“We Work in the Light but get Paid in the Dark”: Structural Violence and Haitian Labor in Dominican Sugarcane Production

Abstract:
This study examines the exploitation of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic’s sugarcane industry, focusing on structural violence, racial discrimination, and capitalist labour extraction. Based on fieldwork in El Seibo and San Pedro de Macorís, it reveals how legal precarity, forced dependency, and spatial segregation maintain the subjugation of Haitian labourers. The Dominican state and sugar companies produce and reproduce a reserve army of labour through a mix of legal exclusion, labour subjugation, and spatial confinement. The research connects these practices to historical colonial regimes, highlighting how Haitian workers’ exploitation fuels global sugar value chains and capitalist accumulation.

Keywords:
Haitian migration, structural violence, sugarcane industry, Dominican Republic, reserve army of labour, capitalist extraction.

Introduction

Violence is a destructive force that obstructs both individual and societal development, acting as a significant impediment to nation-building. When it becomes pervasive, it spreads like an epidemic (Patten and Arboleda-Flórez 2004), making it increasingly difficult for a country to progress and ensure security for its people. In contexts where colonial domination, geopolitical subjugation, poverty, state failure, and environmental degradation intersect—as historically seen in Haiti—violence does not merely shape society but can define national identity itself (Dery and Molinero-Gerbeau 2024, 2).

Haiti was born out of violence, and this dynamic has persisted, deeply affecting its nationals both within and outside its borders. Internally, in the absence of a stable state capable of exercising sovereign control, Haiti has witnessed continuous civil conflicts. The current dominance of armed gangs is merely the latest manifestation of a long-standing struggle for power (Arisma 2022). This situation leaves individuals with few choices: either becoming part of the conflict or falling victim to it. Externally, migration often emerges as the only viable path for survival and self-development.

Haitian migration has long been a historical constant (Catanese 1999). With at least 2 million Haitians living abroad—around 20% of the population (Audebert 2020)—some estimates suggest the diaspora may be as large as 3.5 million (USAID 2021). While migration stems from various factors, chronic violence remains one of the most significant drivers (Dery and Molinero-Gerbeau 2025).

Recent years have seen an escalation of forced displacement. Approximately 1,041,000 people have been displaced in Port-au-Prince alone (OIM 2025). Although precise data on recent external migration is limited, the trend remains substantial. Under the Biden administration’s migration program, 205,026 Haitians left Haiti in a single year (Loop Haïti 2024), highlighting the scale and urgency of this exodus.

One of the primary destinations for Haitian migrants has historically been the Dominican Republic, given its geographical proximity and relative economic stability. For decades, Haitians have crossed the border in search of refuge and employment, with the sugarcane industry benefiting significantly from this influx of cheap labour. The centrality of Haitian labor to sugar production is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a process whose roots can be traced back to U.S. intervention in the early twentieth century.

Since that period, the U.S. occupation in Haiti and the expansion of U.S.-owned sugar companies in Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic established a system in which Haitian labor was actively directed toward sugarcane plantations (Castor 1988). Dispossessed of land and trapped in an unstable environment, Haitians found themselves in conditions resembling bondage, supplying an indispensable workforce for sugar production. Although migration patterns have diversified over time, the underlying structure has remained remarkably consistent: Haitian labor continues to be central to the functioning of the sugar industry, reflecting the persistence of historical inequalities in new forms. These enduring dynamics of displacement and dependency provide the ground on which structural violence takes shape, linking the history of forced incorporation into the sugar economy with the present conditions of vulnerability.

Structural violence, as employed in this study, refers to the systematic harm embedded in political, economic, and social arrangements that reproduce inequality and exploitation (Galtung, 1969). For Haitian migrants in the Dominican sugar industry, this manifests through precarious wages, restricted documentation, exclusion from services, and enforced dependency, mechanisms that sustain their vulnerability and secure their role as a reserve army of labor (Déry & Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). Crucially, these structural relationships are not only abstract or institutional; they are experienced physically and emotionally, producing suffering akin to that endured by victims of direct violence, as the stress, exhaustion, and uncertainty of daily life penetrate the body and psyche. This embodied dimension of structural violence is not only visible in contemporary everyday life but is also deeply rooted in the historical trajectory of Haitian–Dominican relations.

History provides stark examples of this dynamic. In 1937, Dominican President Rafael Trujillo ordered the massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians along the Massacre River, asserting that Haitians were only welcome as laborers, not as citizens. This policy of migratory utilitarianism (Morice 2001) was later institutionalized through bilateral agreements between Haiti's Duvalier regime and successive Dominican governments, formally exchanging Haitian workers for financial compensation. These historical arrangements created a system in which Haitian presence was tolerated only under conditions of economic usefulness, laying the foundations for the spatial and social marginalization that followed.

This logic of social isolation materialized most clearly in the creation of the *bateyes*—settlements tied to the sugar industry that institutionalized migrants' dependence and separation from Dominican society. *Bateyes* are isolated, company-owned settlements in the Dominican Republic where primarily Haitian migrant sugarcane workers live under precarious conditions, with limited access to basic services, and remain economically and socially dependent on the sugar industry. While providing one of the few spaces where migrants can avoid immediate persecution (Castel, 2021), *bateyes* also function as containment zones that secure a stable, low-cost labor supply and restrict social integration, reinforcing both vulnerability and structural exploitation. In this way, the historical logic of utilitarian migration policies converges with present-day territorial segregation, showing how violence and exclusion are reproduced across time and space. Violence

and state failure in Haiti push nearly every Haitian into a potential migratory trajectory. Meanwhile, in the Dominican Republic, systematic policies—including criminalizing undocumented migrants, conducting aggressive deportation raids, and enforcing restrictions on movement—trap Haitian workers in cycles of exploitation within the sugarcane industry.

Haitian labor constitutes the backbone of the Dominican Republic's sugarcane sector, a strategically important branch of the national economy that is heavily export-oriented and dominated by a small number of conglomerates. The physically demanding and poorly remunerated nature of cane cutting has rendered the occupation largely undesirable for Dominican workers, thereby consolidating the reliance on Haitian laborers, who make up an estimated 90 per cent of the workforce and are systematically confined to the lowest occupational strata (Boisseron, 2010).

The sector's production structure underscores its concentration of power: in the 2018–2019 harvest, national output reached 545,515 metric tons, of which Central Romana, Consorcio Azucarero de Empresas Industriales (CAEI), and Consorcio Azucarero Central (CAC) accounted for more than 96 per cent (INAZÚCAR, n.d.), while by 2023–2024 production stood at 494,791 metric tons with a projected rise to 520,000 metric tons the following year owing to favorable rainfall (USDA-FAS, 2024; USDA-FAS, 2025). Central Romana alone dominates with roughly 70 per cent of national output, processing over 20,000 tons of cane daily, whilst CAC operates nearly 8,800 hectares producing approximately 650,000 tons annually (Central Romana, n.d.; CAC, n.d.). This concentration illustrates how a handful of companies control the backbone of the national industry, with exports directed predominantly to the United States. Such figures highlight not only the sector's economic significance but also its structural asymmetries, whereby Haitian workers' labor sustains an industry premised upon their systemic vulnerability, restricted mobility, and lack of equitable labor rights—an example of structural violence embedded within the global capitalist economy.

More broadly, the reliance on Haitian labor in the Dominican sugar industry reflects a wider global pattern in which agricultural markets depend on the exploitation of vulnerable, often migrant, workers to sustain low production costs. This mechanism, widely analyzed in the literature (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016), ensures that essential commodities such as sugar remain affordable while guaranteeing profitability for producers. As Moore (2010) observes, global economic cycles are grounded in the cheap production of food, with sugar occupying a central place due to its caloric density, while wages are generally structured at subsistence levels (Molinero-Gerbeau 2023). Since surplus value extraction is fundamental to capitalist accumulation (Wallerstein 1983), securing a low-cost labor force—embodied in the Dominican case by Haitian migrant workers—becomes crucial for the reproduction of global capitalism. This global framing provides the necessary context to understand the structural vulnerabilities of the Dominican sugar sector.

In line with this, the Dominican sugarcane industry faces multiple interconnected challenges, including labor exploitation, precarious working and living conditions, limited social protections, and environmental impacts arising from intensive cultivation and agrochemical use (Castel, 2021). These structural conditions are reinforced by the sector's integration into global markets: exports in 2023 amounted to $132 million—almost entirely destined for the United States—while imports, primarily from Brazil, reached $43.7 million (OEC, n.d.; World Bank, 2023). This international orientation not only shapes production priorities and environmental practices but also perpetuates

the structural vulnerability of Haitian migrant laborers, who remain indispensable to the sector while systematically deprived of rights and protections (Déry & Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). Over time, trade agreements such as DR-CAFTA and fluctuations in global sugar markets have reshaped production strategies, labor practices, and wage structures. In this way, the Dominican case illustrates how global economic pressures intersect with migration and historical hierarchies to sustain a system of structural inequality.

Globally, migrant workers help guarantee low production costs for multiple reasons, which further explains the Dominican situation. First, restrictive immigration laws prevent them from negotiating better wages or changing sectors—for example, Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) legally binds workers to specific jobs, often in agriculture (Castles 2006). Second, undocumented migrants, constantly threatened with deportation, are more vulnerable and less likely to resist exploitative conditions. Third, racialization and gender-based labor segmentation further enforce compliance, ensuring that migrant workers remain within labor-intensive industries without challenging dominant structures (De Castro 2014).

This study argues that the Dominican state and sugar companies actively produce and reproduce a reserve army of Haitian laborers through a strategic mix of legal exclusion, labor subjugation, and spatial confinement. These practices are not incidental but deeply rooted in a broader historical and geopolitical continuum, illustrating how the exploitation of Haitian migrant workers is a direct extension of colonial labor systems. Their labor is rendered indispensable yet disposable (Wooding and Moseley-Williams, 2004), securing the profitability of the sugar industry while maintaining a regime of institutionalized oppression. Situated within the frameworks of critical migration studies and political economy, this article examines how structural and systemic violence is reproduced through the interlocking mechanisms of racial capitalism, legal precarity, spatial confinement, and exploitative working conditions. It contends that such violence is not the product of isolated acts or policy gaps but a constitutive feature of political-economic systems that require and sustain racialized labor hierarchies. Within this system, legal frameworks, border regimes, and labor structures do not merely regulate mobility and employment—they manufacture and manage vulnerability as a technique of governance. By analyzing these mechanisms, the article seeks to reveal how domination is normalized and institutionalized, rendering certain populations permanently exploitable, governable, and excluded from full social and political recognition.

The findings call for a reassessment of global sugar supply chains, emphasizing how systemic violence underpins an exploitative labor structure that sustains capitalist production.

This article proceeds as follows: it begins with the theoretical framework on violence, racial capitalism, and the reserve army of labor; it then turns to the methodology; this is followed by the empirical findings, presented through an analysis structured around working conditions, housing, discrimination, racism, and legal exclusion, each examined in relation to the overarching theoretical framework; the article closes with the conclusions.

Structural Violence: shaping the reserve army of labor

This study is anchored in a critical, multidimensional theoretical framework that draws primarily from concepts of structural violence -understanding it as the invisible, systemic form of violence embedded in society and institutions, which produces inequality, exploitation, and vulnerability over generations-, racial capitalism, and the global reserve army of labor, while engaging with

theories of legal precarity and spatial confinement. These interlocking concepts allow us to analyze not only the conditions of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican sugarcane industry, but also the mechanisms that enable, justify, and sustain their exploitation within a broader historical and geopolitical system.

At the core of this framework is the concept of structural and systemic violence, a term coined by Johan Galtung (1969) and later expanded by Paul Farmer (2004) to describe the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals. Unlike direct or interpersonal violence, structural violence is embedded in the political, economic, and legal organization of society. It is often invisible, normalized, and naturalized, which makes it particularly effective at perpetuating inequalities. In the case of Haitian sugarcane workers, structural violence manifests in their legal invisibility, the racialized denial of documentation, their confinement to *bateys*, and the lack of access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, and fair wages. It is through these structural arrangements that Haitian laborers are kept in a permanent state of vulnerability and dependence.

Violence operates not only through direct physical means but also structurally, when it serves functions essential to the maintenance of social hierarchies and systems of domination. Structural violence becomes particularly visible when it facilitates the reproduction of labor relations aligned with the imperatives of capital accumulation. In this context, the concept of *racial capitalism* (Robinson 1983) is especially useful, as it highlights how economic systems have historically relied on the exploitation of racialized bodies to generate wealth. The subordination of non-white populations is not merely the result of ideological bias; rather, it is an instrumental mechanism that relegates these populations to the most precarious and devalued forms of labor—those that are most aligned with the needs of capitalist production (Robinson 1983; Balibar & Wallerstein 1991).

Racialization, then, is not only a cultural or symbolic process but a material one, embedded in structures that determine access to work, rights, and recognition (Fraser 2019). It naturalizes the allocation of marginalized groups to subordinate roles in the social and economic order, legitimizes their exclusion from full citizenship, and renders their labor simultaneously essential and disposable. Through these dynamics, racial capitalism sustains a system in which certain bodies are made to bear the burden of profitability while being denied the protections and dignities afforded to others. The situation of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic exemplifies these structural processes with striking clarity, as discussed in the introduction and further developed in the following sections.

As a consequence, structural violence, through racialization, shapes the reserve army of labor (RAL), a classic Marxist concept further incorporated in its transnational dimension into the world-systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein (1995), but also more recently expanded by authors such as Foster and McChesney (2018). RAL refers to keeping workers in a condition of surplus and precarity, ensuring their replaceability and subaltern social condition in order to be deployed when needed, but deprived of more balanced or favorable capacities for negotiation. In addition, "members of the reserve army may function as strikebreakers, as fresh labor in periods of economic expansion, or as replacements for workers exhausted by poor working conditions" (Ruppel 2025,

453), thus potentially deactivating possible struggles and stabilizing production with a maximum surplus value extraction. As previous research has shown, structural violence in Haiti has potentially converted its whole population into a global RAL, functionally serving in production schemes in sectors such as sugar production in the Dominican Republic (Déry and Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025).

In the analyzed context, as will be shown later, these structures are specifically sustained by various sociopolitical mechanisms that regulate access to rights, mobility, and personhood. Within the field of migration, legal frameworks play a central role in the production and maintenance of hierarchies (De Genova 2002). This produces *legal precarity*, which refers to the systematic and intentional production of undocumented or legally ambiguous statuses as a means of governance and labor control (Dauvergne 2008). Rather than being an exception or failure of the system, this condition of legal uncertainty is a functional tool that reinforces social stratification and facilitates the exploitation of racialized populations. This article examines how legal precarity becomes materially and institutionally entrenched in specific contexts, shaping the lived experiences of those subjected to it. (De Genova 2002; Wooding et al. 2004).

Another key dimension of structural violence in this context, spatial confinement, is also central to understanding the processes of capital accumulation. The analyzed case, as will be shown later, perfectly illustrates this relation through the *bateys*—segregated housing compounds originally designed for sugarcane workers, which are not merely places of residence but function as spatial instruments of discipline and control. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2006) and Castel (2021) argue in the case of migrant workers, the architecture of temporariness and isolation is not accidental; it is a calculated social arrangement meant to prevent integration, visibility, and politicization of migrant labor, thus ensuring docility and acquiescence of subjugated workers.

In sum, this paper contributes to understanding how structural and systemic violence manifests in a specific context (sugar production in the Dominican Republic) in order to expand the debate on which mechanisms and structures reproduce and sustain certain pillars of global capitalism. By showing how structural, spatial, legal, and embodied dimensions of domination intersect to support the racialized exploitation of Haitian workers, creating a global reserve army of labor, it argues that violence is not only imposed from above but also inscribed in the spaces people inhabit, the laws that govern their presence, and the ways they come to experience and interpret their own lives under conditions of profound marginalization. In combining these conceptual tools, this study aims to reveal how systemic violence operates at multiple levels—legal, spatial, economic, racial, and affective—to sustain a highly profitable system of exploitation. It also seeks to expose the complicity of multiple actors—from the Dominican state to transnational corporations and even international buyers—in perpetuating this structural injustice and the sociopolitical devices they employ for it. With this framework in place, it becomes possible to situate the analysis within the broader body of research on Haitian migration and labor in the Dominican sugar economy.

Haitian Migration, Agricultural Work, and the *Bateys* in the Dominican Republic

The *bateys* appear in the literature as spatial and social devices directly linked to the sugar economy and to a colonial-style labor organization: collective housing camps for cane cutters where

relations of dependency, controlled mobility, and social exclusion were rearticulated (Castor, 1988; Lundahl, 1983; Wiarda, 1968). Since the early twentieth century, the Dominican sugar industry has depended on Haitian labor and on descendants of Haitians with little access to documentation, public services, and labor rights. Early observers such as Wiarda (1968) described the *bateys* as enclaves where Haitian laborers were indispensable yet excluded from Dominican national life, while Lundahl (1983) emphasized their structural function in sustaining the sugar economy. Derby (1994) historicized this exclusion, showing how the consolidation of *bateys* after Trujillo's nationalist project and the 1937 massacre linked spatial segregation to racialized labor control. Later research deepened this analysis: Madruga et al. (1990) mapped the socioeconomic deprivation of state-run *bateyes*, while Bourgeois (2023) connected the long history of racial categorization to contemporary border imaginaries, stressing the symbolic and spatial continuities of exclusion. Jansen (2021) adds a linguistic and ethnographic lens, showing how perceptions of ethnic difference are reproduced in everyday talk within the *batey* named "Alejandro Bass", reaffirming identity boundaries. Together, these works show that the *batey* is more than a housing unit: it is a historically evolving social technology for the management of racialized labor and the production of exclusion.

Closely related to this historical dimension, the literature on labor exploitation in the sugar mills describes precarious working conditions—low wages, insecure contracts, exhausting workdays—and a productive organization that instrumentalizes Haitian workers' mobility. Classic studies (Martínez, 1995; Castor, 1988) emphasized coercive recruitment, debt bondage, and the complicity of the state and military in labor supply. Lundahl (1983) focused on macroeconomic dependency, whereas Martínez (1995) and Howard (2001) foregrounded the microphysics of surveillance and control inside the *bateys*. Madruga et al. (1990) further exposed how housing and wages tied workers to the plantation, creating what they called a "captive labor regime." More recent work (Bouilly et al., 2020) stresses that even after the relative decline of sugar, labor flexibilization and outsourcing perpetuate comparable vulnerabilities. Zecca Castel (2025) brings these strands together, arguing that structural precariousness persists not despite but through transformations in the sugar sector, sustaining profitability while reproducing mechanisms of subordination.

The labor situation is aggravated by migration policies. Already in the 1980s–1990s, Derby (1994) and Martínez (1995) noted that deportability operated as an informal mechanism of labor discipline. Castor (1988) had already shown how workers' undocumented status bound them to the *bateys*. Recent studies document an intensification of these punitive practices: deportations from hospitals, neighborhood raids, and mass expulsions (RFK Human Rights, 2024; Associated Press, 2025). Compared with older accounts, where deportation was described primarily as a looming threat, today's reports account for its normalization as an everyday practice shaping community cohesion and access to health. Bourgeois (2023) situates this punitive turn in longer histories of racialized bordering, showing how nation-making discourses become embodied in migration enforcement.

As a consequence, racism and discrimination emerge as central analytical axes in the literature. Historical works (Wiarda, 1968; Derby, 1994; Trouillot, 1990) identified anti-Haitianism as an ideological and institutional pillar of Dominican nationalism. Later analyses (Howard, 2001; Bouilly et al., 2020) highlight how such racism permeates not only symbolic domains but also policies of labor, migration, and health. Recent public health research corroborates this: a study

applying the *Everyday Discrimination Scale* in the *bateys* found high levels of perceived discrimination among Haitian and Haitian-descended residents, strongly associated with poverty and undocumented status (BMC Public Health, 2019). Jansen (2021) complements this quantitative evidence by showing how discrimination is reproduced linguistically and socially, through ethnic categorization practices.

The gender dimension makes this exclusion even more visible. Martínez (1995) described Haitian women as doubly marginalized—by gender and by ethnicity—within both labor markets and health systems. Howard (2001) noted that women were more likely to lack documentation, limiting their access to reproductive health. Organizational and academic reports confirm these inequalities: women face degrading treatment, denunciations to migration authorities, and even deportation from hospitals (BBC Mundo, 2025). Derby (1994) already documented expulsions from health institutions in the 1990s, but more recent accounts highlight how these practices intersect with obstetric violence. Tull & Salusky (2019) further show that women of Haitian descent adopt diverse coping and help-seeking strategies to navigate exclusion, though structural barriers remain pervasive. Taken together, this corpus reveals the deep interconnection between gender, racialization, and unequal access to health services.

All of these manifestations are better understood when placed in the longue durée of colonial legacies. Mintz (1985) highlighted the plantation as a crucible of modern capitalist hierarchies, while Trouillot (1990) underscored the silences surrounding colonial violence in Caribbean histories. Bourgeois (2023) analyzes how contemporary bordering practices in the Dominican Republic echo colonial racial logics, which translate plantation segregation into contemporary forms of flexibilization. Maintaining the productive structure of sugar without altering underlying power relations reproduces racial and economic hierarchies; thus, the *bateys* function as nodes where colonial memory, economic exploitation, and racial exclusion converge.

This article contributes to the field by moving beyond analyses that isolate exploitation, deportation, racial discrimination, and health-related violence as separate phenomena. Instead, it conceptualizes them as interwoven dimensions of a broader system that connects migration and violence on both sides of the border. By situating migrants' lived experiences within the historical-structural continuity of sugar capitalism, the research shows how contemporary migration policies reproduce racial hierarchies deeply rooted in the colonial period, how symbolic and institutional violence normalize and sustain the supply of cheap labor, and how gendered inequalities shape these dynamics in specific and unequal ways.

Another distinctive contribution of this work is its focus on the voices of the workers themselves. Instead of portraying them as passive subjects confined within a rigid structure of domination—a perspective often found in the field—the analysis emphasizes how they perceive, narrate, and interpret their own experiences, as well as how they actively engage with and respond to the conditions imposed upon them. This perspective underscores their capacity for agency, resilience, and collective strategies of survival, offering a more nuanced understanding of how subaltern actors both endure and contest structural violence.

Taken together, this approach not only enriches our understanding of the relationship between migration and violence but also transforms the narrative: from one that views the *bateys* as

marginal, peripheral spaces to one that recognizes them as central nodes in the reproduction of structural inequity. At the same time, it reframes migrant workers not as a passive labor force but as active historical agents whose voices and practices reveal both the constraints and the possibilities within the current system (Martínez, 1995; Howard, 2001; Bourgeois, 2023; Jansen, 2021).

Building on this framework, the following section presents the methodological approach and fieldwork strategies used to capture the lived realities of Haitian sugarcane workers.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in phenomenology to examine the realities of Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic. The objective is to explore how violence, harsh labor conditions, and deplorable living environments intersect, shaping the sugar cane industry and how migrants perceive them. One of the researchers spent four weeks in the Dominican Republic, conducting thirteen focus groups and eleven in-depth individual interviews. These were complemented by participant observation in the workplaces and *bateys*, allowing the researcher to understand workers' experiences not only through their narratives but also by observing their interactions and the environments in which they occur. The research was conducted in Haitian Creole, and the researcher had prior experience working with the target populations as well as with organizations closely engaged with these communities. Fluent in Haitian Creole and Spanish, he did not require a translator when interacting with participants. The interviews were predominantly conducted with men aged 20 to 55, as they are the demographic most likely to be employed in the sugarcane industry. Thanks to his experience and established connections with these organizations, he was able to successfully carry out the study, ensuring effective communication, access, and a rich contextual understanding of the population's realities. This multi-method approach, combining focus groups, interviews, and participant observation, provided not only access and trust but also a holistic perspective on the social and economic circumstances of the workers, clarifying how structural and systemic violence is embedded in their daily lives.

The research was conducted in the provinces of El Seibo and San Pedro de Macoris, the two main sugarcane-producing regions in the Dominican Republic[4] (Instituto Azucarero Dominicano 2025), where a significant portion of the Haitian migrant population, about 90% of total workers, is employed in this sector (Dery and Molinero-Gerbeau 2024, 14). As previous research has shown (Castel 2021), both areas are significantly impacted by broader socio-economic dynamics tied to sugarcane production, such as labour exploitation, lack of social services, and the social marginalisation of migrants.

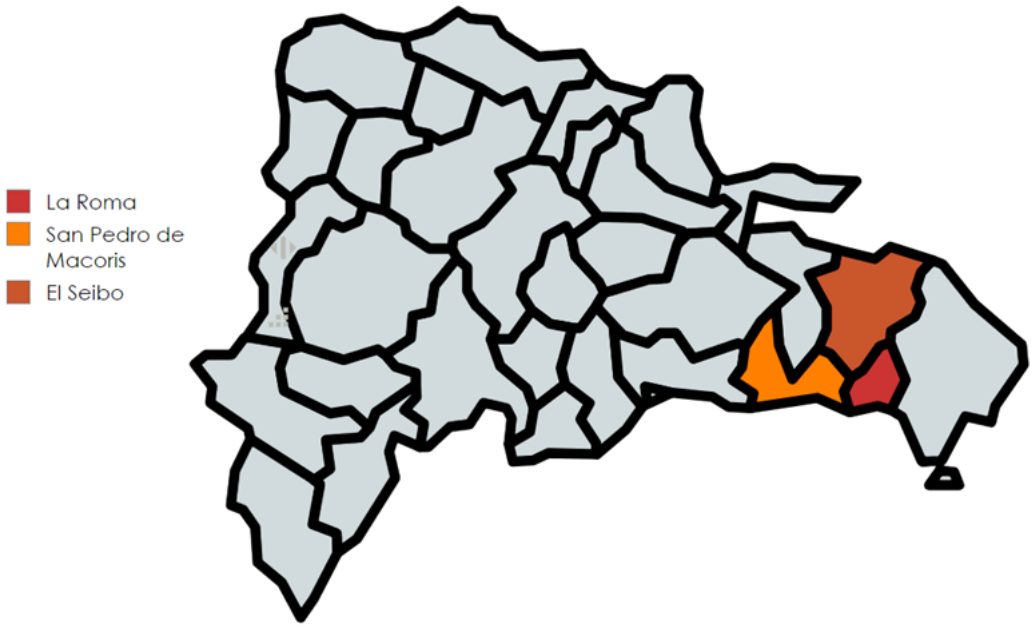
The participant-observer (PO) approach was facilitated by the support of local organizations and religious institutions with established relationships within the *bateys*. These included Les Filles de Marie Paridaens in Seibo Province, which operates a shelter for retired sugarcane workers, and Les Petits Frères de Sainte Thérèse in San Pedro de Macorís, as well as human rights organizations such as Reconoci.do and Solidarité Fwontalye, which defend the rights of migrant workers. These organizations helped the researcher establish contact with workers, provided accommodation, and facilitated entry into the plantations, often accompanying the researcher via local leaders or intermediaries familiar with the *bateys*. Because one of the researchers is a Haitian native, interaction with workers was smooth, allowing him to integrate seamlessly into the daily life of

the plantations while maintaining ethical engagement and respecting the hierarchical and sensitive context of the work environment.

By participating directly in the work and combining it with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher was able to document not only observable practices but also the embodied and emotional experiences of laborers, including exhaustion, threats from guards, withheld wages, and limited access to basic services. This methodological combination allowed for a deeper understanding of how structural and systemic violence operates within the Dominican sugarcane sector, revealing both the social and physical dimensions of exploitation that shape the daily lives of Haitian migrant workers.

Participant recruitment was carefully planned to use purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling proved essential in reaching participants who were initially reluctant to speak due to fears of retaliation by employers (Patton 2015, 451). The study sites, El Seibo and San Pedro de Macorís, were chosen because they epitomize the exploitation prevalent in the Dominican sugar industry, where Central Romana, the largest landholder and employer in the Dominican Republic, dominates production (New York Times 2022). The combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensured a wide range of voices were captured, providing a comprehensive picture of the systemic abuses sugar cane workers face.

Map 3: Location of La Romana, El Seybo, and San Pedro de Macorís provinces in the Dominican Republic



Source: Author's own elaboration

Data was analyzed following thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to uncover the central patterns and themes within the collected data. The process involved several stages of coding, beginning with a detailed, line-by-line examination of the interview and focus group transcripts. Themes linking violence and daily life experiences of Haitian farm workers,

such as discrimination and xenophobia, verbal abuse, physical violence, social exclusion, low wages and lack of legal protections, and fear of deportation, emerged. By incorporating both personal narratives and macro-level structures, the analysis offered a multi-layered perspective on the systemic exploitation faced by Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic. The following section will delve into how the sugar companies in the Dominican Republic use structural and systemic violence in different manifestations, such as extreme labor exploitation or spatially isolating workers to ensure they remain in a state of vulnerability, effectively creating a reserve army of labor for the capitalist sugarcane production.

Although women are fewer (45-50%) in number than men (55-60%) in the sugarcane *bateys* of the Dominican Republic, they are nonetheless subjected to profound and intricate forms of exploitation (Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). While men are primarily employed in the physically demanding work of cutting cane, women often engage in informal, precarious labor such as washing clothes, cooking, selling goods, and caring for children and the elderly—tasks that are essential to the survival of *batey* communities but largely invisible and unremunerated.

Bridget Wooding and Moseley-Williams (2004) emphasize that women in the *bateys* face intersecting oppressions based on race, gender, and migratory status, which result in severe barriers to education, healthcare, and legal documentation. This further illustrates how the sugar industry relies on the social reproduction that women ensure, even though their labor remains unrecognized and unsupported. Though not formally hired in large numbers by the sugar companies, women are exploited through domestic, emotional, and reproductive labor that sustains the male workforce. Also note that women serve as cultural and social anchors in the *bateys*, transmitting memory and resistance in the face of structural violence. Their presence is indispensable to the functioning of these communities, and yet they are continually excluded from rights and recognition. Still, many of these women engage in everyday acts of resistance—by organizing, asserting their rights, and sustaining their families under conditions of state neglect and economic precarity.

Methodology	Total Participants	Men	Women
In-depth interviews	15	13	2
Focus group discussions	142	121	21
Total	**157**	**134**	**23**

The gender configuration of the *bateyes* is marked by an apparent male dominance in formal labor but sustained by the often-invisible labor of women. These women are essential to the physical and cultural survival of the *batey* communities, yet they remain underrepresented, underprotected, and undervalued. Understanding the gendered dynamics of the *bateyes* is key to addressing the broader mechanisms of exploitation and exclusion that sustain the Dominican sugar economy.

Discrimination, Racism, and Legal Exclusion in the Dominican Republic

Discrimination, racism, and legal exclusion operate together as mechanisms of structural and systemic violence shaping the experiences of Haitian workers in the Dominican sugar industry. From the foundation of both nations, Haitians in the Dominican Republic have faced

discrimination through labor segregation, social stigmatization, and poor living conditions in isolated *bateys*, which remain among the few places where migrants can avoid immediate persecution by authorities (Human Rights Watch, 1990; Castel, 2021; Dery & Molinero-Gerbeau, 2024). Discrimination entails unjust treatment based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or socioeconomic status (United Nations, 1965), while racism leverages physical traits, such as skin color, to segregate, marginalize, and control certain groups, reinforcing subordination. In the sugar industry, companies like Central Romana and La Finca exploit these hierarchies, using racial prejudice to justify low wages, precarious work, and social exclusion.

In-depth interviews and focus groups illustrate these abuses vividly. Piscara, 43, recounts: “I am tired of working to put money in Central Romana's pockets. They curse at us, calling us black, saying we’re just animals. They don’t treat Dominicans like that. As soon as we try to claim something, they pressure us.” Yasmira, 29, highlights spatial segregation: “In the *batey*, there are no Dominicans. Haitians and Dominicans are not the same. We don’t have the same color. Moun rouj yo (white people) live in their places, Moun nwè yo (black people) live in theirs.” Similarly, Osimon, 24, observes, “We do the work Dominicans refuse, and even when doing the same tasks, Haitians receive lower pay. Dominicans are supervisors, enforcing a racial hierarchy that prevents us from organizing for better conditions.” Chrisostome, 23, adds, “If a cart rolls with us, the supervisor is more concerned about the oxen than about us. They rush to check on the animals but never ask if we’re okay.” These testimonies reveal how racism is embedded in everyday work practices, constructing Haitian laborers as expendable, a condition resonating with Lugones’ (2007) concept of the coloniality of power and being. Workers are objectified, their suffering dismissed, while the animals central to production receive greater attention, exemplifying the social and symbolic dimensions of exploitation.

Bateys themselves reinforce this discrimination and economic confinement. Isolated and often lacking basic services such as running water and electricity, they were originally designed as temporary housing for sugarcane laborers but often serve as lifelong residences, embodying Sayad’s (2006) “illusion of temporariness.” This imposed temporality is not simply about housing but about shaping workers’ subjectivities, instilling the sense that they are replaceable, that they can be expelled at any moment, and that the *batey* is never truly their home—even when they spend their entire lives there. Its ultimate function is to reinforce the companies’ symbolic control over workers’ existence, cultivating docility and ensuring submission to the established order.

Photo of a house in a batey: Authors' own source

Scarcity, replaceability, and ethnic segregation discipline workers, prevent collective organization, and discourage solidarity. Mosquito, 26, explains, "2 mèg pa fri" (two poor people cannot be warm together). Fear of dismissal, deportation, and punitive actions by supervisors ensures compliance. Ethnic divisions within the work environment further enforce control, as Osimon notes and Chrisostome illustrates: Haitian workers perform the same tasks as Dominicans but receive lower pay and endure dehumanizing treatment, including neglect and lack of concern for their well-being.

Xenophobic migration policies deepen these racial and ethnic divides. Dominican authorities use discourses that frame Haitians as a threat to national identity and security (APNews, 2021), legitimizing mass deportations. The New York Times (2023) reported that deportations disproportionately target those with a "Haitian appearance," while *bateys* remain relatively untouched, paradoxically functioning as tolerated enclaves. Deportations occur with impunity; Martínez and Wooding (2017) estimate that tens of thousands of undocumented Haitians are repatriated annually without due process. Pinto, 25, recounts, "When they take us, they treat us like dogs. They say, 'Go back to Haiti, you devilish Haitians.'"

Legal exclusion compounds these forms of discrimination. Dominican nationality and migratory policies—such as Decree No. 417 (1990) and rulings 168-13 and 168-14 (2013)—systematically deny legal status to Haitians and their descendants, rendering many stateless and restricting access to education, healthcare, social services, and formal employment (Ferguson, 2003; Valdéz, 2021; Delba, 2018). Mitovic, 34, recounts his younger brother Pasci's experience: "The DGM agents took him to Haina…we agreed to pay the DGM agent 20,000 pesos." Marisca, 30, adds, "Because the migration agents came to the *batey* and my brother did not have identity documents, they gave him a machete blow to his back. It seems that they were trying to cut his head off. They stole his phone and 6,000 pesos that he had in his wallet." Juvanocho, 25, describes being "crushed under boots, doors broken while sleeping, thrown into a truck like a pile of trash." Fontanor, 40, recounts, "In these mountains, this is our only home…just like in colonial times."

Without documentation, Haitian workers are trapped in low-paying, menial roles with no social protections. Maxovic, 55, who has worked for Central Romana for over 25 years, explains, "Throughout all that time, the only job I've had is as a picador [chopper]…I know I will never receive a pension because Central Romana no longer pays pensions, claiming we don't have papers." Matiado, 44, adds, "Santral Romann…tell me it's because we don't have documents. But they never say that they won't give us work because we lack documents. In this case, they use the absence of documents as an excuse to exploit us" (Ruguoy, 2008). Legal precarity prevents employers from offering insurance, social benefits, or healthcare, reducing operational costs while reinforcing worker dependence. Bosiko, 25, born in the Dominican Republic, highlights how racialization and legal exclusion intersect: "I used to have legal documents. Now the government won't renew them. Whenever they see me on the street, they stop me because I'm black. Since I don't have papers, the company won't give me a contract or insurance."

This racialized and legalized marginalization extends to future generations. Children of Haitian origin are often denied nationality and access to education, relegating them to precarity and continued dependence on the sugar industry. Pitoufo, 55, explains, "My two sons…Because I don't have documents…The only job they're given is as picadors." Economic dependence, fear of deportation, and restricted mobility ensure workers comply with exploitative conditions. Seasonal return to Haiti is contingent on paying smugglers and officials; Mikousic, 32, explains, "Because we don't have identity documents, when the Zaf season ends, we pay 2,500 to 3,000 pesos to return to Haiti. When it's time to come back to the Dominican Republic, we pay between 25,000 and 30,000 pesos…officers, migration agents and smugglers along the entire route."

The consequences of these intersecting forms of structural violence are multidimensional. Haitian workers experience physical and emotional exhaustion, chronic stress, anxiety, and depression as reported in other research (Kaiser et al., 2015; Darder, 2012; Fanon, 2008; Bourdieu, 1977). Ethnic segregation, legal precarity, and social marginalization operate together to ensure a compliant, cheap labor force, indispensable for Dominican sugar production and export (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Moore, 2000). Testimonies repeatedly show how companies and authorities

collaborate to maintain this system, reinforcing inequalities and exploiting racialized labor for profit.

Despite these oppressive conditions, Haitian workers engage in resistance strategies, forming clandestine mutual aid networks, sharing resources, and participating in labor rights movements. NGOs and human rights organizations document abuses, pressuring the government and sugar companies to address violations (Amnesty International, 2025). While these efforts face significant obstacles, they reveal the agency of workers within an oppressive system and challenge the entrenched structures that perpetuate racialized and economic exploitation.

In conclusion, discrimination, racism, and legal exclusion in the Dominican sugar industry act as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of structural and systemic violence. Through racialized labor hierarchies, spatial confinement in *bateys*, legal precarity, and pervasive social and economic marginalization, Haitian workers remain indispensable yet subjugated actors. These structures ensure the sustainability of the sugar industry while perpetuating inequality, intergenerational precarity, and the broader operation of capitalism that relies on a compliant, cheap, and disposable labor force. Only through systemic reforms, international advocacy, and sustained local activism can these intersecting forms of oppression be addressed, paving the way for dignity, rights, and justice for Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic.

Working Conditions and Housing in the Dominican Sugar Industry

Across various industries and regions, capitalist production often relies on structural inequalities and precarious working conditions to secure a steady supply of cheap, compliant labor. Migrants, particularly those with limited legal protections, are especially vulnerable to these exploitative practices. The agriculture sector exemplifies this dynamic (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016), and within this sector, the Dominican sugar industry provides a vivid illustration of how structural and systemic violence is embedded in production. Haitian migrant workers in sugarcane plantations are systematically exploited, subjected to oppressive working conditions, and forced into legal precarity, all of which sustain their acute vulnerability and reinforce their role as a disposable labor force.

One of the most visible aspects of this exploitative system is the wages paid to Haitian workers. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), “excessively low wages in agricultural sectors create conditions that perpetuate the poverty and marginalization of workers, despite the enormous profits generated by the industry” (ILO, 2019, p. 102). In the Dominican Republic, Haitian workers earn between RD$12,000 and RD$15,000 per month, while Dominican workers performing the same tasks earn approximately RD$20,000 per month. Beyond lower wages, Haitian workers are systematically denied social benefits. As Palanovic, 32, poignantly observes, “we work in the light but get paid in the dark,” encapsulating the structural inequalities inherent in the sugar industry.

The competitive nature of the global sugar market drives companies like Central Romana and La Finca to prioritize efficiency and profit maximization, often at the expense of workers' health and well-being. Pre-harvest burning of sugarcane fields is one such practice, aimed at accelerating the harvest to reduce operational costs. Modavic, 27, a supervisor at La Finca, explains: "Before cutting the cane, La Finca sets fire to the plantations to facilitate a much faster harvest because, once the engines are running, they need to find enough cane to crush." For workers, however, these practices amplify exploitation and physical strain. Minoty, 44, recounts: "Once motè lage (they give the signal), they don't care if we're sick or well, whether it's sunny or raining. We have to manage and cut the cane to feed the furnace."

The piece-rate payment system, which pays workers per ton of cane cut, compounds these vulnerabilities. Workers must maintain extreme efficiency under harsh weather conditions to earn enough for survival, yet the system is rife with manipulation. Pakito, 35, shares his frustration: "Almost every year, they change the weight. This year, se fini yo fini avèk nou (they've taken away our courage more than any other year). When we think we've cut 4 or 5 tons, the company says we've only cut 3 tons, and they won't pay us any more than that." This combination of low wages and manipulated measurements ensures workers remain economically dependent and socially vulnerable.

Photo of a payday: Authors' own source

Debt and reliance on company-run stores (còlmad) further cement this dependency. Workers often borrow money at exorbitant interest rates, trapping them in cycles of obligation. Guarnacho recounts his experience: “I borrowed 1,000 pesos but fell ill and couldn’t repay it. When I started recovering, I went to mete yon jou pou yon patikula (work for an individual), who gave me 1,000 pesos in a day, but the supervisor had already called the company, and he chivatwam (snitched on me).” Castel (2021, p. 883) notes, “debts with the bodega, where they buy basic food on credit, make them prisoners of a one-sided dependency relationship with their work: a dependency that, in daily practice, translates into unimaginable violence.”

The absence of fixed salaries ensures continued precariousness. Dominique Gauthier (2017, p. 58) emphasizes, “the absence of a fixed salary ensures that workers remain in a precarious state, with little opportunity to improve their economic situation.” Miroslav, 43, explains: “We never know how much we’re going to earn. When the Zafra is about to start, they hold meetings, but we, the picadors, are not invited. It’s only lè pag la (when the first payment) arrives that we find out how much they’re paying us per ton. We don’t determine the value of our hard work; they decide however they want. They treat us like slaves.”

Transportation of workers adds another layer of exploitation. Haitian migrants are transported to fields in overcrowded, poorly maintained trucks, risking accidents and injury. Reyes (2020, p. 86) notes, “The trucks transporting workers are overloaded, and the journey on poorly maintained roads increases the risks of accidents and injuries.” Mikando, 45, explains that workers must wake at 3:00 AM to prepare for the Kalos, a type of float used for transport, without even access to drinking water: “At the start of the harvest, the company often makes great promises about improving working conditions, but lè Zaf la fini (at the end of the Zafra), we realize that they were nothing but empty promises—promises that never moved from words to action.”

Photo of migrant transportation means to the sugar cane plantation: Authors' own source

Working hours are grueling, frequently exceeding 10 hours per day, with little opportunity for rest. Structural and systemic violence extends beyond the workplace into healthcare. Overcrowded bateys, poor water quality, and lack of sanitation compromise worker health (Ruguoy, 2008, p. 108). Access to healthcare is limited, as insurance often requires identification documents that many Haitian migrants lack. Bazovic, 36, recounts:

"When we get injured and go to the hospital, they don't take care of us. We can spend the whole day there, and no one pays attention. Sometimes, we don't even go to the hospital because we already know they won't treat us. On top of that, we're afraid they might call immigration officers to have us detained and deported. Besides, we know we won't get paid if we don't go to work."

Workers frequently continue laboring despite illness or injury. Chrisostomo, 28, shares the story of a colleague:

"There was a picker who would go to work early in the morning; he was the one ki te gen papel (regular document), which was useful for us to buy things in El Seibo. He had an accident and died. We said we would take some time to mourn him, and we said we would take a few days off from work, but the column manager said that if we went on strike (he would say that if we did not

go to work), we would be kicked out of our house. So, we had to bury him tankou yon chyen (like a dog) because if the column manager put us out, we would have nowhere to go."

Housing serves as a mechanism of control and exploitation. *Bateys*, the only available residential spaces, are overcrowded, unsanitary, and isolated, reinforcing dependence on the company (Castel, 2021, p. 880). Ruguoy (2008, p. 108) reports that rooms measuring as little as 4m² are often shared by multiple workers, with families of five or more crammed into two rooms totaling 8m². This extreme discomfort ensures that workers remain focused on production rather than social or familial life. Bissic, 50, explains: "If one day, the company determines that a *batey* no longer serves its primary purpose of increasing production and generating more wealth for the company, it will disappear overnight."

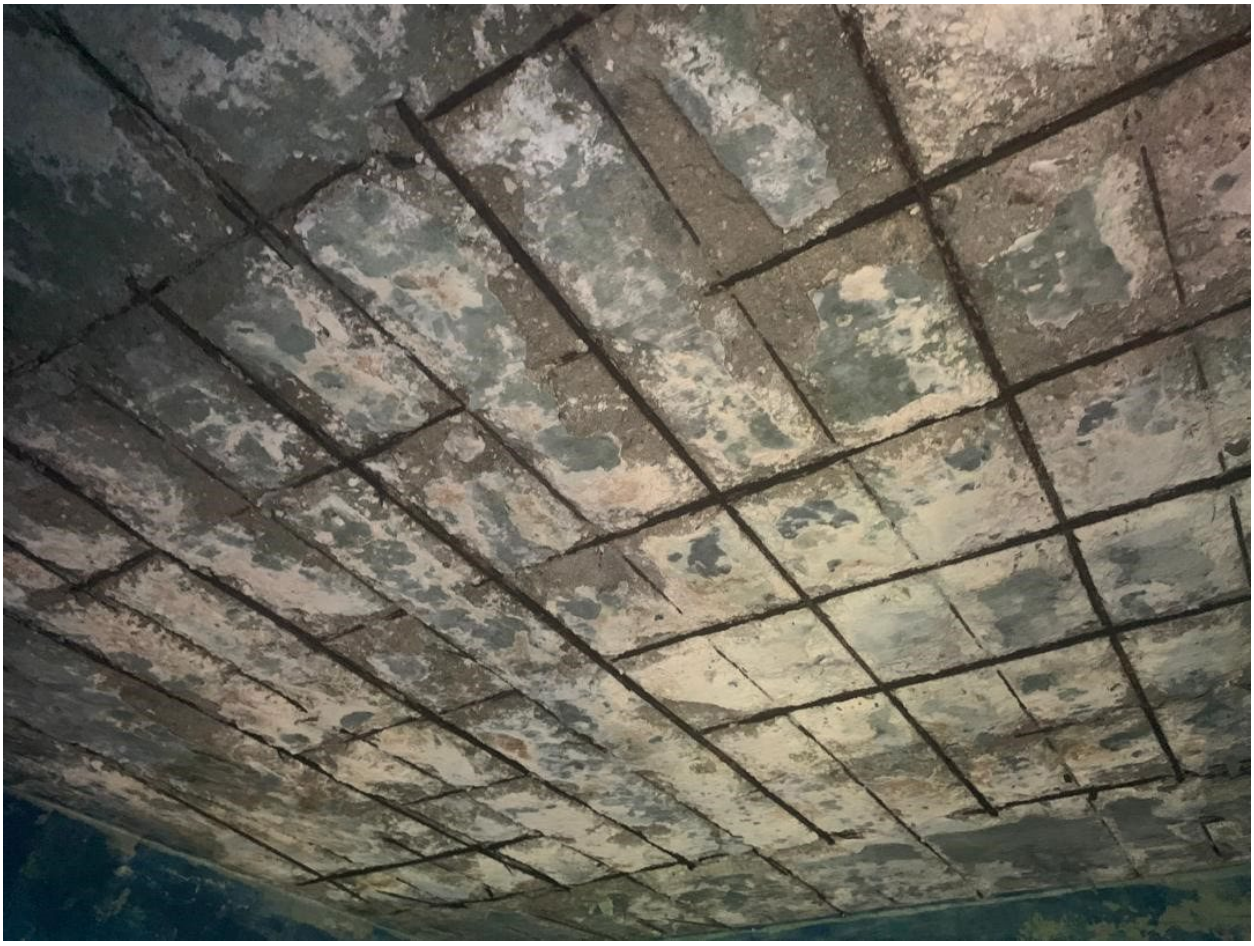
Physical structure of a *batey*: Author's own source

Demolition and relocation of *bateys* create both physical and emotional uprooting. Madisson, 54, recounts: "After spending 24 years building a life, forming connections with neighbours, and establishing a routine, I saw my world collapse when the company decided to raze my batey. Residents were dispersed to other bateys where they knew no one, further isolating them in their vulnerability." Jovic, 50, adds:

“It is a way for them to make sure we do not have any relationships between us so that no one helps the other. They know that if we get too used to each other and spend more time together, we will demand our rights. They try to divide us more daily to exploit us better.”

Housing is reserved for workers with contracts, tied to the male sugarcane cutters’ productivity. Mishda, 72, recounts the forced eviction of widows: one year after her husband died, she was ordered to leave unless she remarried a company worker or convinced a son to work there.

Promiscuity, early unions, and overcrowding are strategically leveraged. Matilda explains: her 17-year-old daughter shares a room with a young partner due to a lack of housing, creating forced early unions tied to economic survival. Mobarak, 37, states: “Even pigs live better than us because they are fed, washed, and given water. We do not even have enough room to turn around. Sometimes, during *Zaf* (Zafra), there are 2 or 3 of us in this little space.”



The roof of migrant house: Author’s own source

Despite these conditions, workers create networks of solidarity. Bozovic, 45, notes:

> Even though it is very difficult, and Central Romana and La Finca try to divide us and keep us in uninhabitable spaces, we do our best daily to support one another. We know that only by staying united can we make our voices heard and fight for our rights. Even though the conditions here are terrible, we cannot leave our fellow workers who come to find jobs sleeping out in the open. That's why we share what little space and resources we have with those who just arrived. The houses are small, and the living conditions are harsh, but we cannot forget the families we have left behind who depend on us. We have no choice but to work hard and endure because everything we do is for them.

The Dominican sugar industry thus illustrates the pervasive structural and systemic violence inherent in global capitalism. Exploitative wages, debt bondage, unsafe working conditions, restricted healthcare, and the control exerted through housing create a compliant, expendable workforce, sustaining a cycle of intergenerational precarity and dependency.

Moreover, the exploitation of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican sugar industry demonstrates that racialization functions not only as an economic mechanism but also as an epistemic and ontological force that structures their existence as inherently subordinate. Economic practices such as low wages, debt bondage, and piece-rate payment systems are inseparable from racialized assumptions that position Haitians as naturally disposable and exploitable laborers (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). Testimonies from workers like Miroslav, who described being treated "like slaves," and Pakito, who recounted the manipulation of harvest weights, reveal that these economic mechanisms are underpinned by an epistemic framework in which Haitian knowledge, agency, and labour value are systematically devalued (Dery & Molinero-Gerbeau, 2024; Lugones, 2007). Beyond monetary exploitation, this epistemic violence shapes how workers are perceived and treated in everyday interactions: in healthcare, housing, and social life, their experiences, needs, and suffering are rendered illegitimate or invisible (Fanon, 2008; Ruguoy, 2008). As Bazovic recounted, fear of deportation and discrimination discourages workers from seeking medical care, illustrating how racialized epistemologies sustain their vulnerability and prevent access to essential resources, reinforcing the perception that their lives are secondary to the imperatives of production (Castel, 2021; Darder, 2012).

Physical structure of a migrant's room: Author's own source

This ontological racialization—the construction of Haitians as inherently less valuable beings—manifests spatially, socially, and psychologically. *Bateys*, with their extreme overcrowding, isolation, and lack of basic amenities, are not mere housing deficiencies but tools that enforce a racialized hierarchy of existence (Howard, 2007; Wooding et al., 2004). Madisson's account of being uprooted after decades of community life and Matilda's description of her daughter's coerced early union demonstrate how the very structure of daily life and social reproduction is subordinated to corporate control, linking survival and belonging to labor output (Martínez & Wooding, 2017; Ruguoy, 2008). Spatial confinement, precarious housing, and enforced dependency cultivate an embodied awareness of inferiority, normalizing subordination and internalizing a sense of disposability. Workers are not merely economically exploited; their subjectivity is moulded to accept marginalization as natural (Bourdieu, 1977; Sayad, 2006). As Lugones (2007) and Balibar & Wallerstein (1991) argue, the coloniality of power interweaves race, labour, and subjectivity, producing a social ontology in which Haitians are epistemically and existentially defined as "less than," thereby facilitating the reproduction of a compliant, expendable workforce across generations.

Conclusion

This study has exposed how discrimination, racism, precarious legal status, exploitative working conditions, and inadequate housing function as systemic mechanisms deliberately designed to sustain a cheap and highly profitable workforce for the Dominican Republic's sugarcane industry. In active collusion with public authorities, dominant economic actors such as Central Romana and La Finca employ intricate strategies that, through multiple forms of violence, ensure the docility, availability, and intergenerational continuity of a Haitian reserve army of labor. This process of extreme surplus value extraction, sustained across generations, echoes and extends the logics of colonial slavery.

The dimensions analyzed in this article—racial capitalism, legal precarity, spatial confinement, and exploitative labor structures—reveal the existence of a deeply entrenched system of structural violence and domination. This system is not accidental but deliberately engineered to maintain Haitian workers in conditions of absolute dependence and vulnerability. Stripped of legal rights, confined to marginal spaces, and subjected to dehumanizing exploitation, these workers are rendered the ideal labor force for an industry whose primary logic is the maximization of profit, leaving no space for autonomy or resistance. A key aspect of this system is its gendered structure: the plantation economy relies on a male-dominated workforce for physically demanding tasks, while women and children are affected indirectly through housing dependency, family obligations, and limited access to resources. This gendered division of labor reinforces patriarchal hierarchies within households and binds family well-being to the male worker's labor, further entrenching vulnerability across generations. By considering these gendered dynamics, the analysis highlights how structural violence operates not only at the level of individual workers but across family and community structures, deepening the systemic inequalities embedded in the sugarcane sector. Ultimately, this article has shown how systemic violence is not a residual effect of capitalism but one of its central organizing principles. By examining the interwoven mechanisms of exclusion and control, this study has shown how state policies, corporate practices, and legal regimes converge to sustain a racialized labor force essential to capital accumulation. These dynamics serve a broader function: they institutionalize hyper-exploitation, social exclusion, and slow death for populations deliberately denied full legal and human recognition—thereby securing the ongoing reproduction of a deeply unequal and racialized economic order.

The severity of these conditions is underscored by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's 2022 ban on sugar imports from Central Romana, citing the company's use of forced labor. The investigation identified multiple violations, including "abuse of vulnerability, isolation, withholding of wages, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime"—findings that align with the testimonies of our interviewees. Despite this prohibition, fieldwork conducted two years later confirms that the situation remains unchanged, demonstrating the limitations of such measures. Furthermore, the persistence of identical conditions in La Finca and Central Romana suggests that extreme exploitation is not an isolated issue but rather a structural feature of the Dominican sugar industry.

These findings call for a critical reassessment of global sugar value chains, highlighting the extent to which everyday products consumed in Western countries are produced under violent and inhumane labour conditions in the global periphery. Tracking these supply chains is essential to exposing and addressing the systemic exploitation embedded in the industry.

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