

THE FUTURE OF WORK: WORKER ORGANIZING & POWER IN AFRICA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

FEDERATION OF ALL UGANDA MIGRANT WORKERS ASSOCIATIONS (FAUMA)

Building Blocks

For decades, workers, particularly care workers, have migrated from East African countries such as Uganda to the Gulf region in search of employment opportunities. However, migrant workers in these destinations have faced a wide range of injustices and mistreatment, including discrimination, exploitation, torture, imprisonment on false charges, *de facto* slavery, and even fatalities, in some cases, fatalities.

Back home, their families are often kept in an information blackhole, with little in the way of updates on what is going on with their relative in the host country. To add insult to injury, upon returning to their homeland, they often face social and economic reintegration challenges, including trauma, discrimination by the public, lack of employment opportunities, weak social support systems, and in some cases, discovering that the money they sent home has been misappropriated by the relatives to whom they entrusted it. Yet these distressed migrant workers, especially in the informal economy, lacked the collective organization and leadership to share their experiences and voice their demands. Since 2015, traditional unions in Uganda have been perceived by migrant workers as largely passive and ineffective in representing their interests, a factor that contributed to the formation of FAUMA.

In response, in 2024, the Federation of All Uganda Migrant Workers Associations (FAUMA) was established as an umbrella body that integrates together 23 associations to confront widespread exploitation, abuse, and lack of representation. By pooling experience and resources, FAUMA strengthens associational power, enabling collective action and representation beyond what fragmented groups could achieve. It also builds coalitional power by engaging governments, publics, and international actors to advance migrant workers' rights.

Unlike other federations that focus solely on in-country associations, FAUMA has extended its reach by organizing across borders by integrating diaspora associations, strengthening transnational associational and coalitional power. This inclusive approach strengthens the collective voice of migrant workers, giving them a sense of belonging and ownership within a unified structure. Through FAUMA, migrant workers' associations abroad are not only connected to their homeland but also empowered to participate actively in decision-making and advocacy. Its member associations include the Kyeyo Initiative Uganda, Association of Ugandans in the Middle East, Association of Ugandans in Scandinavian States, Association of Ugandans in the UK, Xmaids Family

Initiative, Mwagale Foundation, the Khwinyukhe Khurambebe Initiative, and Rights for Maids Association Uganda.

The leaders of these associations serve as coordinators, mobilizing and organizing members to participate in FAUMA's programs and initiatives. FAUMA has 75 leaders, of whom 60 per cent are men and the remaining are women. Women are most represented in departmental leadership and least represented in country-based and diaspora roles. Leadership is drawn intentionally from varied associations and diverse geographies, with quotas to ensure adequate representation of women and persons with disabilities. This design guarantees that Ugandan migrant workers, wherever they are, have a channel of representation and that remediation efforts to help them can be coordinated globally. Through engagement with Ugandan embassies and host governments, FAUMA develops institutional power, creating channels for dialogue and policy influence. In this way, FAUMA bridges the gap between home and diaspora, creating a dynamic network that ensures that migrant workers are heard, supported, and effectively represented wherever they are in the world.

FAUMA's multi-tiered structure is distinctive: At the base are the associations. The next layer is representatives in each host state, then regional coordinators (for example, Middle East and Scandinavia), then continental leaders, and finally an overall Head of Diaspora who coordinates all these external representatives. This federated structure ensures that, from individual workers dispersed in local community groups in the various host states, to the continental blocs, each collectivity can speak with consolidated leadership through a unified platform.

It also has specialized departments such as occupational health and safety, women and children, and people with disabilities (PWDs). FAUMA avoids bureaucratic or siloed communication through a flexible, issue driven approach. Issues are addressed at the lowest appropriate level, whether at country, association, or departmental level, with referrals used only when escalation is necessary. When information is intended for all leaders, the primary responsible officer (PRO) communicates it through shared digital platforms, including a dedicated leadership forum, enabling rapid information sharing and coordinated action without bureaucratic delays.

The federation is governed by a constitution and strategic plan. At the apex of governance is a democratically elected Executive Committee⁴¹ responsible for strategic direction and accountability, supported by specialized functional departments covering welfare, crisis response, anti-trafficking, legal affairs, advocacy, training, research, ICT, and monitoring and evaluation. The structure is further decentralized through

continental, regional, and country-based coordinators embedded within diaspora communities across Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and North America, ensuring transnational representation and rapid response. In addition, leaders of affiliated associations and returnee-led organizations are formally integrated into committees and departments.

FAUMA also exercises discursive power by reshaping narratives around migrant workers. Through social media (e.g Facebook, Twitter, TikTok) and public campaigns, it reframes migrants as rights-bearing economic actors rather than passive victims, strengthening legitimacy and public support. It ensures workers' voices are heard in policy by organizing consultations and bringing migrant representatives into discussions. Outreach includes home and community visits, contact lists, and support groups to mobilize workers and keep them informed. FAUMA researches migration issues and shares clear briefs with the responsible government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), and engages recruiters and employers to strengthen corporate social responsibility. It also operates justice and case-management services that document cases, provide legal aid or referrals, and mediate disputes. Ongoing case management and dispute resolution are handled by FAUMA's labor officers, both in Uganda and in host countries, through physical and digital engagement. When crises arise, it liaises with repatriation agents, embassies and families of the victims rescue and dignified repatriation for distressed or deceased workers.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

FAUMA currently has 175,000 members, 70 percent of whom are women workers. This provides a large and representative base through which the federation collectively advances the interests of migrant workers, especially women. Digital organizing via social media has been a significant enabler of this gain. These tools allowed the federation to mobilise and reach members within and outside Uganda while shaping public narratives on migrant worker rights. FAUMA leverages blogs, television and radio engagements, and commentaries disseminated through Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and its website. Nevertheless, FAUMA and other digitally organizing worker groups in Uganda face constraints arising from periodic media censorship, internet shutdowns, and restrictions on social media platforms, including Facebook, which has been blocked for several years. In response, FAUMA, with partner support, developed the Kyeyo and Tuliwamu apps which facilitate organizing, monitoring, and responding to migrant worker safety concerns across the continent and abroad. For workers with limited digital access, FAUMA also relies on phone calls, messaging, emails, and in-person outreach.

FAUMA engaged the Ugandan government and other stakeholders to support the operationalization and improvement of pending bilateral labor agreements with Qatar, Jordan, and

the UAE. It advocated for the expansion of such agreements to additional destinations in Europe and the Americas, alongside winning FAUMA's formal inclusion in national policymaking to ensure migrant workers' voices are heard. This has strengthened its institutional power.

Through rural sensitization campaigns, the association is shaping public narratives around safe migration. FAUMA is reframing the image of migrant workers away from narratives that portray them as hapless or passive "victims of trafficking." Instead, it presents migrant workers as purposeful economic actors with clear goals and rights. FAUMA further challenges portrayals of migrants as desperate opportunists by highlighting them as serious-minded workers with family responsibilities who contribute substantial foreign exchange to the Ugandan economy through remittances.

FAUMA organized Uganda's first migrant returnees' meeting, and participated in more than 20 high-level dialogues, including engagements with embassies and the Ugandan Parliament. Its leadership capacity building, quarterly diaspora reports, and grassroots sensitization position FAUMA to reconnect stranded and vulnerable migrants abroad with their communities back home. Through its advocacy and lobbying, FAUMA secured for itself and other stakeholders regular policy updates and consultative engagements with the Ugandan government toward a comprehensive labor-externalization law. FAUMA collaborated with the Uganda Private Migrant Labour Training Centres to roll out standardized training and pre-departure orientation for all migrants. The Federation also established migrant-worker desks in Ugandan embassies staffed with labor attachés and legal experts.

While the abolition of the *Kafala* system in Saudi Arabia in 2025⁴² was ultimately a state led reform under their Vision 2030 agenda, migrant worker organizations such as FAUMA contributed indirectly by documenting labor abuses and engaging sending state institutions. Through advocacy and solidarity building, they strengthened transnational networks that sustained normative and reputational pressure for labor reform.

FAUMA has nurtured and entered into partnerships with a range of Ugandan government agencies, including the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Office of the President, as well as with embassies and parliamentarians, strengthening its coalition power channels for policy influence and recognition. Internationally, FAUMA collaborates with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), Kyeyo Initiative Uganda, civil society organizations, and media outlets such as Voice of America. These alliances broaden its reach, enhance its legitimacy, and supply technical support for repatriation and advocacy programs. Through these partnerships, the federation has rescued, repatriated, and reintegrated more than 400 migrant

workers since 2024, particularly from the Gulf region. Of the migrant workers thus far re-integrated, 80% are female who worked in the care economy. To strengthen longer-term economic reintegration, FAUMA has established two skills development centres: one in Mityana, focusing on shoemaking, belt making, crafts, and tailoring, and another in Mukono, specializing in hairdressing and soap making.

Over the past two years, the federation, working with allied organizations such as the Uganda Human Rights Commission, Voices for Labour, the Women Probono Initiative, and Candia Advocates, has provided legal representation to 65 migrant workers. These cases involved exploitation, abuse, contract violations, and disputes with employers or recruitment agencies. This support gave the migrant workers a voice by enabling access to justice and formal dispute-resolution mechanisms. It also strengthened associational power by demonstrating the federation's capacity to defend its members and hold employers and recruiters accountable.

Challenges

Despite these advances, FAUMA faces significant challenges. FAUMA's ability to scale its influence across Africa is constrained by the limited presence of migrant worker organizations in key sending countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. This gap restricts sustained coalitional power for cross border coordination and the formation of strong continental alliances. Collaboration with traditional unions also remains challenging. In Uganda, migrant workers report that longstanding divisions within traditional union movements, combined with increasing politicization, hinder cooperation and further constrain the coalitional power that could emerge from partnerships between new worker groups and established unions. Many migrant worker organizations seek to maintain political neutrality to protect members operating in sensitive migration contexts.

High upfront costs of maintaining bespoke digital organizing platforms constrain FAUMA's digital capacity. Together with government surveillance, censorship of public social media platforms, and the digital divide, these constraints weaken both FAUMA's sustained digital mobilization and its public visibility. Its structural power is weakened by the precarious status of migrant workers in host countries, where protections are limited and legal insecurity is widespread. Even for a federation of 23 associations, financial constraints limit FAUMA's ability to offer training in financial literacy, for example, teaching migrant domestic workers that they should open a bank account in Uganda and deposit their wages in it to prevent misappropriation. Meager finances also constrain FAUMA's capacity to scale its rescue missions and social reintegration programs, while the wide geographic spread of migrants can complicate coordination. Additionally, it takes resources to assist returnees with housing or job hunting, let alone psychological counseling, or to develop the leverage to

persuade local councils to compel next of kin who squander a migrant's funds to reimburse the defrauded worker, with penalties. Moreover, entrenched stereotypes of migrants as helpless victims persist, requiring that FAUMA to continue to reframe and shift narratives in Uganda and abroad.

Replicable Lessons

- FAUMA's experience demonstrates that fragmented migrant worker groups can build associational power through federation, multi-tiered leadership, and unified representation.
- Dedicated migrant-worker focal points in missions (embassies and consulates) strengthen institutional power, shortening response times for detention, abuse, and deaths. These officers coordinate directly with host authorities and home institutions to resolve issues quickly.
- Sensitization through public campaigns builds discursive power, shifting mindsets viewing migrants as "victims" to "workers with rights and responsibilities," unlocking public and political support. This shift builds empathy, reduces stigma, and mobilizes public and political support. It also legitimizes migration as decent work deserving protection and respect.
- Strategic partnerships with ministries, IOM, ILO, and media, convert goodwill into coalitional power, enabling coordinated action and policy influence for migrant welfare.
- Digital tools, despite constraints, expand associational and discursive power and sustain organizing across dispersed contexts. Despite the high upfront costs, developing bespoke digital tools reduce vulnerability to censorship by limiting dependence on a single commercial social media platform, especially in contexts prone to censorship and internet shutdowns. Despite disruptions, worker groups can sustain organizing by adapting technologies to context, rather than waiting for political conditions to improve. Combining apps with phone calls, messaging, emails, and in-person outreach ensures continuity when digital access is uneven or restricted.