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ACTION BRIEF

GUIDANCE FOR ACTION: ADDRESSING THE EMERGING IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WOMEN IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC FOR A GENDER-RESPONSIVE RECOVERY



BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect women migrant workers across Asia and the Pacific,¹ in particular those with irregular migration status. In normal circumstances, women migrant workers already face various risks, including restrictive migration policies, insecure forms of labour, language barriers, overcrowded living conditions, racism, xenophobia, lack of legal recognition, and undervaluation of their contribution to social and economic development.^{2,3} Women migrant workers are also exposed to multiple intersections of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, age, migration status or other sex- or gender-associated characteristics. The surge in COVID-19 cases is causing sudden travel restrictions and other policy changes that exacerbate these risks. This note mainly focuses on the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers and recommendations to support governments, donors, civil society organizations, employers and the private sector in addressing those impacts.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the number of migrant women increased by 48 percent from 23 million in 2000 to 43 million in 2017.⁴ Given the feminization of migration within Asia, in particular for domestic and care work in the informal sector, women migrant workers are already more likely to work in insecure labour, under precarious conditions.⁵ Globally, women make up 70 percent of front-line workers in the health and social sector, including as nurses, midwives, cleaners and laundry workers, many of whom are migrant workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicts that, **due to COVID-19, unemployment could rise globally by almost 25 million, with these estimates tremendously affecting women and migrants.**⁶ It has been estimated that the

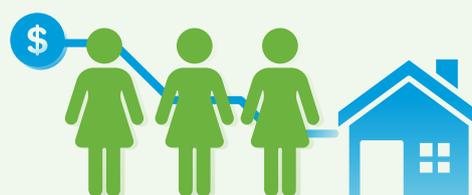
outbreak could cost China’s migrant workers alone a combined USD 115 billion in lost wages.⁷ The loss of wages caused by COVID-19 has substantial implications not only for women’s economic security but also for the wider community, both in countries of origin and countries of destination. Women migrant workers have become crucial agents in global survival circuits.⁵ Remittances are key for the survival of households and communities in the region, with seven of the world’s top 10 remittance-receiving countries in the Asia-Pacific region according to World Bank.⁸ Countries in the region rely on migrant domestic workers – more than 80 percent of whom are women – to fill the care gap.⁹ At the same time, the economy of many countries of destination in the region also relies on their migrant labourers. Research shows in 2018, migrant domestic workers contributed USD 12.6 billion to Hong Kong’s economy (3.6 percent of GDP), USD 8.2 billion in Singapore (2.4 percent of GDP), and USD 900 million in Malaysia (0.3 percent of GDP).⁶ This is in jeopardy as a result of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

With COVID-19 only just starting to emerge in the Pacific, less data is currently available on the impacts it is having on Pacific Island women migrant workers. However, countries such as New Zealand and Australia, which employ Pacific Island women in fields such as domestic and care work and seasonal agricultural work, are starting to close their borders to non-citizens.¹⁰ The ILO reports that in 2018 remittances amounted to USD 689 million in Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Established issues for women migrant workers in the Pacific include lack of decent work and social protection, high levels of gender-based violence, limited knowledge of their rights, weak employment contracts, lack of avenues for addressing grievances and abuse such as trade unions, abusive working or living conditions, and low salaries, to name a few.¹¹ Given that humanitarian crises often worsen these existing inequalities, COVID-19 could further destabilize the already delicate system within which women migrant workers function.

In order to promote inclusive economic recovery, there is a need to integrate women migrant workers as rights holders who are essential to the region’s sustainable development. Importantly, the whole society must come together for more assertive and collective efforts to ensure migrant-inclusive and gender-responsive measures in preventing further spread of the virus. **No one should be left behind - no matter who or where they are.**



50.2% of 11.6 million migrant workers in South-East Asia and the Pacific regions are women.¹² COVID-19 will make them one of the most vulnerable impacted groups as they are discriminated against both as women and as migrants.



Women are sending more than **USD 300 billion** home a year, which is half of global remittances.¹³ Due to COVID-19, many women migrant workers are losing their jobs which will have ripple effects for their families in their countries of origin.



As a result of COVID-19, globally unemployment could rise by almost **25 million**. This will make women and migrant workers particularly vulnerable.¹⁴



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KEY EMERGING ISSUES

► FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

- Travel bans, or restrictions such as requiring a health certificate, are impacting women migrant workers who may need to return to their countries of origin.¹⁵
- Women migrant workers who are unable to return to work due to travel restrictions may lose their livelihood.¹⁶ Given their limited access to social protections, this will place a huge economic burden on them. Some may decide against returning home for fear of not being able to come back to work after the crisis.
- Women migrant workers, especially those working in domestic and care work, are being prohibited from attending any form of gathering during their rest time, such as going to church, because their employers are afraid that they may bring the virus back to them.^{11, 17} In relation to this, the imposed restrictions on mobility may reduce women migrant workers' access to essential support services and may increase their exposure to violence.
- Local and national emergency measures may impinge on the rights of migrants, especially women. For example, a lockdown in Bangkok, Thailand led to mass migration of migrant

workers to other provinces and back across borders to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar.^{18, 19} This is potentially fuelling transmission and driving the outbreak into areas with less preparedness and capacity to respond. This increasingly puts both women migrant workers and women who live in these areas at risk of exposure, with the possibility of limited access to treatment and services.

- The impacts of lockdowns could violate the human rights for the affected migrant populations, especially women and girls as they lack protection and basic needs e.g. shelter, health, and food.^{20, 21}

► TERMINATION, EXPIRY AND RENEWAL OF CONTRACTS

- Several reports are indicating that women migrant workers in some sectors are losing their jobs in large numbers following increasing closures of businesses and restricted mobility.^{3, 22, 23}
- Contracts are being terminated and demand is dropping due to employer fears, closing or relocation. This leaves many women migrant workers in limbo regarding their visa, employment, and housing, and unable to seek due compensation as services are stretched or unavailable as a consequence of the outbreak.^{12, 24}

► SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INSURANCE

- Migrant women often do not have access to gender-responsive social protection mechanisms such as maternity protection, sexual and reproductive health care and other benefits. This is particularly the case for those working in informal employment, especially domestic service and the care sector. In the situation of COVID-19, women migrant workers could face more difficulties in accessing social protection due to tightened travel and movement restriction, as well as stigma around the perceived risk of contagion.
- Women migrant workers already face barriers in accessing adequate health care services, including for routine health services such as sexual and reproductive health. With regards to COVID-19, they may face high costs of testing and treatment, and may have difficulty reaching diagnostic and service locations.²⁵
- Existing legal services and emergency shelters for women migrant workers experiencing violence are operating with limited capacity or have closed down or repurposed due to COVID-19 related measures and impacts.
- There is a lack of preventive or mitigating measures including migrant health insurance.²⁶ Compounding the vulnerability this brings is a lack of emergency and back up measures to protect the rights of migrant workers in emergency situations, such as those who are forced to leave the household or do not have private accommodation, or those who are put at increased risk of debt by the health crisis.²⁷
- Women migrant workers with irregular migration status may be hesitant to comply with COVID-19 screening, testing and treatment procedures due to several factors. One may be fear of having their documentation checked and risking fines, detention or deportation.²⁸ Another is the fear of losing their livelihood, or the stigma of a positive test for COVID-19. [Link: Policy Brief on Access to Social Protection for All Migrant Women]

► WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS

- Women migrant workers in domestic work, care work, construction, agriculture, factory work and hospitality are unable to telecommute. The nature of their work may also put them at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19.^{16, 29}
- Proposed COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies, such as isolation, social distancing and

regular handwashing, may not be feasible for those living in informal settlements, refugee camps, and labour accommodation compounds which are often overcrowded, with poor ventilation and limited access to gender-responsive water, hygiene and sanitation facilities. This should include, for example, women-friendly bathrooms with provisions for menstrual hygiene management, located in safe and well-lit areas, and well-sited water collection points. Given that women migrant workers often live in poor conditions and often bear additional domestic responsibilities related to water and sanitation activities such as walking for a long distance to collect water for their families for drinking, bathing, cooking, and other household needs, the nature of their living conditions may put them at increased risk of exposure.^{20,30}

► OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

- Women migrant workers with irregular status or in informal employment are often less able to avail themselves of their rights during the pandemic. It can be hard for them to request leave, access personal protective equipment (PPE), work from home, or make other flexible arrangements.^{13,14,31}
- Women migrant workers who work in sectors that require them to have physical contact with other people may have limited access to precautionary measures including hand-washing facilities, hand sanitizers, and PPE.¹³

► VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

- During emergencies, rates of gender-based violence including domestic violence increase. This is well documented from previous emergencies and pandemics. Following travel and movement restrictions and/or sudden loss of employment, migrant women may be forced to spend more time with a potential perpetrator and may not be able to leave abusive relationships.³²
- Levels of gender-based violence spike when households are placed under the increased strains that come from security, health and money worries, and cramped and confined living conditions. This is frequently observed among displaced populations in crowded refugee camps, as well as in internally displaced persons settlements and labour accommodation camps. Reported cases of domestic violence has tripled recently in some countries practising social distancing.³³

- There is an increased risk of abuse and exploitation of women migrant workers, particularly when female migrant domestic workers are made to work on their day off following government orders to stay inside. In addition to that, they may also face higher risk of violence at the hands of their employer as a result of increased isolation and reduced mobility, and additional barriers in accessing support services.
- There is an increased risk of sexual exploitation and violence by state officials and armed guards abusing their power over women who are returning or have irregular migration status.³⁴
- During emergencies such as the COVID-19 outbreak, migrant women affected by violence could face more difficulties in accessing essential services, including critical and life-saving health, psychosocial care, police and justice or social services, due to barriers such as language, availability, or concerns for their migration status.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



FOR GOVERNMENTS

- ▶ Governments in countries of destination and countries of origin **should provide all migrant populations including women, men, girls and boys irrespective of their migration status the full protection of their human rights during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, without prejudice and discrimination** and in compliance with international law.
- ▶ Governments in countries of destination should **support disaggregated data collection (disaggregated by age, sex, disability and other factors) and gender analysis** to understand the gendered impacts of the outbreak amongst migrants.
- ▶ Governments in countries of destination should **ensure that all migrant workers, women, men, and persons of diverse gender identities are included in national and local crisis response plans to the full protection of the labour law**, with access to the same treatments as nationals across all sectors of work, in line with international standards.
- ▶ Governments in countries of origin and recruitment agencies should work together to **ensure accountability regarding employment conditions of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic** through the use of joint and several liability in employment contracts signed before departure.
- ▶ Concerning gender-based violence that could rise during the pandemic, governments should work together with civil society organizations to **ensure service directories are updated and effective referral pathways for essential services (including healthcare, policing and justice services, psychosocial support, reporting and complaints mechanisms, and other necessary support) are available and accessible to migrant women and girls**, regardless of their migration status.

- ▶ Governments in countries of destination and countries of origin **should make arrangements for the dignified and safe repatriation of all migrant detainees in immigration detention centres**, in compliance with international laws with technical support and monitoring by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to reduce the risk of transmission.
- ▶ Governments in countries of destination **should not deport, detain or arrest migrants with irregular status** coming forward for screening, testing and treatment measures in order to control the spread of the COVID-19.
- ▶ In response to increasing impacts of the outbreak in areas with inadequate resources for normal prevention and mitigation strategies, such as in informal settlements, governments and civil society organizations should collaborate to **implement gender-responsive interventions including provision of essential emergency needs** such as food, medical treatment, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) including sanitary products **for migrant populations, especially women and girls.**



FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

- ▶ **Provide resources to development and humanitarian organizations** working towards protecting human rights of migrant populations to develop rights-based and gender-responsive prevention, response, and recovery programmes to address specific circumstances of migrant populations, especially women and girls during and after the outbreak. This may also include providing procedures in case of **repurposing or adapting existing projects** to the changing situation where necessary to ensure that organizations **can make plans and execute appropriate interventions responding to the emerging needs of migrant populations, especially women and girls.**



FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- ▶ Collaborate with stakeholders including governments, development agencies, recruitment agencies, and employers in all sectors to empower women migrant workers during this pandemic by (1) **ensuring that they are fully aware of precautionary and preventive measures** against COVID-19 and have access to timely and accurate information on local and national response and potential impacts in a language they understand and (2) **increasing their capacity to understand, negotiate, and report on employment conditions and access to social protection**, as relevant, in line with the protections guaranteed in national laws and international mechanisms.
- ▶ Continue to monitor, advocate and offer collaboration with relevant stakeholders **in sharing knowledge, information, and tools for the protection of human rights of migrant populations**, which can be violated during this time of ever-increasing controls on migration.



FOR EMPLOYERS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- ▶ Employers, individuals and agencies in all sectors in countries of destination hiring migrant workers should **ensure that they fulfil responsibilities of decent work and extend additional necessary support that is inclusive and gender-responsive for their migrant workers and their families**. This may include providing flexible working arrangements, paid leave, housing in case migrant workers have to self-quarantine, and supplying food, daily essentials, and health care during the pandemic.
- ▶ Private sector companies in all sectors employing migrant labour within their value chains **need to provide gender-responsive prevention, response, and recovery of COVID-19 measures**. This includes recognizing homes as new workplaces which requires special measures including **grievance mechanisms to address increased risks of domestic violence, special flexible working arrangements, promoting shared-care giving responsibilities and including special measures for all women, including women migrant workers, across their supply chains**.³⁵ See specific Guidance Note for Private Sector companies [Link: Guidance for Action: Gender-Sensitive Private Sector Response to COVID-19 for Accelerated and Inclusive Economic Recovery]
- ▶ In response to the increasing impacts of the outbreak that may result in sudden employment interruption, **provide immediate economic relief to all workers, including migrant women and men, for income replacement measures** such as cash transfers, micro loans, and deferring existing loan payments.



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