



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata
Human Rights Commission

Building Understanding: A Guide to Talking About Migrant Rights in Aotearoa



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata
Human Rights Commission



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission is Aotearoa New Zealand's national human rights institution (NHRI), operating under the UN Paris Principles.

The Human Rights Commission was formed in 1977 to provide better implementation and protection of human rights in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Commission currently works under the Human Rights Act 1993, and currently accredited with “A status” as a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI).

The Commission is funded through the Ministry of Justice but operates independently of the New Zealand Government as an independent Crown entity.

We are a voice for human rights in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our vision is to be a credible, effective, connected and highly valued organisation that makes human rights and the human rights dimensions of Te Tiriti real and relevant. We are confident in our Tiriti-based aspiration and are working to make a positive impact for all communities, individuals, whānau, hapū, and iwi in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Preface

Every person who lives and works in Aotearoa New Zealand deserves the freedoms we all value: the freedom to be treated with dignity, to be free from exploitation, and to build a better life for themselves and their families. Yet some policy settings, such as visas that tie people to a single employer, undermine these freedoms and create conditions that can potentially lead to exploitation.

This guide is part of our collective effort to change that, to ensure advocates have access to clear, effective messaging that makes human rights real and relevant for everyone in our communities.

I want to acknowledge and thank the Champions Network—Rebekah Armstrong (World Vision), Mandeep Bela (Union Network of Migrants), Louise May (Citizens Advice Bureau), Lisa Meto Fox (Advocate), Gary Shaw (Modern Slavery Specialist), May Moncur (Employment Advocate), and Anu Kaloti (Migrant Workers Association and Immigration Specialist)—for their vital role in sharing their experiences, knowledge and solutions. I also acknowledge the many other organisations working tirelessly to uphold human rights in this space.

When we act together we can create a stronger Aotearoa, upholding human rights, freedom and dignity for all.



— Professor Gail Pacheco

Equal Employment
Opportunities Commissioner

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata
Human Rights Commission



Introduction: Building public support to address migrant exploitation

Whether people are helping grow our food, cooking in our restaurants, building the homes we live in, or working as engineers in our tech companies - everyone deserves to be treated with respect and have the freedom to live with dignity.

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission has published two reports on the experience of migrant workers on temporary visas in Aotearoa New Zealand: [The RSE Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review](#)¹ and [The Accredited Employer Work Visa Scheme: A Human Rights Review](#)².

Across both schemes, the Commission found systemic issues that put people at risk of exploitation. Both schemes aim to meet labour shortages and provide economic opportunities; but their current settings create significant human rights risks for people we invite to live and work in Aotearoa. Visa settings that tie workers to a single employer increase a power imbalance and discourage reporting of abuse. Weak recruitment oversight enables unethical practices, which can lead to poor living and working conditions and limited access to health care. Fear of retaliation or deportation, alongside barriers to accessing legal advice and representation, inhibits mistreated workers from seeking remedies.

These failures undermine fundamental human rights and the human rights dimensions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Both reports contain detailed recommendations for addressing these issues and point to a clear need for systemic change.

Taking coordinated action on ending ‘tied visas’

Building on the findings from our research, in 2025 we initiated a Migrant Exploitation Advisory Group under the leadership of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner, Professor Gail Pacheco. The group was composed of seven migrant worker and employment rights experts – representing migrant worker unions, civil society organisations, modern slavery experts and a business consultant. Working with the group, we decided to focus our advocacy on addressing ‘tied visas’. Under these visa arrangements, a worker is tied to a specific employer and unable to change employer without losing their visa and right to stay in the country. Tied visas are a systemic enabler of exploitation—locking workers into dependency and increasing their vulnerability to abuse. The practice is also widely recognised internationally as creating serious risks of human rights violations.

¹ [Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. The RSE Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review \(Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 2022\)](#)

² [Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. The Accredited Employer Work Visa \(AEVV\) Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review. \(Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 2024\)](#)



What this guide is about

We have developed this guide to share insights from our research, work with other migrant rights advocates, and to suggest plain-language ways to frame and explain migrant exploitation in Aotearoa New Zealand. **While our current campaign is focused on ending tied visas— and we encourage others to use what we learned and join that call— the lessons can also be applied to other actions needed to eliminate migrant exploitation.**

‘Framing’ describes the choices we make about how to communicate on an issue. The framing strategies recommended in this guide are designed to make communication about migrant exploitation more impactful and effective. They offer shared language that anyone who is communicating on this issue can use to deepen understanding of what migrant exploitation is and how to address it. Strategic framing used consistently can empower the public to imagine, advocate for, and actively support human rights.³ That means action to support a better, more dignified life for the people who are invited to work here and live in our communities.

The guidance is based on research that we undertook to understand public perceptions of migrants and framing that can deepen understanding of the systemic factors that enable exploitation to occur.⁴ The research consisted of a review of relevant international framing literature and a nationally representative survey of 1073 New Zealand adults aged 18 years and over. Survey participants answered questions about their general attitudes toward and understanding of migrant exploitation in Aotearoa New Zealand and read short passages that explained the problem of migrant exploitation and potential solutions to it. The survey was conducted in September 2025, and had a margin of error of 3% overall.

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission is committed to a holistic expression of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and human rights including respectful relationships, shared responsibilities, and rights activation, and we aim to ensure Te Tiriti o Waitangi is embedded in everything we do. This guidance is offered with the understanding that Te Tiriti o Waitangi was our first immigration policy and forms the basis for all ongoing settlement here.

3 Frameworks Institute Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen? (Frameworks Institute, 2020) [Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen? - FrameWorks Institute](#)

4 Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, [Horizon Research Migrant Exploitation Survey](#) September 2025

Two messages to try when campaigning to end tied visas

The following are the messages that we tested and found to be effective for building public understanding of migrant exploitation and support for ending tied visas. Both messages use frames that remind people of our common humanity and shine a light on the systems that currently enable harm to occur. Each differs slightly in the values it prioritises.⁵ Please feel free to copy these messages as written to use in your own communications/advocacy efforts.

1. A message focused on the value of self-direction

Everyone deserves to expect that the work we do will give us the opportunity to create a better life for ourselves and our families. Whether people are helping grow our food, cooking in our restaurants, building the homes we live in, or caring for our loved ones, we should all have the chance for our work to bring us closer to the lives we aspire to.

But our government's policy decisions mean that many people who are invited to work and live in our communities from overseas are denied that opportunity. Because they're tied to a single employer through their visa, if people are underpaid, mistreated, or abused, they can't easily leave their job.

Our system creates a dead-end, with people denied the opportunities to work towards a better life for themselves and their families. Tied visas set the stage for exploitation, making it easy for abuse to happen and hard for people to escape it.

The good news? We can change this. We must let the Minister of Immigration know that we want them to change immigration policy so that people who are invited to live and work here have the same opportunity to switch jobs like everyone else. By doing so we can ensure that all people in our communities have the opportunity to thrive in their workplaces, and to live the life they aspire to for them and their families.

This message is focused on self-direction: the freedom of opportunity to create a better life for ourselves and our families. This is a recognisable, relatable frame that humanises the people who we invite to live and work here by reminding the audience of what we have in common. It focuses on systems and policy decisions made by our government that constrain people's opportunities and put them in harm's way and uses metaphors to explain the impact of tied visas by describing a system that creates a 'dead-end' and a stage that is 'set for exploitation.'

⁵ For more on values, see [Common Cause AU, "Values Map and Definitions," 2022.](#)



2. A message focused on the 'golden rule'

No matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us try to treat others the way we'd want to be treated. Whether people are helping grow our food, cooking in our restaurants, building the homes we live in, or caring for our loved ones, everyone should be treated with respect and have the freedom to live with dignity.

But our government's policy decisions mean that many people who are invited to work and live in our communities from overseas are tied to a single employer through their visa. This means if they're underpaid, mistreated, or abused, they can't easily leave their job. Imagine being stuck in a job where speaking up about abuse could cost you your right to stay in the country and make a better life for yourself and your family. That's not respectful or right. Tied visas set the stage for exploitation, making it easy for abuse to happen and hard for people to escape it.

The good news? We can change this. We must let the Minister of Immigration know that we want them to change immigration policy so that people who are invited to live and work here have the same basic freedom to switch jobs like everyone else.

Because when people have the freedom to leave unsafe workplaces, we build fairer, stronger communities where everyone thrives.

This message is focused on the 'golden rule' that we should treat others as we'd expect to be treated. It appeals to widely-held values of fairness and justice to remind the audience of the impact that our immigration systems can have on people who we have invited to live and work in our communities. In this message, the deliberate use of 'no matter what we look like or where we come from' acts as a reminder that while we may have differences, we all share the human right to be treated with respect and to live with dignity. It asserts that to do otherwise is 'not respectful or right.'

Key recommendations for all your messaging on migrant exploitation

Frame your communications with helpful values

Framing with values is a powerful way to tap into what people really care about and show them that the issue you're focused on is relevant to them. When we frame our communication with values like care and respect, or justice and broadmindedness, people are more likely to take positive action toward supporting others than when we focus on values like competition, individualism, and fear.⁶ What's more, we know that most people really do care about these helpful values.⁷

Talking about **freedom** can help people see the harm and injustice done by exploitative labour practices and inadequate systems that hurt migrants and their families. This could mean **freedom to** live with dignity or create better lives for ourselves and our families, or it could mean **freedom from** abuse and exploitation.

Other powerful values to frame are collective **care and love** for family, the human right to **dignity and respect**, and the importance of a **fair and just** system.

We found that all of these values were important to the public, regardless of who they were.

A note on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, our first immigration policy: Research on communicating about Te Tiriti o Waitangi with Pākehā people recommends framing your communications with the value of **collective care and support**.⁸ People's understanding of Te Tiriti's primary relevance to immigration was not a focus of our own research. However, these values of care and support – along with manaaki, aroha, and utu – align with those we found built agreement for taking action on migrant exploitation

What this sounds like:

Everyone deserves a life free from harm and exploitation at work.

All of us deserve a fair go at work, and to be treated with dignity.

Our society has a responsibility to make sure that all people who live and work in our communities are treated with respect.

We should ensure that people are treated with hospitality, care, and manaaki in the workplace.

⁶ [Common Cause. The Common Cause Handbook. \(Public Interest Research Centre, 2011\), 24-25.](#)

⁷ [Common Cause. Perceptions Matter: The Common Cause UK Values Survey \(Common Cause Foundation, 2016\) \[Perceptions Matter: Report & Summary - CC Foundation\]\(#\); \[The Workshop, How to talk about community planning for climate disruption Attitudinal survey insights report for Resilient Tāmaki Makaurau \\(The Workshop, 2024\\) \\[How to talk about community planning for climate disruption - Attitudinal survey insights report — The Workshop\\]\\(#\\)\]\(#\)](#)

⁸ [The Workshop, Understanding how Pākehā think and reason about te Tiriti | the Treaty to guide how we talk \(The Workshop, 2024\), 9. \[Understanding how Pākehā think and reason about te Tiriti | the Treaty to guide how we talk — The Workshop\]\(#\)](#)

Focus on our common humanity to surface feelings of empathy and respect

Framing our common humanity means focusing your communications on those things we all share – the things that make us human. It reminds us that **no matter what we look like or where we come from**, we share values and concerns, like care for our families and neighbours, and aspirations for a good and stable life. This way of framing is a great way of reminding us of our commonality across difference.⁹ It asserts that more unites us than divides us and helps to surface feelings of empathy, respect, and shared purpose in your audience.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric can be dehumanising. While our research showed most people value migrant workers' contributions to society and believe that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect, even well-meaning ways of talking about the people who come to live and work here can unintentionally create feelings of distance between us. For example:

- By overly focusing on the contributions migrant workers make to our economy we can end up framing them not as people but as resources who can be exploited to generate economic return;
- when we describe our values or motivations as 'kiwis' we can evoke nationalist ideas about in- and out-groups, borders, and cultural conformity, excluding people who don't fit the mould;

Make sure that you put shared human dignity and wellbeing at the centre of your stories. Try framing our communities in terms of care, rather than nationality, and make your stories about people who we have **invited** to work and live in our communities and who are **building a better life** here.

What this sounds like:

No matter what we look like or where we come from, we deserve the opportunity to make a better life for our families, OR

No matter who you are or where you're from, you should be treated with respect and dignity at work

Rather than: 'Kiwis' **Try:** 'caring people'

Rather than: 'hard-working migrants' **Try:** 'all of us, no matter where we come from'

Rather than: 'migrant workers' or 'economic migrants' **Try:** 'people invited to work and live in our communities,'

A note on different framing for different audiences. Our research showed that framing our common humanity with values like freedom, care, and dignity allows most people to understand and see the value of action on migrant exploitation, regardless of their age, ethnicity, gender identity, geographical location, or political affiliation. Using these techniques can assist more people to act in helpful and compassionate ways.

Be specific to help overcome fatalism and individualism

Migrant exploitation is not an issue that many people in the public engage with day to day. Mostly, we all make sense of new information by drawing on ideas that are readily accessible and dominant in our information environment. Without clear explanations and specific examples of what migrant exploitation means here, and how we can address it, people are likely to reach for unhelpful solutions, to misunderstand the scale and relevance of the problem, or simply to feel hopeless. Simply giving people facts and figures won't work to shift this frame.

Our research showed high awareness that migrant workers live in our communities, and strong agreement that all people in Aotearoa New Zealand should experience dignity and respect at work. Once people read our explanations of the problem and the solutions to address it, their support for systems-level solutions increased. This tells us that people need good explanations of the systems that place people in harm's way, and of the changes to those systems that will improve people's lives.

Use any statistics or figures in ways that put them in the context of people's day-to-day lives and experiences. And make sure that you always follow a problem statement with an explanation of how it causes harm to people, and a specific, proportional solution to address it.

What this sounds like:

'Whether people are helping to grow our food, cooking in our restaurants, building the homes we live in, or caring for our loved ones, everyone should be treated with respect at work and have the opportunity to live with dignity.'

'Many people who are invited to work and live in our communities from overseas are tied to a single employer through the Accredited Employer Work Visa. This means if they're underpaid, mistreated, or abused on the job, they don't have the freedom to leave. Ending tied visas will allow people the freedom to move on from exploitation to build a better life.'

Rather than: '50,000 migrant workers'

Try: 'enough people to fill Eden Park'

Focus on systems not on vulnerable individuals

It's easy for people to reach for individualist frames when they think about migrant exploitation. These frames might include the idea that some kinds of people are particularly vulnerable to harm or particularly inclined to behave badly. When we're faced with complex problems, focusing on individuals can feel like a way of humanising the issue.

However, these frames shift responsibility for the problem and the solution onto individual actors: 'bad apple' employers or 'vulnerable people.' Framing certain communities as vulnerable can contribute to a sense that they are responsible for the harm they experience, playing into racist stereotypes.

Language or imagery that casts migrant workers as victims may motivate people who already care about the issue but alienate others. Similarly, locating harm in a few ‘bad apple’ employers removes the responsibility for our government to create systems that are reliable and robust. These frames lead people to solutions that may create more harm than good and they can play into ideas about ‘human nature’ which will leave people feeling fatalistic.

It is still important to name people: however, these need to be the **people who can act to change the systems we all rely on**. Name government ministers responsible for immigration policy, heads of large employers’ associations that could throw their weight behind change, and the authorities that enforce our labour laws. Name what we can do as voters, community members, or employers advocating for changes to our immigration and labour systems. Help people understand how **our systems set the stage for exploitation** by focusing your stories on drivers of exploitation like legislation, immigration policy, and employment practices, rather than on the supposed characteristics of individual people, cultures, or communities.

What this sounds like:

Use verbs like **‘choose,’ ‘create,’** and **‘decide’** to describe government policy and legislation.

Rather than: ‘bad apple’ employers
Try: ‘systems that set up’ or ‘set the stage for’ exploitation

Rather than: ‘victims of exploitation’ or ‘vulnerable people’ **Try:** ‘people at risk of exploitation’ or ‘people locked into abusive workplaces by our labour and immigration laws.’

Reframe the conversation: Tell a story people can act on

When faced with unhelpful messages, it is tempting to argue back. However, repeating falsehoods – even to negate them – or frames that direct people away from helpful actions makes these ways of thinking more accessible to people. So, don’t mythbust! The more we hear something, the more natural and believable it tends to feel and the more likely we are to use it to make sense of new information.

The best way to argue back is to reframe with a better story, and to keep telling it. It’s important that this story features helpful values, explanations of the problem, and credible solutions. Focusing only on the problem – what some call ‘crisis framing’ – may generate attention but does not generally motivate people to act.¹⁰ Instead, offer people a story about the issue that helps them see a path to action they can believe in.

How to use an effective message structure

Follow the ‘values-problem-explanation-solution’ structure below to help your readers see and understand a helpful way forward. This structure can be adapted to any number of ‘asks.’ For instance, you might focus on:

- requiring and enforcing ethical recruitment standards
- providing better support and effective redress for migrant workers experiencing human rights risks and violations
- increasing requirements for employers to provide settlement support

Here, we have focused on ending tied visas.

Value

Whether people are helping grow our food, cooking in our restaurants, building the homes we live in, or caring for our loved ones, everyone should be treated with respect and have the freedom to live with dignity.

Problem

But our government’s policy decisions mean that many people who are invited to work and live in our communities from overseas are tied to a single employer through their visa.

Explanation

This means if they’re underpaid, mistreated, or abused, they can’t easily leave their job. Imagine being stuck in a job where speaking up about abuse could cost you your right to stay in the country and make a better life for yourself and your family. That’s not respectful or right. Tied visas set the stage for exploitation, making it easy for abuse to happen and hard for people to escape it.

Solution

The good news? We can change this. We must let the Minister of Immigration know that we want them to change immigration policy so that people who are invited to live and work here have the same basic freedom to switch jobs like everyone else

Finish with a vision for what could come next

When people have the freedom to leave unsafe workplaces, we build fairer, stronger communities where everyone thrives.

Dos and don'ts

Rather than...	Try this...	Why?
<p>'Migrant exploitation is illegal,' OR</p> <p>'Migrants are hard workers who make valuable contributions to our economy'</p>	<p>Everyone deserves a life free from harm and exploitation at work, OR</p> <p>All of us deserve a fair go at work, and to be treated with dignity</p>	<p>Tap into helpful values like freedom, care, dignity and respect, rather than focusing on economics, legality, or achievement</p>
<p>'Economic migrants'</p>	<p>'People invited to work and live in our communities,' or</p> <p>'People building a better life for their families here'</p>	<p>Make sure you frame people's humanity to help your audience see the similarities between us all</p>
<p>'Victims of exploitation,' Or 'Vulnerable people'</p>	<p>'People at risk of exploitation', Or</p> <p>'People locked into abusive workplaces by our labour and immigration laws.'</p>	<p>Focus on systems, not individuals, to avoid activating the sense that some people are simply more likely to experience or commit harm</p>
<p>'Bad apple' employers</p>	<p>Systems that set the stage for exploitation.</p>	
<p>'It's not true that migrants don't fit in here'</p>	<p>'No matter what we look like or where we come from, we deserve the opportunity to make a better life for our families'</p>	<p>Don't myth bust or repeat untruths: instead, tell your own story focused on helpful values</p>
<p>'As Kiwis, we can do better'</p>	<p>'As caring people, we can do better'</p>	<p>Avoid nationalist frames which can serve to push people further apart</p>
<p>'XXX number of people'</p>	<p>'Enough people to fill Eden Park' / 'the size of [xxx town]'</p>	<p>Make statistics and facts relatable</p>
<p>Tied visas</p>	<p>'People whose visas tie them to a single employer'</p>	<p>Avoid jargon; use plain-language explanations instead</p>

Works we consulted in our literature review

Allen, William. “Public attitudes to labour migrants in the pandemic: dynamics during 2021” (The Migration Observatory, 1 April, 2021) [Public attitudes to labour migrants in the pandemic: dynamics during 2021 - Migration Observatory - The Migration Observatory](#)

ASO Communications *Here to Stay: How to Talk About MAGA’s Authoritarian Agenda on Immigration*. (We Make the Future Action, 2025) [Here to Stay: How to Talk About MAGA’s Authoritarian Agenda on Immigration \(ASO Communications\) — We Make The Future Action](#)

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre *Refuge from our Rhetoric: Making the Best Case for People Seeking Asylum with Words that Work*. (ASRC, 2015) [ASRC-Messaging-Research-Project.pdf](#)

Freedom From Torture *Changing the Conversation on Asylum: A Messaging Guide*. (Freedom From Torture, 2021) [Full Report - Changing the Conversation on Asylum - Freedom from Torture_1.pdf](#)

Kustov, Alexander. “Persuading People on Immigration is Hard But Here’s What Can Be Done,” *Migration Policy Centre EU* (blog), 13 June, 2023. [Persuading People on Immigration is Hard but Here’s What Can be Done - Migration Policy Centre](#)

Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre. *Framing Modern Slavery: A Messaging Guide* (PIRC, 2024) [MSPEC-FramingGuide-final.pdf](#)

Public Interest Research Centre *Framing the Economy. How to Win the Case for a Better System*. (NEON, NEF, Frameworks UK, PIRC, 2018) [Framing the Economy](#)

Public Interest Research Centre “What Have Immigrants Ever Done For Us?,” 2013. [What have the immigrants ever done for us? Five reasons why the economic argument for immigration is destined to fail – PIRC](#)

Further resources

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. *The RSE Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review* (Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 2022)

[Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. \(December 2022\) The RSE Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review.](#)

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. *The Accredited Employer Work Visa (AEWV) Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review*. (Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 2024) [Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission. \(August 2024\) The Accredited Employer Work Visa \(AEWV\) Scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Human Rights Review. Migrant Workers’ experiences and recommendations.](#)



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