

## BRINGING IMMIGRANT WORKERS INTO THE JOB QUALITY CONVERSATION



In early 2022, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) had the opportunity to engage with the Families and Workers Fund (FWF)-led work on the Job Quality Measurement Initiative (JQMI). This work, done in collaboration with the Department of Labor (DOL) and in partnership with dozens of other research, policy, and practitioner partners, has provided an opportunity to bring a strong focus on the topic of job quality. In particular, the JQMI has allowed a focus on what can be done to strengthen how job quality is defined, understood, and measured with a goal of moving the needle on the quality of jobs in America.

While IRC's work with JQMI began in 2022, IRC has a long history of engaging with workers. In the U.S., IRC provides workforce development services to up to 20,000 individuals annually through a wide range of job training, career pathways, skill development, and job placement programs and services delivered across nearly 30 U.S. communities in 16 states. More than 90% of this population of current and future workers are immigrants who hail from more than 100 countries. The majority are English language learners, nearly all are low-income, and have a range of educational and skill backgrounds ranging from pre-literate individuals with no formal education to foreign-trained professionals with university degrees.

The goal of the *Bringing Immigrant Workers into the Job Quality Conversation* project was to leverage IRC's deep reach into diverse communities of immigrant workers – many of whom speak little to no English and are skeptical of engaging with traditional government and research partners – to gather their experiences, perspectives, and views on job quality.

More than 17% of American workers are immigrants and as such, it is impossible to have a conversation about job quality without considering immigrant workers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, labor force participation among immigrant populations has continued to outpace labor force participation among native-born workers, especially among men where nearly 80% of working-age immigrant men participate in the labor force compared to just 65% of native-born men.<sup>2</sup> The need to think about the intersection of job quality and immigrant workers is also especially pronounced when we think about job quality in certain industries – for example, nearly three-quarters of agricultural workers and one-third of all hotel workers are immigrants. And while compensation is just one aspect of job quality, it is important to recognize that on this metric, immigrant workers continue to trail their native-born counterparts with median weekly earnings in 2021 of foreign-born workers just 88.3% of native-born workers.<sup>3</sup>

In short, as America invests in a critical conversation about job quality – within and beyond the JQMI - it is imperative to be intentionally inclusive of the experiences and perspectives of immigrant workers and IRC is appreciative of the opportunity to help bring these voices into the conversation through the *Bringing Immigrant Workers into the Job Quality Conversation* project.

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## **BRINGING IMMIGRANT WORKERS INTO THE JOB QUALITY CONVERSATION: METHODOLOGY**

The IRC team was primarily focused on gathering qualitative data from immigrant workers and used two tools – focus groups and individual interviews – to gather this data.

A total of four focus groups were conducted in three regions including Abilene, TX (1), Tallahassee, FL (1), and DeKalb County, GA (2). Focus groups were led by three (3) different IRC staff members and supported by interpreters as needed as all participants were non-native English speakers.<sup>4</sup> Focus groups were recorded and supported by additional notetakers to ensure full capture of the discussion.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Foreign Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics 2021, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Situation Report September 2022, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Foreign Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics 2021, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> In this report, IRC worked to ensure fidelity to participants' expressed thoughts, communicated via interpreter and at times, this has resulted in comments that may include irregular grammar or sentence construction.

IRC held the focus groups in convenient community locations including IRC offices and local churches and participants were identified and invited through IRC's existing engagement with immigrant communities as a service provider as well as word of mouth. Focus group leaders used a set of ten (10) questions to guide conversations (see Appendix A) though notably, most focus groups were not able to thoroughly move through all questions due to time (focus groups were scheduled for up to 90 minutes). Focus group participants were provided snacks during the focus group and received a \$50 gift card as compensation for their time.

A total of 35 immigrant workers participated in these focus groups and key demographic information about these participants is shared below:



57% were female



44% reported primary school or less, 12% had completed secondary school, 44% had university education



71% had been in the U.S. five years or less



60% identified themselves as speaking no to some English, 40% identified themselves as having good or excellent English



83% were currently employed; of those who were currently unemployed all had recent U.S. work experience



Participants came from 11 countries including Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Burma, Iran, Venezuela, Jamaica, and Uganda

*\*100% of participants were work-authorized*

As was noted in above, most focus group participants were working – many had worked multiple part-time and full-time jobs in recent years and they had found these jobs through a range of approaches including assistance from social service organizations, personal friends and family networks, and their own independent job search activities. The primary industries of employment were hospitality, food service, food production, retail, janitorial services, and a limited amount of customer service and/or clerical positions. Employers ranged from national chain restaurants to universities, small local businesses to multi-national conglomerates.

A total of four individual interviews were conducted. Interviewees were similarly diverse and included two men and two women from three countries and all interviewees were currently employed; all were identified as they had been past recipients of IRC workforce services. Interviewees were asked the same questions that were used to guide focus groups (see Appendix A) and received a \$50 gift card for their participation.

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## KEY THEMES

**Consistent challenges around “traditional” components of job quality including wages, hours, and work conditions.** Many project participants highlighted low wages as an aspect of their job that they were dissatisfied with. Participants disclosed a range of very low pay – for example, one participant noted she made just \$4 per hour in a tipped position at a large chain restaurant, and another participant shared that his pay had finally risen to \$9 per hour after working more than five years at a wage of \$7.50 per hour for one employer, and still another noted frustration that he made \$10 per hour yet new hires were all making \$15 per hour.

*"You are in the same position, and you've worked there for so long and for example they pay you \$10 per hour at the start but someone else starts after you at \$15 per hour but you've been working there for a long time and you aren't making \$15 per hour. That makes people very mad."*





In addition, several participants shared additional pay-related concerns including discrepancies between the hourly pay initially vs. what they were paid, inaccurate paychecks when they had used paid time off, and highly variable pay due to inconsistent hours.

*"One week you get paid \$300, the next week \$400, then maybe \$500, then the next week \$300 again. It's not good. You don't know how much you're going to get."*

Participants also identified the hours that they worked often contributed to dissatisfaction with their job. One participant shared how she had jumped between nearly a half-dozen jobs (some overlapping, most part-time) over several months because she was in pursuit of enough hours to cover her expenses.

*"My first real job was a waitress at a Mexican restaurant. I had that job for a month but had to switch jobs to another restaurant. I moved from 3 or 4 restaurants, one Mexican, one pizza place, a [COMPANY NAME REDACTED], and a [COMPANY NAME REDACTED]...They were all part-time because I couldn't find a full-time job." <sup>5</sup>*

Other participants identified the challenge of being called in to work a specific shift with set hours, only to be told by their supervisor to go home early making for an unpredictable work experience.

*"At times we have a scheduled time to work, and they come and ask us to leave at 3 pm instead of 5 pm and that really affects our work production."*

<sup>5</sup> IRC is redacting identifying company names to limit the sharing of any potentially identifying information from those workers who participated in the focus group



Work conditions were also identified by many participants as an area of concern in terms of job quality. Many of these concerns were very consistent and included the physical toll of long shifts on their feet, physical fatigue related to demanding physical work and among some, a strong emphasis on completing work very quickly with minimal breaks. These concerns also included significant monitoring by supervisors and in some cases cameras.

*"Standing up whole shift can be really hard...back pain and pain in legs for standing up the whole shift."*

*"Very strict, not allowed to have phone on your person. Stand and work the whole day regardless of if the shop is busy or not. Monitored heavily, if sitting you would be reprimanded."*

**Experiences of lower job quality that were directly connected to status as an immigrant, person of color, and/or English language learner.** Some focus group participants expressed that experiences of a culturally and linguistically unwelcoming environment and in some cases, discrimination made them less satisfied with their job. Based on what participants shared, this took many forms.

*"At times supervisors use language that is not appropriate and racist to us as employees and that affects us a lot."*

*"Sometimes at work, I am asked to work harder than other Latinas with lighter skin, but I am black. We have been here for two years and people still assume we don't speak English even though we are learning."*

*"Injustice when they treat you differently because of your lack of English. They give a higher pay to an English speaker even though they know nothing about the job."*

*"Boss talking about 'all those foreigners, and immigrants taking away American jobs'."*

*"People think that people who aren't from the U.S. have to work harder and are lazy. They make us do harder work than other employees. I don't know if everyone has the same barriers, but this is what I face. It causes a lot of distress emotionally and it's hard to establish myself here when I feel like I am not supposed to be here. This is something that happens every day and we need to find a solution."*



**Strong focus on respect, fairness, and opportunity as key components of job quality that were much desired but often missing.** Both in describing aspects of job quality that were lacking in previous and current roles, as well as the aspects of job quality that were important to them in future jobs, focus group participants identified an overlapping set of work culture components including respect, fairness, and opportunity as central to their definition of a good quality job. Indeed, these themes were prevalent in a wide range of stories and experiences shared and while they took different forms, the central idea of an experience of work culture that they experienced as valuing them – as individuals, but also as compared to other workers including those without immigrant backgrounds – was consistent.

*"Treating us equally would be much better because sometimes you make a mistake and it is taken so seriously compared to someone who is American or somebody who can speak perfect English. You can speak good English and your employer still makes such a big deal than someone else."*

*"I didn't like that my job people yelled at me all the time. When I worked in customer service, they called me when someone yells and something bad happened. I got so used to people yelling at me but I didn't like it."*

*"Respect and comfort make people stay. Being treated well. If people don't treat me right, I am not going to stay."*

*"Friendly environment. Respecting each other, if not it creates distractions and discomfort. Smile at each other, don't take home stress to work. Being supportive of each other. Communication. "*

*"Speaking of opportunities and jobs, right now I work for [COMPANY NAME REDACTED] working in sports maintenance. I have the opportunity to advance from maintenance to maybe a coach or gym teacher. Having these opportunities are great, there are always moments of racism, but the only limits are the ones we put on ourselves in this country."*

## Challenges of talking about job quality issues.

Most *Bringing Immigrant Workers into the Job Quality Conversation* project participants who shared a perspective on whether they would feel comfortable talking with their employer about job quality issues expressed that they were not comfortable doing so. Participants shared experiences of having tried to do so, only to feel that they had been ignored, that their supervisor responded by countering that they were slow or not doing their job well, and in some cases, experiencing negative repercussions on the job.

*"Don't feel like there is time to talk to supervisor. Everyone is too busy to listen."*

*"When we have a problem at work we should be able to bring that to a manager, but it is the opposite because when we report, repercussions come back to us. When I get a report from the supervisor to the manager, my current supervisor gives false reports saying I am slow and I don't work hard. But this isn't true. I face this all the time."*

*"I tried this once [talking to a supervisor about an issue], and the experience was the next day after I complained to the manager I was taken off the schedule and my hours were cut. They also lowered my salary."*

In addition, some participants shared how their own lack of English skills made it more arduous to try and advocate for key aspects of job quality like addressing pay and scheduling issues. In particular, those who spoke English less than well noted how they either have to rely on a co-worker volunteering to translate to address an issue or try and communicate with a supervisor directly and that these options were not always available or effective in a timely manner.





*"Participant shared that she made an appointment one day to request PTO time and at the paycheck time she wasn't paid enough. She was paid just \$500 instead of \$600. She was hoping that it would be on her next paycheck, but it wasn't. She asked for help from someone else who speaks English to help her to talk to the team leader and the team leader said they don't have time to check on that. It took a long time for the team leader to check on that, but finally she got the pay because her friend that spoke English helped. She was in her right but didn't feel valued or like her request was important."*

Outside of conversations with employers, participants expressed that no one had really asked them about job quality before they participated in focus groups. Because of time, not all focus group sessions were able to spend time gathering feedback from participants about how they would prefer for people to solicit their input on job quality issues but in groups that did have time to discuss this issue, there remained some hesitancy in talking about the issue in general with outside parties. In terms of suggestions as to what could be done in soliciting their feedback on this topic, most were related to the need to feel that something positive (and nothing retaliatory) would be done with this feedback in their own workplaces and second, that efforts should be made to provide interpretation and translation.



Finally, it is important to situate these key themes in two other important contextual factors. First, it should be noted that several of the industries that the participants work (or had worked) in are industries that have documented, widespread challenges with some aspects of job quality such as low wages and the prevalence of part-time work and/or unpredictable schedules. For example, data from the Economic Policy Institute shows that the majority of workers in some of the largest food service and retail employers in the U.S. earn less than \$15 per hour.<sup>6</sup> Data from Harvard University's Shift Project shows that workers in service sector jobs are also disproportionately likely to have unpredictable schedules and/or work less than full-time.<sup>7</sup> These industry-wide issues related to job quality are important to think about when reflecting on the voices, perspectives and experiences expressed through the Bringing Immigrant Voices into the Job Quality Conversation project. Second, while not a specific focus of the question framework used to guide focus group and interview conversations, it bears noting that many of the participants explicitly shared appreciation for the assistance they had received from workforce development programs and other social service providers and some specifically noted appreciation for the opportunity to work in America and strive to build a good life for their family. As participants reflected on their experiences and perspectives on job quality it was clear that many had experienced significant dissatisfaction with some aspects of their jobs and yet, also held at the same time an appreciation for the opportunities available to them in America.

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## LOOKING AHEAD

The immigrant workers who participated in the *Bringing Immigrant Workers into the Job Quality Conversation* project identified a range of significant challenges around the quality of jobs in which they work. From low pay and inconsistent hours to culturally unwelcoming environments and discrimination, these immigrant workers helped to lift up key considerations that stakeholders in the American job quality conversation must pay attention to. These workers also helped point a way forward, articulating the characteristics of good quality work that matter to them most including respect, fairness, living wages, reasonable schedules, and opportunities to advance.

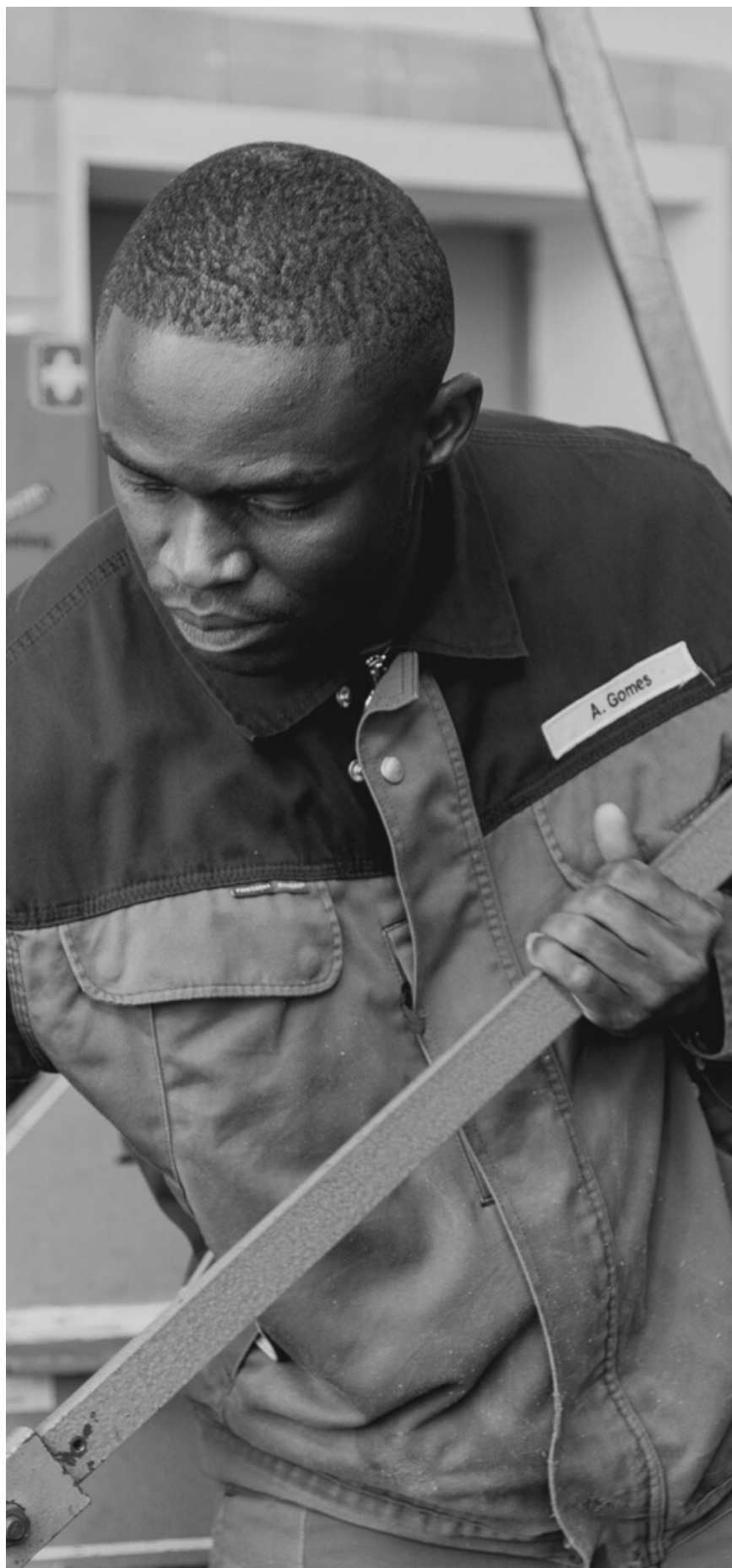
Within IRC, the findings from the *Bringing Immigrant Workers into the Job Quality Conversation* project will be used to reflect further on the strategies and approaches IRC uses in providing workforce development programming to diverse current and future workers. In particular, IRC is interested in exploring additional opportunities to build the knowledge, skills, and confidence of workers to identify high-quality jobs and advocate for improvements to job quality once employed. IRC also looks forward to opportunities to engage industry and employers to advance conversations in this space.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.epi.org/company-wage-tracker/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/still-unstable/>

As partners within the JQMI engage in their own vital and diverse research and work, IRC is hopeful that these immigrant voices can help inform how researchers and policymakers consider measuring job quality both in terms of what is measured but important, the care taken to ensure that the way we measure job quality takes into account linguistic and cultural diversity as well as the clear hesitation and concern that some of America's most vulnerable but important workers clearly feel when sharing information about their jobs.

Finally, and more broadly, IRC looks forward to a continued national conversation about job quality that is deeply inclusive – of immigrants and all workers. Particularly on the heels of COVID-19 and profound disruptions to the American labor market, it remains clear that the economic health of America, its communities, and its people requires a renewed focus on ensuring that all workers, regardless of job title, have the opportunity to experience a quality work environment that allows them to thrive.



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## **APPENDIX A – Question Set for Bringing Immigrants into the Job Quality Conversation Focus Groups and Interviews**

1. Can you tell me about your experience working in the United States up to this point?
2. When you think about a job – whether it is your current job or a job that you had before – what are some things that you thought were good about those jobs? What makes you want to keep working there?
3. On the flip side – when you think about your jobs – current or past – what are some things that you think were not so good about those jobs? What are some characteristics of those jobs that made people want to leave?
4. When you look for a new job, or a friend or family member tells you about a new job that they think you might be interested in, what are some things that you want to know about the job to determine if it is likely a good job for you?
5. If you think about the last job you had – what are two things that your employer could have done differently that would have made you more interested in continuing your career there?
6. Would you ever feel comfortable and safe sharing feedback about the things that aren't working for you at your job with an employer? What would be the best way for you to be able to share this feedback with your employer (a conversation, an anonymous survey, etc.)?
7. In what ways do you feel like your opinions and ideas about the quality of your jobs are valued by other people like employers, the government, or other people in your community? Have you ever had the opportunity to share your opinions about your job with someone outside of your family and friends? With whom?
8. What opportunities would you like to have to share the opinions and ideas you have about your job and the jobs in your community? Whom would you like to share them with?
9. Do you have any thoughts about how to connect with people in your community about the quality of jobs available to you? For example, would people like to have conversations in person, share their opinions through text or Whatsapp, attend a big community meeting for a discussion or something else?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?