5 percent

¹ World Bank, "Liberia Employment and Pro-Poor Growth", November 2010, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/283211468299085933/pdf/591240Gray0ESW10111911110BOX358271B.pdf>. See also Liberia's Economy Size, retrieved on May 12, 2025 from <https://www.world-economics.com/Informal-Economy/Liberia.aspx>.

² Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) & Ministry of Labor, "Report on the Liberia Labor Force Survey 2010", February 2011, https://lisgis.gov.lr/admin_area/surveys/pdf/202501229154811Liberia_laborforce_2010.pdf.

³ See the status of ratification of international human rights treaties by Liberia on the Treaty Body Database of the Office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/treaty.aspx; See also the Information System on International Labor Standards (NORMLEX) of the International Labor Organization (ILO) at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx/en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102742.

had never received training or information on labor rights, which is indicative of a broader national trend. Without knowledge of their entitlements or access to grievance mechanisms, informal workers face heightened risks of exploitation.

Institutional constraints further exacerbate these challenges. The Ministry of Labor (MoL), mandated to administer and enforce labor laws, has no dedicated unit focusing on informal employment, no regulations addressing informal work, and no mechanisms to monitor workplaces in the informal economy. Labor inspectors lack both the mandate and training to engage with informal workers or domestic workers employed in private households.

Liberia's ratification of multiple ILO conventions and human rights treaties signifies a strong normative commitment to protecting all workers. Yet the lack of implementation regulations and weak enforcement mean that informal economy workers remain outside the effective scope of these protections. This implementation gap is particularly concerning given the centrality of the informal sector to national development and to the livelihoods of women, youth, migrants, and rural communities.

This study maps Liberia's labor laws, examines their impact on informal workers, including domestic workers, and identifies key legal and policy gaps. It concludes that Liberia's labor framework does not adequately extend protection to informal workers and that significant reforms are needed to align national law and practices with international standards. The report recommends that the MoL play a central coordinating role in advancing reforms to strengthen the protection of workers in the informal economy, including by initiating and supporting a review of the Decent Work Act, in coordination with relevant authorities and the legislature, to ensure its compliance with international human rights and labor standards. It further recommends that the MoL adopt regulations and codes of good practice to operationalize the Decent Work Act (2015) for workers in the informal economy and strengthen labor inspection and enforcement systems. In addition, the report recommends that the Government of Liberia (GOL) fulfil its reporting obligations under international human rights and labor treaties.

A comprehensive and inclusive labor protection system grounded in international standards and responsive to the realities of informal work is essential to advancing decent work, reducing vulnerability, and promoting equitable and sustainable development in Liberia.

I. Introduction

Workers in the informal economy play a central role in Liberia's labor force and in the country's overall economy. They make up a substantial share of the national workforce and contribute significantly to the country's GDP. Despite their importance, these workers remain outside the effective protection of Liberia's labor laws. Limited information exists on how national labor legislation affects their human rights, and gaps persist in understanding how Liberia's obligations under international human rights and labor standards are being applied to safeguard their rights. Liberia is required to report on such efforts to the international human rights mechanisms, particularly the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR Committee), yet Liberia has not met this obligation.

This information gap prompted OHCHR to undertake a mapping and legal analysis of Liberia's labor laws, and international instruments to which Liberia is a state party. The study has two main objectives:

1. to assesses the extent to which national legislation complies with Liberia's international obligations to protect workers in the informal economy.
2. to identify gaps in existing laws and policies to support evidence-based advocacy for legal and policy reform.

To this end, the study reviewed relevant domestic legislation, including the Constitution, the Decent Work Act (2015) and other labor- and social security- related statutes, as well as applicable international human rights and labor standards. The study examines how these frameworks apply to, and impact workers in the informal economy.

The document begins with an overview of workers in the informal economy in Liberia, identifying key sectors and groups and outlining the specific challenges they face. It then reviews Liberia's international human rights and labor obligations before analyzing the national legal framework, with particular attention to the Decent Work Act. The assessment reveals areas where current laws fail to cover or adequately protect informal workers.

Finally, it presents the findings of this mapping exercise and offers recommendations aimed at strengthening Liberia's labor law and policies. These recommendations seek to ensure that national legislation better reflects the realities of workers in the informal economy and addresses the gaps that currently leave them without meaningful legal protection. Where necessary, this study proposes the development of new legislation to achieve comprehensive and inclusive protection for all workers in Liberia.

II. Methodology

This study involves a comprehensive mapping of Liberian Labor laws and relevant international human rights and labor standards. It seeks to collect, analyze, and organize legal and policy information to assess how existing labor frameworks apply to workers in the informal economy and identify gaps or confirm the absence of gaps in legal protection. The exercise also examines the challenges and limitations affecting the implementation of the law to protect workers in the informal economy.

The methodology combined in-depth desk review with comparative analysis. National sources reviewed included the Constitution, labor legislation such as the Decent Work Act (2015), related regulations and policies, and other statutory instruments governing labor and social protection. These were analyzed alongside Liberia's international and regional obligations, including ILO Conventions and human rights treaties. Secondary sources, such as academic studies, UN reports, and civil society documentations, were also considered to contextualize the legal findings.

The desk review was complemented by consultations with the Ministry of Labor (MoL), the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR), workers' organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, civil society actors, and representatives of the informal economy. These consultations served to validate the legal analysis and provided insight into practical challenges associated with the application of labor laws.

The analysis was guided by a human rights-based approach, applying principles of equality and non-discrimination, participation, accountability, and access to justice. Regional and international best practices were also drawn upon to inform context-specific recommendations aimed at strengthening legal protection for workers in the informal economy.

III. Overview of the situation of workers in the informal economy

In most countries, including Liberia, workers in the informal economy⁴ are neither legally recognized nor adequately reflected in national labor statistics or the legal framework. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the informal economy includes activities with market and economic value, but are not regulated or taxed by the state.⁵ The World Economic Forum says workers in the informal economy include those who are self-employed, and those employed by others.⁶ According to the ILO, their employment

⁴ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) defines the informal economy as “activities that have market value and would add to tax revenue and GDP if they were recorded”. See IMF, “What Is The Informal Economy”, December 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/12/what-is-the-informal-economy-basics>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See World Economic Forum, “What Is The Informal Economy And How Many People Are Working In It?”, June 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/06/what-is-the-informaleconomy/#:~:text=The%20informal%20economy%20is%20a%20set%20of,ends%20meet%20for%20billions%20of%20people%20worldwide>.

remains informal, meaning it is not regulated by “national labor legislation, is not subject to income taxation, and is not covered by social protection and other employment-related entitlements. As a result, they are often excluded from guarantees, such as advance notice of dismissal, severance pay or paid annual or sick leave.”⁷

Despite this lack of recognition, workers in the informal economy constitute a significant portion and play a vital part to Liberia’s economy. The World Bank estimates that 90 per cent of Liberia’s population operates in the informal economy,⁸ contributing 40 percent of the country’s GDP.⁹ According to the Liberia Labor Force Survey (LLFS) 2016-2017 Final Report, published in December 2024, informal employment accounted for 86.7 per cent of total employment (Sustainable Development Goals Indicator 8.3.1) in 2016-2017.¹⁰ This represents a significant increase from 68% reported in the Liberia Labor Force Survey Report of 2010,¹¹ which notes that “68 percent of all employed persons work in the informal sector.” The survey identified fewer work opportunities for the growing number of young people as a prime driver of this increase.

According to the ILO, “informal employment affects more than nine in ten (91.3 per cent) of young workers in Liberia. Rates are higher among young women and youth in urban areas”¹². According to the school-to-work transition survey, a joint initiative between the ILO Work4Youth project and the Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), there is a strong correlation between the level of education and a young person’s transition from informal to formal employment. This transition tends to favor young men over young women, due to lower educational attainment among the latter.¹³

Workers in the informal economy include, but are not limited to, domestic workers, petty traders, street sellers/vendors, construction workers, rock crushers, charcoal producers, traditional fishermen, informal agricultural workers, subsistence farm workers, artisanal miners, small-scale manufacturers, taxi drivers and commercial bus drivers, motorbike taxi drivers (“pen-pen” drivers), maker sellers, as well as workers in the formal sector who lack formal employment arrangements.

Although these workers have traditionally been excluded, various actors have recently made efforts to improve the situation of those in the informal economy. Firstly, the GOL has sought to formalize informal work by promoting business registration and simplifying tax systems for small traders.¹⁴ For example, in May 2024, the

⁷ Labor ILO, Briefing Paper “What is Informal Employment?”, January 2023, <https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/995264844802676>.

⁸ World Bank, “Liberia Employment and Pro-Poor Growth”, November 2010, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/283211468299085933/pdf/591240Gray0ESW10111911110BOX358271B.pdf>.

⁹ See Word Economics, “Informal Economy Sizes, - Liberia”, accessed on May 12, 2025 at <https://www.worlddeconomics.com/Informal-Economy>.

¹⁰ LISGIS, “Liberia 2016/2017 Labor Force Survey Final Report”, December 2024, page xiv, https://lisgis.gov.lr/admin_area/surveys/pdf/202501236523198LBR201617LiberiaLaborForceSurveyReportFinal.pdf.

¹¹ LISGIS & Ministry of Labor, Liberia Labor Force Survey 2010”, February 2011, page xiii, https://lisgis.gov.lr/admin_area/surveys/pdf/202501229154811Liberia_laborforce_2010.pdf.

¹² ILO, “Liberia SWTS Country Brief, January 2017, <https://www.ilo.org/media/436196/download>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Daily Observer, “Formalizing Liberia’s Informal Sector”, May 2024, https://www.liberianobserver.com/business/formalizing-liberia-s-informal-sector/article_df523688-1e69-11ef-8686-7ff65ac903be.html; and UNDP, “MoCI Launches Free Registration For Petty Traders”, May 2024, <https://www.undp.org/liberia/press-releases/moci-launches-free-registration-petty-traders>.

Ministry of Commerce and Industry, through the Liberia Business Registry, introduced free registration for numerous local petty traders, primarily comprising domestically owned small and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs). SMEs account for 80-85 per cent of the country's employment, playing a crucial role in generating sustainable income for the poor and vulnerable.¹⁵ This initiative marks a significant transition from informality to formality. At the same time, the Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA) is taking steps to integrate informal sector businesses, particularly petty traders, into the tax net through simplified processes and capacity building initiatives.

Secondly, trade unions¹⁶ registered under Liberian law continue to champion the cause of and protect the rights of workers in the informal economy. For example, The Liberia National Trade Union Movement (NTUM)¹⁷ advocates for better wages, safer working conditions, and social protection for workers in both formal and informal economies. The Liberia Rural Workers Trade Union (LIRWTU) fosters indigenous

solutions and creates partnerships and affiliations with indigenous people around the country, and works to transform the relationship between urban dwellers and rural communities into one of mutual understanding and benefit.¹⁸ The Liberia Labor Congress (LLC) have supported the rights (to work, and to social security and trade union) of workers in the informal economy.¹⁹ The Market Women Associations (MWA) promotes and protects the rights and wellbeing of its members.²⁰ The Pen-Pen Riders Association is an informal association that seeks to represent the interest of its members.²¹ The Trade Unions for Agricultural Workers (TUAW) has attempted to work with smallholder farmers and informal agricultural workers. The Street Vendors Association (SVA) also seeks to promote and protect the interests of its members. The Liberia National Domestic Workers Union (LNDWU) also protects and seeks the interest of their members.²²

Finally, the National Petty Trader Union for Women (NPTU) protects women in the informal economy. Other organizations who protect their members, as their names depict, are the Federation of Petty Traders (FPT) and the Informal Workers Union of Liberia (IWUL).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Efforts to obtain the websites or Facebook pages prove futile as many of them do not carry online presence. The listing was obtained from the Ministry of Labor.

¹⁷ The Liberia National Trade Union Movement (NTUM) is not generally speaking a recognized national trade union in Liberia. However, it advocates for better wages, safe working conditions, and social protection for both formal and informal workers.

¹⁸ Liberia Rural Workers Trade Union (LIRWTU) is a national trade union movement that recognizes the urgent need for solutions that are led and understood by indigenous people not only to improve lives in indigenous communities, but also a resource for solving social, economic and environmental challenges in Liberia.

¹⁹ The Liberia Labor Congress (LLC) represents workers and advocates for their rights. It serves as a central body for workers, engaging in collective bargaining, promoting decent work and enforcing fair working conditions and labor practices.

²⁰ Liberia Marketing Association (LMA) is part of the Empowerment Program for rural Liberian women and plays a crucial role in empowering women economically, particularly in the informal economy.

²¹ The Pen-Pen Riders Association in Liberia, also known as the Pen-Pen Peace Network (PPPN), is a group of motorcycle taxi drivers (pen-pen riders) who formed a local peace committee to promote peace in Liberia, particularly before and during elections.

²² The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWU) promotes the rights of and advocates for the respect and recognition of nannies, house cleaners, cooks, and home care workers.

IV. Relevant international human rights instruments and labor standards

1. International human rights standards

The rights of workers, including those in the informal economy, are guaranteed in a number of international human rights instruments. First, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), a landmark human rights document adopted in 1948, recognizes a range of human rights that are relevant to workers in the informal economy. These include the rights to work and free choice of employment (Art. 23); to form and join trade unions, and to decent working conditions (Art. 23); to equal pay for equal work (Art. 23); to just and favorable remuneration and to rest and leisure (Art. 24); to social security (Arts. 22 and 25); and special care and assistance for motherhood and childhood (Art. 25). Although the UDHR is not legally binding, it carries strong moral and political authority and provides a foundation for legally binding international human rights treaties.

There are a number of United Nations (UN) human rights treaties, stemming from the UDHR, that provide legal guarantees for the rights of all workers, including workers in the informal economy. These include the ICESCR; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW). Liberia has ratified or acceded to all these instruments, except the ICRMW. Under these instruments, Liberia has obligations to take necessary measures – legal, policy, institutional and other measures – to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of workers in the informal economy and to report to their monitoring bodies (i.e., treaty bodies) on their implementation. The ICESCR affirms several key human rights pertinent to all workers, including those in the informal economy. These include the right to work (Art. 6), the right to just and favorable conditions of work (Art. 7), trade union rights (Art. 8), and the right to social security (Art. 9), among others.

The CESCR, through its general comments No. 18 on the right to work²³ and No. 23 on the right to just and favorable conditions of work,²⁴ provides an authoritative interpretation of these rights and guidance on the obligations of States parties to realize these rights.

The Committee observed that a person's right to work includes the right to the opportunity to gain his/her living by work which he/she freely chooses or accepts, which implies the prohibition of forced labor, and the right not to be unfairly deprived of employment. It is an individual right that belongs to each person and is,

²³ Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), “General Comment No. 18 on the Right to Work”, February 2006, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2006/en/32433>.

²⁴ CESCR, “General Comment No. 23 on the Right to Just and Favorable Conditions of Work”, April 2016, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2016/en/122360>.

at the same time, a collective right. Therefore, the rights provided in Articles 6 to 8 of the ICESCR are inseparable and must be considered together. The right to just and favorable conditions of work also implies the prohibition of forced labor and social and economic exploitation, especially of children and young persons, and several fundamental elements should be taken into account to guarantee the right to remuneration (including fair wages, equal remuneration for work of equal value, etc.), safe and healthy working conditions, equal opportunities for promotion, rest, leisure, reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays, flexible working arrangements, etc. The CESCR general comment No. 23 provides detailed guidance on the elements of this right and State's obligations to realize it. Trade union rights, provided in Article 8 of the ICESCR, include the right to form and join trade unions, the rights of trade unions to establish national federations or confederations and to form or join international trade union organizations and to function freely, and the right to strike.

The right to social security ensures access to and maintenance of benefits that guarantee health care and income security against social risks or contingencies throughout the life cycle. The CESCR has emphasized that the rights to work and to social security apply to everyone, including workers in the informal economy, self-employed workers, agricultural workers, refugees, and unpaid workers. It has also emphasized that laws and policies providing for workers' rights and protections should explicitly extend to workers in the informal economy; and that those workers should be included in social security schemes with comprehensive coverage for health care, sickness, old age, unemployment, employment injury, family and child support, maternity, disability, and survivors and orphans. Human rights treaty bodies have recognized that the principles of equality and non-discrimination apply to the realization of the rights to work and to social security for workers in the informal economy.

The ICCPR, for its part, guarantees the rights that are pertinent to the workers in the informal economy. The ICCPR explicitly prohibits slavery and forced or compulsory labor (Art. 8). It also provides for the right to freedom of expression (Art. 19), the right of peaceful assembly (Art. 21) and the freedom of association (Art. 22), which are critical to exercising trade union rights provided in Article 8 of the ICESCR. Article 22 of the ICCPR specifies the right to freedom of association in relation to trade unions, for the protection of workers' interests.

Despite these guarantees, the lack of legal recognition, fear of retaliation, and risk of losing jobs inhibit workers in the informal economy from joining and associating in trade unions, participating in protest or collective action, or voicing their concerns. Furthermore, workers in the informal economy face significant barriers to effective access to justice in labor disputes. For example, in some labor disputes coming before the MoL for adjudication,²⁵ the time of commencement of employment has often become a hotly disputed and contested issue, resulting in a dispute between the employee and the employer. Without a formal written contract

²⁵ Under Liberian laws, including the Act creating the Ministry of Labor and the Decent Work Act, labor complaint by an employee or labor inspector are first lodged with the Minister of Labor or his deputy, who then refers the case to the Department of Labor Standards for review, where the case is presided over and handled by Hearing Officer for hearing and adjudication. These are based at and operate under the authority of the Ministry of Labor. Appeals from the Hearing Office are taken to the National Labor Court, and then to the Liberia Supreme Court.

establishing the date of employment, with an employee unable to provide further evidence to substantiate the employment date, the presumption often favors the employer's testimony.²⁶

Other human rights treaties, such as the ICERD, CEDAW, CRC, CRPD and ICRMW, focus on the rights of specific groups of individuals, including indigenous peoples and people belonging to minorities, women,

children, persons with disabilities, and migrants. CEDAW specifies the protection of women's rights to equal employment opportunities; equal pay for equal work; social security; protection of health; and safety in working conditions, among others. The CRC protects children from hazardous work and forced and child labor, affording them access to education and opportunities and ensuring their health and safety. The CRPD focuses on the protection of persons with disabilities in relation to employment, working conditions, and social protection, with a specific focus on reasonable accommodation and equal access to work, and equal treatment at work. The ICRMW provides protection for migrant workers and their families.

The CEDAW Committee, in the concluding observations on the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Liberia, called upon the State Party to address the persisting gender inequalities in the employment sector, such as occupational segregation and gender wage gaps in the informal sector, where women are concentrated.²⁷

Liberia has reporting obligations under the core international human rights instruments. However, Liberia is long overdue in submitting its report to several treaty bodies. For example, Liberia has not submitted its initial report under the ICESCR,²⁸ which is nearly two decades overdue. For the ICCPR, no further report has been submitted since the report due in December 2005 was submitted in November 2016.²⁹ Under the CERD, Liberia's report, which was due December in 2001, has not yet been submitted. Under the CEDAW, Liberia submitted a report in March 2014 but has not submitted any since.³⁰ For the CRC, Liberia submitted a report in October 2023. For the CRPD, Liberia's latest report was submitted in October 2019.³¹

2. International labor standards

While ILO has no specific convention dedicated to workers in the informal economy, several of its conventions and recommendations are relevant to workers in the informal economy, addressing issues like freedom of association, forced labor, discrimination, and social protection. As a founding member of the ILO since its establishment in 1919 and having ratified 27 international labor conventions,³² Liberia has demonstrated

²⁶ This observation is based on a foreign person working for a university and a Liberia domestic worker hired by the foreign worker to perform household chores.

²⁷ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee), "Concluding Observations on the Combined Seventh and Eighth Periodic Reports of Liberia", November 2015, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2F7-8&Lang=en.

²⁸ See Liberia's Reporting Status on OHCHR's UN Treaty Body Database accessible at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/countries.aspx?CountryCode=LR&Lang=EN.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See ILO's Country Portal: Liberia, culled on December 14, 2024, <https://www.ilo.org/liberia#:~:text=Liberia%20has%20been%20a%20member,their%20pursuit%20of%20decent%20work>.

sufficient commitment to protecting the rights of workers. By the ratification and effective implementation of these conventions, Liberia has reaffirmed the rights of workers in the informal economy³³. Among them, several ILO conventions are essential in setting standards and providing a framework for labor rights and social protection of workers in the informal economy³⁴.

Despite this substantial progress, Liberia has not yet ratified some other key ILO instruments.³⁵ They include Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention No. 102 (1952), Occupational Safety and Health Convention No. 155(1981), Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention No. 187 (2006), and Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labor Convention, 1930. In Recommendation No. 204 (2015), the ILO urged the State parties to take measures to “formalize the informal economy, promote the economic inclusion of workers, recognize the fundamental rights of workers, and foster an entrepreneurial spirit, as well as contribute to decent work, social dialogue, and civic participation”³⁶.

The concept of decent work

Except from ascribing the title “Decent Work Act” to the primary national legislation that regulates labor, Liberia’s jurisprudence remains largely silent on the concept of decent work. The legislation has neither a definition nor a concept of decent work. However, the legislation provides that the purpose of the Act is to regulate decent work. While decisional laws of the Supreme Court of Liberia have applied provisions of the Decent Work Act to specific cases, the Court has not provided an operational concept or definition of what constitutes decent work.

For its part, the ILO defines “decent work” as *‘work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men’*³⁷. The ILO has enumerated four (4) pillars in the Decent Work Agenda, including: (1) rights at work; (2) employment creation; (3) social protection; and (4) social dialogue. The pillars constitute the framework for countries in promoting decent work. In addition to the pillars, the ILO also enumerated basic

³³ The ILO conventions ratified by Liberia include: (a) Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87); (b) Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No.98), (c) Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); (d) Abolition of Forced Labor Convention, 1957 (No. 105); (e) Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); (f) Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and (g) Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

³⁴ They include: ILO Convention No. 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948), which protects the rights of workers, including those in the informal economy, to form and join trade unions; ILO Convention No. 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949) which protects workers’ rights to collective bargaining and requires states parties to respect and promote these right; ILO Convention No. 177 (Home Work Convention, 1996) that sets standards to protect homeworkers, a significant part of the informal economy in Liberia; ILO Convention No. 189 (Domestic Workers Convention, 2011)aiming to improve the working conditions of domestic workers, who often work informally.

³⁵ See the ILO conventions not ratified on ILO’s Information System on International Labor Standards (NORMLEX) culled on July 30, 2025, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/?p=1000:11210:0::NO:11210:P11210_COUNTRY_ID:102742.

³⁶ ILO, “Recommendations No. 204 concerning the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy”, June 2015, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_377774.pdf; See also <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/Media.action?id=16399>.

³⁷ See ILO, “Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, culled on December 15, 2025 from <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/decent-work-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>.

elements of decent work standards. According to the ILO, all persons employed and working should enjoy these elements, and labor legislations should reflect and promote them to advance decent work. These elements include employment opportunities; adequate earnings and productive work; decent working time; combining work, family and personal life; work that should be abolished; stability and security of work; equal opportunity and treatment in employment; safe work environment; social security; and social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation.

Liberia's principal law on labor matters, the Decent Work Act (2015), incorporates substantially most labor rights found in international human rights and labor standards. Although the Decent Work Act makes no distinction between workers in the formal and informal economy, the Act, in practice and application, accords more protection to workers in the formal economy than workers in the informal economy.

3. Regional labor standards

Liberia is a member State of the African Union (AU) and a founding member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The regional and sub-regional bodies have instruments that govern labor in the region and subregion. For example, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights though not directly focus on worker in the informal economy, it promotes a **rights-based approach to work**, ensuring dignity, protection from exploitation fairness, equality, and protection for all workers even though it does not specifically mention the informal economy.

The African Charter on Employment and Labor (Draft / Regional Guidelines) encourages member states to extend labor protections, occupational safety, and social security to informal workers. ECOWAS Labor Protocols promote the harmonization of labor laws, social protection systems, and occupational safety standards across member states, aiming to extend protection to all workers, including those in the informal sector.

V. National legal framework

Labor in Liberia, both in the formal and informal economy, is governed and regulated by the Constitution, statutes, regulations and policies of Liberia, as well as international human rights treaties and labor conventions to which Liberia is a party. The major legislation governing labor is the Decent Work Act of 2015, a statutory instrument. It will therefore be the main subject of analysis in this report. Below is an overview of each of these laws, and how they apply to workers in both the formal and informal economies.

1. National Constitution (1986)

Although the Constitution does not explicitly guarantee the full range of the rights to work (including the right to just and favorable conditions of work and trade unions), and to social security, it guarantees certain elements of these rights. For example, Article 12 explicitly prohibits slavery and forced labor, which are crucial elements of the right to work. Article 17 provides for the right to peaceful assembly and association, including in relation to trade unions, which is essential to trade union activities. In addition, Article 18 guarantees the right to equal opportunity for work and employment, and the right to equal pay for equal work. These provisions can and should be construed as applying to workers in both formal and informal economies. In

substance, the Constitution provides a general legal framework for the governance, protection, and regulation of both formal and informal employment.³⁸

2. Legislation

a) The Decent Work Act (2015)

The Decent Work Act (2015), which replaced the Labor Law (Title 18, Liberian Code of Laws) and the Labor Practices Law (Title 18A, Liberia Code of Laws), is the primary statutory instrument that governs labor relations in Liberia. This Act is informed by the ILO's decent work standards, which align with international human rights standards relating to work and social security.³⁹ The Act, through section 2.1, Chapter 2, clarifies its purpose, establishing the legal framework for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling fundamental rights at work in Liberia. It provides a comprehensive set of rights as well as key elements of the rights of all workers, including those in the informal economy.

Although the Act does not explicitly provide for the right to work, as stipulated in the ICESCR, it contains major elements of this right in Chapter 2, with concrete guidance in Chapters 12 to 14, establishing a legal framework to facilitate the establishment and the orderly termination of employment relationships. Chapter 2 provides for the right to equal protection, freedoms from compulsory labor and from child labor, and prohibits discrimination at work as well as sexual harassment.

In the same manner, the various Parts of the Act provide for key elements of the right to just and favorable conditions of work, including equal remuneration (Part II, Chapter 2), wages, working hours, rests, and paid leave (Part V), and occupational safety and health (Part VI), along with relevant enforcement mechanisms and compensation procedures (Parts VI and VII).

³⁸ The Liberia Constitution provides in Article 17 that all persons, at all times, in an orderly and peaceable manner, shall have the right to assemble and consult upon the common good, to instruct their representatives, to petition the Government or other functionaries for the redress of grievances, and to associate fully with others or refuse to associate in political parties, trade unions, and other organizations. Article 18 further provides that all Liberian citizens shall have equal opportunity for work and employment regardless of sex, creed, religion, ethnic background, place of origin or political affiliation, and all shall be entitled to equal pay for equal work.

³⁹ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has clarified that the right to work, as enshrined in Article 6 of the Covenant, must be understood as encompassing decent work. In General Comment No. 18, the Committee defines decent work as work that respects the fundamental rights of the human person, including the rights of workers to safe and healthy working conditions and fair remuneration, provides an income sufficient to enable workers to support themselves and their families, and ensures respect for the physical and mental integrity of the worker in the course of employment (§7). In this context, the elements relating to fair remuneration and adequate livelihood are closely linked to Article 7 of the Covenant, which guarantees just and favorable conditions of work. Furthermore, the Committee emphasizes that States parties are under an obligation to refrain from denying or limiting equal access to decent work for all persons, particularly disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups. This includes the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right of women and young persons to access decent work, as well as to adopt appropriate legislative, administrative and policy measures to combat discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation (§23).

The Act also provides a comprehensive set of rights for trade unions, through Parts II, VIII, and IX. The Act explicitly guarantees the right to organize, associate, and bargain collectively in Part II and further specifies representative organizations, agreement-making, and industrial action, including strikes.

Furthermore, the Act, through Chapters 3 and 10, provides for the institutions responsible for, and the processes and procedures of labor administration.

In addition to the Decent Work Act (2015), a few national legislations make reference to Liberian workers and employment, including workers in the informal economy, as can be fully gleaned from the following brief overview.

b) Children's Law (2011)

The Children's Law of 2011, the principal national legislation governing the rights and protection of children, defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years (Article I, Section 3) and provides broad protection from child labor. The Law, in Article III, Section 20, guarantees that every child shall have the right to be protected from work and other practices that may threaten her or his health, educational, spiritual, physical, and moral development and provides for the intervention by a social worker or probation officer when a child in need of care is involved in such situations. In addition, the Law explicitly prohibits the employment of children in hazardous work (Article VII, Section 9.1). Any contract for apprenticeship or employment with a child shall involve the consent of his/her parent or guardian, (Article VII. Section 9.3) and the duties of an employer to a child employee are set out in Article VII. Section 9.4.

Furthermore, the Law mandates the MoL to issue regulations specifying the terms and conditions applicable to specific categories of work, including, where appropriate, the establishment of minimum working ages for different categories of work (Article VII, Section 9.2). Consistent with this, the Decent Work Act (2015) prohibits the employment of children under the age of 15 in full-time employment (Section 21.2). The Act further provides that a child who is at least 13 years old may be employed to perform light work, limited to a maximum of two hours per day and fourteen hours per week, and in compliance with the prescribed procedures (Section 21.3). The Act further sets out specific working conditions for children over the age of 15 but not yet 16, including a maximum of seven hours of work per day and forty-two hours per week, mandatory rest periods totaling at least one hour, additional annual leave entitlements, and requirements for employers to maintain a certified register and employment records of all employed children (Section 21.5). The Act also strictly prohibits children from engaging in hazardous work, as defined in Section 21.4. However, the Act does not contain detailed provisions regulating children's participation in labor or employment beyond these age and hour limits. This represents a gap, as it lacks comprehensive measures governing the conditions under which children may work, apart from the general prohibition of hazardous work.

c) The Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons (2005)

The Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons prohibits the trafficking of persons and prescribes harsh criminal penalties for violations. With reference to all workers, the Anti-Trafficking Law prohibits forced labor and

other forms of exploitation. See also Article 12 of the Constitution (1986) and Section 2.2 of the Anti-trafficking Act.

d) The Social Security Act

The Social Security Act (2017), together with the Decent Work Act (2015), forms the primary legislative framework that governs social security schemes in Liberia. However, the Act remains limited in terms of availability, accessibility, and coverage, and therefore falls short of realizing the right to social security for all individuals.

The National Social Security Act (2017) does not provide protection for all contingencies recognized under international human rights and labor standards. The Act primarily covers old-age (retirement) pensions, work-injury benefits, disability benefits, and survivor benefits. It does not, however, extend to unemployment benefits or family and child-related benefits, whereas the Decent Work Act (DWA) provides additional protection, such as sickness and maternity benefits.

The existing benefits under the Act are available to employees in both the public and private sectors, with voluntary enrollment permitted for self-employed persons. At the same time, the Act explicitly excludes certain categories of workers, including casual workers, family labor, household workers, military personnel, and persons employed on boats. Consequently, workers in the informal economy who are typically unregistered and whose employment relationships are not formally regulated remain outside the scope of the National Social Security Scheme, leaving a significant gap in coverage of social protection.

3. Analysis of the national legal framework – the Decent Work Act (2015)

a) The application of the Act

The Constitution of Liberia, in Article 17, obliges the GOL to promulgate policies to govern opportunities for employment and guarantees workers' freedom of association, including the right to form and join trade unions. This establishes a constitutional baseline for State responsibility in regulating labor relations and protecting workers' rights.

The Decent Work Act (2015) operationalizes these commitments and, on its face, adopts a broad personal scope. The Act's Section 1.5b (iii), explicitly states that the Act applies to all work performed in both the formal and informal economy, while Section 1.4 (l) defines an "employee" to include any worker in either sphere, regardless of their gender and nationality, as further construed in Section 1.5 b. In principle, this means that core protections - fair wages, non-discrimination, and safe working conditions - are intended to extend to informal workers as well. However, in practice, workers in the informal economy are largely excluded from the effective enjoyment of these protections. Minimum wage enforcement, regulation of working hours, occupational safety and health standards, and access to labor inspection remain overwhelmingly focused on the formal sector, leaving informal workers without meaningful recourse. Moreover, although the Act repeatedly refers to "all workers," it does not establish a tailored framework that reflects the specific realities of

informal work. Beyond general applicability clauses, the Act makes a very limited express provision for workers in the informal economy. The only explicit minimum wage guarantee targeting a segment of this group is found in Section 16.1A, which extends minimum wage protection to domestic and casual workers. This offers only partial and fragmented protection to a relatively small subset of informal workers and does not address the broader spectrum of informal occupations and vulnerabilities.

These legal and practical gaps are acknowledged in the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights for 2024-2028 (NAPBHR), a national policy document launched in August 2024. The NAPBHR notes that workers in the informal economy are not effectively covered by legal provisions relating to working conditions, such as wage, working hours and labor inspection, as informal work is often considered as a part-time or marginal employment.⁴⁰ It further observes that the “informal sector is generally characterized by physical danger and poor working conditions, precisely because it is largely unregulated, leaving workers highly exposed to human rights violations/abuses and other risks.” Hazardous occupations are especially prevalent in informal sectors, such as illegal fishing, logging, and mining, where regulatory gaps and the absence of effective remediation mechanisms contribute directly to workplace injuries and fatalities⁴¹.

Collectively, this demonstrates a significant disconnect between the formal scope of the Decent Work Act and the actual level of protection afforded to workers in the informal economy.

b) Lack of policy frameworks relating to workers in the informal economy

Section 1.5(e) of the Decent Work Act authorizes the MoL to “publish regulations and/or a code of good practice specifying how this Act will apply to particular categories of workers in respect of whom special and substantial problems of application arise.” This provision reflects a clear legislative intent: where general statutory protections may be insufficient or difficult to operationalize, the Ministry is mandated to issue tailored regulatory guidance to ensure that vulnerable or hard-to-regulate categories of workers, such as those in the informal economy, are not left without meaningful protection.

Despite this explicit authorization, there is no evidence that the MoL has issued any regulations or a code of good practice specifying how this Act should apply to workers in the informal economy or addressing the unique challenges they face.⁴² In the absence of such implementing instruments, workers in the informal economy are theoretically covered by the Act’s general provisions, but lack the procedural and substantive specificity needed to translate those provisions into enforceable rights. The result is a regulatory vacuum: the Act’s broad language is insufficiently detailed to guide employers, inspectors, or workers themselves, effectively rendering the protections non-operational for large segments of the labor force. Consequently, the informal economy workers remain without a clear legal framework through which they can understand, claim, or seek remedies for violations of their rights under the Act.

⁴⁰ The Republic of Liberia, “National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024-2028)”, Section 2.3.2, <https://liberia.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/NAP%20BnHR%20%28003%29.pdf>. See also Liberia’s Decent Work Act; Chapter 13, Section 13.2.

⁴¹ Ibid; See also Report of the Working Group on the Issue of Human Rights and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises: Visit to Liberia, A/HRC/53/24/Add.1, April 2023, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/24/Add.1>.

⁴² Discussion with staff of the Library and Documentation Section of the Ministry of Labor. December 2024.

c) Employment security

Chapter 13 of the Decent Work Act (2015) establishes employment security guarantees for all workers in Liberia, including workers in both the formal and informal economy. A central feature of this framework is the requirement that all employees receive written employment contracts or written particulars of employment. In principle, such documentation provides an essential safeguard: it clarifies the terms and conditions of work, strengthens job security, and enables workers to assert their rights. In practice, however, workers in the informal economy are overwhelmingly engaged or employed without formal contracts or written employment particulars, despite this legal requirement. This disconnect between law and practice undermines the protective purpose of the Act and leaves informal workers without a reliable basis to contest unfair treatment or termination.

The Act restricts termination to situations where cause exists and requires between one week to thirty days' written notice, depending on an employee's length of continuous service (see Section 14.6). The Act authorizes immediate termination without notice in case of "grave misconduct" (see Section 14.3a). Section 14.5(c) further provides that, where termination occurs for economic reasons, employees are entitled to four weeks of severance pay for each completed year of service. Section 14.3d(i- viii) outlines a detailed list of behaviors that qualify as grave misconduct, including incapacity to perform duties effectively due to alcohol, narcotics or similar substances; violation of another employee's fundamental rights; sexual harassment; physical or verbal violence or threats against co-workers or the employer; careless or intentional destruction of the employer's property causing significant loss; exposing others to safety or health risks; unexcused absence for more than ten consecutive days or more than twenty days within six months; and breaches of confidentiality, except when disclosure reveals employer wrongdoing or protects the public interest.

However, while the Act is legally inclusive, its implementation is not. In practice, these legal protections are applied almost exclusively to workers in the formal economy. Workers in the informal economy continue to be subjected to "at-will" employment, without any fixed-term contracts, written particulars, or predictable termination procedures as required by law. Consequently, they lack job security and have little access to severance entitlements or protection against arbitrary dismissal. This implementation gap is exacerbated by the absence of MoL regulations operationalizing the Act for workers in the informal economy. Although the Act authorizes the MoL to issue regulations, no regulatory instruments have been adopted to provide protections relating to written contracts, termination safeguards, and severance pay for these workers or to create enforcement mechanisms adapted to their realities. Without such regulations, the MoL lacks the tools to require compliance from employers in the informal economy. Furthermore, no other national legislation fills this gap or addresses the specific needs of workers in the informal economy, leaving them structurally excluded from core labor protections.

To align national law and practice with international human rights and labor standards, particularly those pertaining to decent work and employment security, workers in the informal economy must, at the minimum, be provided with a written statement of employment. Such a requirement would not only clarify the terms

and conditions of work but would also constitute a critical step toward extending legal certainty, enhancing job security, and promoting enforceable rights for the vast majority of workers in Liberia.

d) Child and forced labor

The Decent Work Act (2015) prohibits the employment of children under the age of 15 in full-time work (Section 21.2). The Act further provides that a child who is at least 13 years old may be employed to perform light work, limited to a maximum of two hours per day and fourteen hours per week, and in compliance with the prescribed procedures (Section 21.3). For children over the age of 15 but not yet 16, the Act establishes specific working-time conditions, a maximum of seven hours of work per day and forty-two hours per week, mandatory rest periods totaling at least one hour, additional annual leave entitlements, and requirements for employers to maintain a certified register and employment records of all employed children (Section 21.5). The Act also imposes a strict prohibition on hazardous work for children (Section 21.4).

However, beyond these age thresholds and working-hour limitations, the Act does not contain detailed or comprehensive provisions governing the broader conditions under which children may engage in work. It lacks guidance on permissible types of light work, employer obligations in relation to supervision and safety, or measures addressing the underlying vulnerabilities that often lead children into work such as poverty, school attendance barriers, and informal-sector exploitation. This regulatory gap weakens the protective function of the Act, as it provides only a partial framework rather than a holistic system for preventing harmful or inappropriate child labor.

This gap is particularly significant when viewed alongside the Children's Law (2011), which assigns the MoL a specific mandate to issue regulations specifying the terms and conditions for specific categories of work, including the establishment of minimum working ages for different types of employment (Article VII, Section 9.2). Although the statutory framework anticipates a more detailed regulatory regime, particularly for forms of work that present heightened risks for children, no such regulations have been issued to date. As a result, the legislative intent of the Children's Law and the Decent Work Act remains unfulfilled.

Liberian law also expressly prohibits slavery and forced labor. Article 12 of the Constitution enshrines this prohibition, which is reaffirmed in Section 2.2 of the Decent Work Act and elaborated in the Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons (2005), which criminalizes forced labor, servitude and other slavery-like practices. These strong normative commitments should, in principle, serve as powerful safeguards for disadvantaged workers, including children.

Despite this robust legal framework, the absence of implementing regulations and effective oversight by the MoL has significantly undermined enforcement. No regulatory instruments have been adopted to clarify how prohibitions on child and forced labor apply in the informal economy, where the majority of child labor occurs. Consequently, the protections contained in the Decent Work Act and related laws remain largely theoretical for informal-sector workers. Child labor, including its hazardous forms, continues to be widespread, with weak monitoring, insufficient labor inspection coverage, and minimal accountability for violators. This implementation deficit constitutes a major barrier to realizing the rights guaranteed under Liberia's labor and child protection laws.

e) Equality and non-discrimination in employment

Article 18 of the Constitution guarantees equal opportunity for work and employment while Article 11 affirms equality before the law and equal protection for all persons. These provisions establish a constitutional framework prohibiting discrimination in access to employment and in the enjoyment of employment-related rights. This framework is further operationalized through national labor legislation. Section 2.7 of the Decent Work Act explicitly prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation, reinforcing the State's obligation to ensure that all workers are treated fairly and without bias on the basis of protected characteristics.

Similarly, the 2017 Act establishing the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation creates a statutory social security and welfare scheme intended to support workers against various social and economic risks. However, the scheme primarily covers registered workers, predominantly those in the formal economy, because eligibility is tied to contributions and formal employment relationships. As a result, a large segment of Liberia's workforce employed in the informal economy is effectively excluded from accessing social security benefits, despite the constitutional guarantee of equality and non-discrimination.

Women

Sections 2.4(a) and 2.5 of the Decent Work Act (2015) guarantee that all women and men are entitled, without distinction, exclusion or preference, to the rights and protections provided under the Act, including equal remuneration for work of equal or comparable value. The Act thereby enshrines the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination in employment and pay.

These protections apply to all workers covered by the Act, including those in the informal economy. However, women working in the informal economy often remain unable to effectively access or benefit from these protections in practice. Liberian women participate heavily in the informal economy and constitute the majority of workers in the informal economy. According to the World Bank, approximately 94 per cent of women are informally employed, compared to 79 percent of men, based on a 2015 LISGIS survey.⁴³ In addition, the Council on Foreign Relations notes that “seventy-four per cent of all female workers in Liberia are informal laborers, and 41 per cent of university-educated women work informally, compared to 24 percent of university-educated men.”⁴⁴

Women in Liberia's informal sectors, including market vendors and domestic workers, face significant challenges such as discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse and exploitation, and limited legal protections. Many lack access to credit, banking services, and social security benefits, further heightening their vulnerability to exploitation and economic insecurity.

⁴³ World Bank Group, “Liberian Women Count: Evidence from a Macrosimulation of the Gender Dividend”, April 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099231304272369200/pdf/IDU061c87b350856f042340a5050ea45b0e58bf3.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), “Liberia's Significant Strides on Women's Rights Have Not Translated to Workplace Equality”, accessed on July 30, 2025 at <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-global-economy/case-studies/liberia/>.

While Liberia has established laws and policies to promote gender equality, including the Decent Work Act, the National Gender Policy (2009) and the Employment Policy (2009), there remains a need for more explicit safeguards against gender-based discrimination and abuse. Strengthening these protections and ensuring their extension to women working in the informal economy is essential to achieving meaningful gender equality in the world of work.

Migrant workers

The ILO defines migrant workers as people who are employed in countries other than their own.⁴⁵ In Liberia, Chapter 45 of the Decent Work Act (2015) governs the employment of migrant workers and extends to them equal legal protection, including the rights to association and to social security, subject to obtaining a work permit.

Migrant workers, both foreign and domestic, play a vital role in Liberia's economy, particularly in the fishing, mining, and agriculture sectors. In 2024, Liberia issued more than 10,000 work permits to foreign nationals, which carry a fee,⁴⁶ including many from ECOWAS member states, who may enter Liberia freely but must obtain a work permit to work in Liberia. Recently, an influx of Burkinabe nationals engaged in illicit mining and farming activities, especially in the southeastern region, prompted Liberian authorities to begin formal migrant registration in the area.⁴⁷

Despite the presence of migrant workers in cross-border trade, Liberian laws provide no legal protections for these groups. A UN Women study reported that informal cross-border trade is a primary source of employment and income for 91 per cent of female and 96 per cent of male respondents in border regions, a sector historically dominated by women.⁴⁸ The study shows that employment and income generation, particularly, profit remain the main motivation for their participation.⁴⁹

Migrant and cross-border workers in the informal economy face substantial barriers to accessing labor protections and Liberia has yet to establish arrangements for the portability of social security benefits. Strengthening legal protection and support systems for these issues is essential to promoting equity and reducing exploitation within the labor market.

f) Limits on working hours

Under the Decent Work Act (2015), standard working hours are capped (commonly interpreted as 48 hours per week, with a 56-hour maximum including overtime), and the law provides for overtime pay, a weekly rest

⁴⁵ See ILO, “International Labor Standards and Labor Migration”, <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/labor-migration/international-labor-standards-and-labor-migration>.

⁴⁶ Civil Service Agency of the Republic of Liberia, “An Analysis of the Alien Work Permit Report 2024”, June 2025, <https://csa.gov.lr/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/A-Report-from-The-Analysis-of-the-Alien-Work-Permit-2024.pdf>;

⁴⁷ West Africa Democracy Radio, “Liberia Registers Burkinabé Migrants Amid Mining Concerns”, May 2025, <https://wadr.org/liberia-registers-burkinabe-migrants-amid-mining-concerns/#:~:text=The%20Liberian%20government%20has%20been,and%20protecting%20Liberia's%20natural%20resources>.

⁴⁸ UN Women, “Baseline Study on Women in Cross Border Trade in Liberia”, 2007, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Media/infocus/en/ICBTreportLiberia.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

day of at least 24 hours, and remuneration for public holidays (see Section 17 and related provisions). The law also provides for paid annual leave, with entitlement depending on continuous service.

The protections are mostly accorded to workers in the formal economy. The activities of workers in the informal economy are characterized by unregulated working hours, and they often work long hours without corresponding pay.

g) Remuneration

Consistent with international human rights and labor standards on wages, workers in the informal economy should be accorded minimum wage (to ensure an adequate standard of living for workers and their families), regular pay, overtime compensation, in compliance with Article 7 of the ICESCR, the ILO's Conventions No. 100 (1951) on Equal Remuneration, No. 131 (1970) on Minimum wage; No. 95 (1949) on protection of wages; and No. 01 (1919) on hours of work. Liberian laws require equal pay for work of equal value (see Article 18 of the Liberian Constitution (1986) and Section 2.5 of the Decent Work Act). The DWA sets that for i) every formal sector (concession, industry, business, company, etc.) a worker/employee is entitled to be paid a minimum wage of United States Sixty-Eight Cents (US\$0.68) per hour or United States Five Dollars and Fifty Cents (US\$5.50) per day for work that the employee is employed to perform; ii) every domestic and/or casual worker/employee is entitled to be paid a minimum wage of United States Forty-Three Cents (US\$0.43) per hour or United States Three Dollars and Fifty Cents (US\$3.50) per day for work that the employee is employed to perform.⁵⁰

While the Act establishes minimum wage in the country for workers in the formal economy (see Section 16.1A (i) of the Act), its coverage of informal economy workers is far more limited: only domestic workers and casual workers are explicitly included (see Section 16.1A (ii) of the Act). Although Section 16.4(c) requires employers to pay wages at intervals not exceeding one month and this requirement formally applies to all employees under the Act, many workers in the informal economy are unable to benefit from this protection in practice due to the absence of formal employment relationships. The Decent Work Act (2015) guarantees overtime pay of at least 150% of the regular hourly rate (see Section 17.5). However, it does not require additional compensation for working on a weekly rest day (see Section 17); nor does it provide for additional compensation for night work (see Section 17).

Like many provisions relevant to workers in the informal economy, there are no regulatory mechanisms in place to monitor compliance or ensure that workers in the informal economy are paid regularly, receive overtime pay or are compensated for working on a weekly rest day or night.

⁵⁰ Republic of Liberia, "An Act to Repeal Title 18 of the Executive Law, Labor Practices Law and to Establish in lieu therefore The Decent Work Act, 2015", (June 2015), <https://database.ilga.org/api/downloader/download/1/LR%20-%20LEG%20-%20Decent%20Work%20Act%20%282015%29%20-%20OFF%20%28en%29.pdf>.

h) Safe and healthy working conditions

Chapter 24 of the Act provides broad protection for workers concerning safe and healthy working conditions. However, there is no evidence that the MoL has issued regulations specifying how these occupational safety and health (OSH) provisions apply to workers in the informal economy.

Section 24.1 aims to secure the safety, health, and welfare of employees and eliminate at the source risks to safety, health and welfare. Section 24.2 provides key OSH terms, including chemicals, disease, hazard, injuries, etc. The Act also requires employers to provide health and safety training for employees (Section 25.1) and restricts work that is dangerous to the health of the mother and child (Section 20.4).

Despite these protections, the Act does not explicitly guarantee workers' right to refuse unsafe work. International labor standards affirm the right of workers to remove themselves from situations of danger without fear of retaliation. In the absence of such protection, workers may feel compelled to remain in unsafe conditions, undermining the effectiveness of the OSH framework. In addition, the Act contains no provisions for workers who report hazards, raise concerns, and act as whistleblowers.

i) Maternity, paternity and parental leaves

Liberian law provides for paid paternity leave (Section 20.3 of the Act) and paid nursing break (Section 20.6 of the Act). The law, however, fails to provide parental leave or flexible work arrangements for employees with family responsibilities. Moreover, there is no evidence that the MoL has issued regulations specifying how these family responsibilities provisions apply to workers in the informal economy.

Fathers working in the informal economy should have access to paternity leave around the time of childbirth and benefit from adequate parental leave arrangements to support their childcare responsibilities. Additional measures are needed to improve their working conditions in line with ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities (1981) and ILO Recommendation No. 165.

Liberian law forbids discrimination, particularly on the grounds of pregnancy or breastfeeding (Section 2.4 of the Act) and guarantees at least 14 weeks of maternity leave (Section 20.1 of the Act). While the Act provides that employment shall be deemed continuous during any period of maternity leave (Section 20.4 of the Act), it does not explicitly protect workers from arbitrary dismissal due to pregnancy or maternity.

As with other provisions relevant to workers in the informal economy, there is no evidence that MoL has issued regulations on how the maternity at work provisions should apply to workers in the informal economy.

j) Trade union rights

Liberian laws generally permit workers to form and join unions of their choice (Article 17 of the Liberian Constitution; Sections 34-36 of the Act). The Act also guarantees the rights of workers and employers to engage in collective bargaining (Section. 2.6(b); Section. 37; and Chapter 39 on good-faith collective bargaining). Workers also have the right to strike, provided procedural requirements are met (Sections 41.1–41.2). During a lawful strike, employers may not hire replacement workers or require non-striking employees to

perform the work of striking employees, and workers are entitled to resume their employment after the strike unless dismissed for a valid reason (Section 41.3).

Despite these protections and exclusions, there is no evidence that the MoL has issued regulations clarifying how the right to associate provisions apply to workers in the informal economy.

While the Act recognizes the rights of workers to join and/or form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, several provisions concerning the establishment and operation of trade unions risk undue interference in their internal affairs. For instance, although trade unions should be free to draft and amend their constitutions and rules without prior authorization, Articles 35.1(b) and (d) and 35.3 overly prescribe detailed mandatory content and require ministerial approval for any amendments. In addition, the Act (Articles 36.1(d), 36.4(d) and 35.3) grants the authorities broad discretion over the registration, cancellation, and dissolution of trade unions, giving rise to concerns about excessive administrative control.

k) Right to social security

The National Social Security Act (2017) establishes a contributory social security scheme that primarily covers employees whose employers are obliged to make monthly contributions on their behalf (§§89.8 and 89.16). Although the Act permits self-employed people to voluntarily enroll (§89.13), most workers in the informal economy remain effectively excluded because they are not part of employer-based contribution systems.

The Act provides several benefits, including, retirement pensions and its minimum rate (§§89.20–89.21), invalidity pension (§§89.22–89.23), survivors' lump-sum benefits (§§89.24–89.25), disablement benefits (§§89.26–89.28), occupational disease provisions (§89.29), and death benefits (§89.30).

However, it does not cover all contingencies recognized under international human rights and labor standards. It covers only old age, work injury, disability and survivor, but not unemployment or family/child support, while sickness and maternity are covered under the DWA. Coverage of existing benefits applies to employees in both the private and public sectors with voluntary enrollment available for self-employed people. At the same time, the law explicitly excludes casual workers, family labor, household workers, military personnel, and persons employed on boats – the categories that encompass many informal economy workers. While the Act authorizes certain medical benefits to insured persons (§§89.33–89.35), these do not constitute wage replacement during periods of sickness.

While the Act authorizes the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation to issue regulations governing the administration of the scheme (§§89.12, 89.36), there is no evidence that such regulations have been issued to clarify how social security provisions should apply to workers outside employer-based contribution structures, including workers in the informal economy.

l) Labor administration and informal employment

Part III, Sections 3 to 11 of the Decent Work Act designates the MoL as the institution responsible for the administration and enforcement of the Act, including all labor-related matters, including matters affecting workers in the informal economy.

Despite this explicit mandate in the Act to reach and serve all workers throughout Liberia, the MoL faces challenges in extending its services to the large number of workers in the informal economy and address their needs. These challenges include limited financial and logistical resources, as well as insufficient personnel capacity.

These challenges are compounded by several institutional and regulatory gaps. First, the MoL has not established a specialized unit or designated any specific unit responsible for dealing with the affairs of workers in the informal economy. Second, although the Act authorizes the MoL under Section 7.1 to issue regulations, it has not yet developed or promulgated regulations, policies, or codes of good practices specifically aimed at protecting the rights of workers in the informal economy. Third, the Ministry lacks structured data collection systems and targeted mechanisms to identify and respond to the specific needs of these workers.⁵¹

Labor inspectors, appointed and assigned in accordance with the law, generally do not engage with workers in the informal economy, as their mandate and operational scope typically focus on the formal economy sector. The absence of a clear regulatory framework defining the conditions under which workers in the informal economy, including domestic workers, are employed further hinders effective oversight and protection of the rights of workers in the informal economy in Liberia.

VI. Conclusion and recommendations

The Decent Work Act establishes a comprehensive legal framework intended to regulate labor relations and protection of the rights of all workers in Liberia, including those in the informal economy.⁵² On paper, its scope is broad and inclusive, extending to workers in both the formal and informal economies. However, the analysis demonstrates a persistent and significant gap in the Act as well as between the Act's formal guarantees and their implementation in practice, resulting in limited protection for the vast majority of Liberia's workforce employed in the informal economy.

As a result, informal economy workers, who constitute a significant share of the national labor force and contribute substantially to the country's GDP, remain largely outside the effective coverage of Liberia's labor framework. They continue to face low and irregular wages, job insecurity, the absence of formal employment contracts, long work hours, unsafe and unregulated working conditions, and limited access to social protection, maternity protection, labor inspection, and fair dispute resolutions. These gaps leave workers in the informal economy vulnerable to exploitation and hinder the realization of their fundamental rights guaranteed under Liberian laws and international human rights and labor standards to which Liberia has committed. A central cause of this implementation deficit is the absence of regulations, policies, and codes of good practices that the Ministry of Labor is explicitly authorized and expected to issue under the Decent Work Act. Without such instruments, general statutory guarantees cannot be translated into enforceable rights for informal workers. Also, employers, labor inspectors, and workers lack the practical guidance needed to operationalize the Act.

⁵¹ Interviews with officials at the MoL, December 2024.

⁵² See Section 1.5b(iii) of the Liberia Decent Work Act.

The Ministry also faces resource constraints and limited inspection capacity and lacks specialized institutional structures or data systems necessary to extend protection to workers in the informal economy.

To close the gap between law and practice, there is an urgent need for the MoL to develop regulatory frameworks that adapt the Act to informal work realities.

While oversight, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms at the MoL are largely focused on workers in the formal economy, they remain weak for workers in the informal economy, highlighting the need for targeted and timely intervention by the MoL. The lack of policies, regulations, and codes of good practices, which outline standards, processes, and procedures through and by which the Decent Work Act will be applied to address the specific needs of workers in the informal economy is a felt need.

Such frameworks should address, at the minimum: (1) written employment particulars and job security; (2) fair wages, minimum wage and compensation standards; (3) dismissal; regulated working hours and paid overtime; (4) occupational safety and health and inspection coverage; (5) equality and non-discrimination for women and migrant workers; (6) protection against child and forced labor; (7) access to social security benefits; (8) and the right to organize and bargain collectively. Establishing these measures would not only align national practice with the Decent Work Act and international obligations but also strengthen Liberia's capacity to promote decent work and ensure that the rights guaranteed in law become meaningful and enforceable for all workers, regardless of sector or status.

It is important that UN agencies, such as the OHCHR and ILO, continue to provide the GOL and relevant authorities with technical assistance to fulfil their obligations under the international human rights treaties and international labor standards. This should include legal and policy analysis and reform, capacity-building of relevant authorities, informal economy workers, employers, and other relevant stakeholders, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and facilitating social and policy dialogue to advance the rights of workers in the informal economy. They should also assist in empowering workers in the informal economy to advocate for their rights, engage with relevant authorities and national and international human rights mechanisms, and utilize available grievance and support mechanisms to address violations effectively.

Recommendations

To support the protection of the human rights of workers in the informal economy, this assessment study sets out the following recommendations:

To the GOL:

- 1) Expedite the preparation and submission of Liberia's overdue reports under the ICESCR and other international human rights treaties and engage constructively with treaty bodies to strengthen the protection of the rights of workers in the informal economy.
- 2) Ratify key international human rights and labor instruments, including the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR, the ICRMW, and ILO Conventions, such as No. 189 on Domestic Workers and No. 102 on Social Security (Minimum Standards).

To the MoL and MoJ, and other relevant line-ministries:

- 1) Issue regulations and codes of good practice, as authorized under Sections 1.5(e) and 7.1 of the Decent Work Act (2015), to explicitly operationalize protections for workers in the informal economy.
- 2) Adopt regulations under the Children's Law and the Decent Work Act (2015) to define permissible light work, hazardous work, and conditions for children's employment.
- 3) Review and revise the Decent Work Act (2015) to ensure full compliance with international human rights and labor standards and to extend its protection to all workers, including those in the informal economy, taking into consideration the findings and conclusions of this study. In particular:
 - Review and amend the provisions relating to children's engagement in work, including in terms of permissible ages, working hours, working conditions, and others.
 - Extend minimum wage protections to all informal workers consistent with international labor standards.
 - Establish legal protection for refusal of unsafe work and for whistleblowers reporting OSH risks.
 - Amend restrictive provisions governing trade union registration, dissolution, and constitutional approval to ensure freedom of association in line with ILO Conventions.
- 4) Reform the National Social Security Act (2017) to enable coverage for informal workers and provide benefits aligned with international standards, including unemployment protection.
- 5) Develop policies to facilitate the transition from the informal economy to the formal economy and strengthen the protections for workers in the informal economy in relation to their employment, working conditions, collective bargaining, and social security.
- 6) Expand the mandate and resources of labor inspection systems to cover informal workspaces, applying a rights-based approach that protects workers rather than penalizes them, and ensuring accountability for violations. Provide labor inspectors and enforcement bodies with training on constructive engagement with workers in the informal economy.
- 7) Promote the formation and legal recognition of workers' associations and cooperatives in the informal economy and ensure their effective participation in tripartite consultations and in the development of labor and social protection laws, regulations, and policies.
- 8) Ensure systematic data collection on workers in the informal economy and support national statistical institutions in conducting regular labor force surveys with data disaggregated by sex, age, disability, migration, and employment status.
- 9) Adopt targeted measures to address gender-based discrimination, and human rights abuses and violations in the informal economy, including for domestic and care workers.
- 10) Establish specialized units, including through assigning existing units within the MoL, to address the needs and conditions of workers in the informal economy, including domestic workers.

- 11) Strengthen the labor inspection systems, including by increasing the number of labor inspectors and strengthening their capacity, so that the workplaces in the informal economy, including domestic settings, are effectively inspected.
- 12) Provide accessible, effective mechanisms or procedures for workers in the informal economy to bring cases of human rights violations and ensure that, in case of violations, cases are effectively investigated and prosecuted, with remedies available to affected workers.

To trade unions and civil society organizations

- 1) Support workers in the informal economy to build/strengthen their capacity, to organize themselves and effectively exercise and claim their rights.
- 2) Monitor the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report, as well as stemming from international human rights and labor mechanisms.
- 3) Engage in and advocate for legislative and policy reforms to promote and protect the rights of workers in the informal economy.
- 4) Reinforce the capacity of informal workers association through training, advisory and technical supports.

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