



GUIDANCE NOTE



# ADDRESSING THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

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## GLOBAL SNAPSHOT: IMPACT ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

Women migrant workers around the world are on the front-lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. They work in essential but low-paid and vulnerable jobs, as health and care workers, nurses, cleaners and laundry workers, placing them at high risk of exposure to coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> Women migrant workers already have to grapple with multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities, gender-specific restrictions in migration policies, insecure forms of labour, racism, and xenophobia.

Women migrant workers face a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, having their labour and human rights violated and contracting coronavirus. They are likely to work in the informal economy, especially domestic service and the care sector, with insecure contracts and no paid leave or ability to work from home. They are also more likely to be engaged in short-term, part-time work. Their jobs are generally excluded from contributory social insurance schemes, which means limited or no social safety nets to compensate for lost income and limited or no access to health care and maternity protection.

For many of the 8.5 million women migrant domestic workers, the onset of the pandemic has led to dismissal from jobs, with their health and safety ignored and even violated. For live-in migrant domestic workers, losing their

jobs also means losing their place to live. The onset of travel restrictions has increased financial challenges and uncertainty, with many stranded far from home.<sup>2</sup>

The economies of many countries around the world are sustained by the remittances sent home by women migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> Remittances provide a lifeline for families and communities in their countries of origin, especially during times of crisis. Given the economic downturn caused by the impacts of COVID-19, women migrant workers are sending fewer remittances, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of families that depend on this income.

This Guidance Note highlights the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers and makes recommendations in the context of the economic and social response and recovery packages that governments are putting forward.

### GLOBAL SNAPSHOT: KEY DATA

- Some 100 million migrant women send remittances every year, amounting to half of the USD\$601 billion sent in 2016,<sup>4</sup> but they pay up to 20 per cent more in transfer fees than men.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2019, half of an estimated 272 million migrants who live and work outside their countries of origin were women.<sup>6</sup> Of these women, approximately 66.6

million were migrant workers.<sup>7</sup> The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers in situations of vulnerability are severe.

- COVID-19 could cause 25 million jobs to be lost globally, with women migrant workers particularly vulnerable.<sup>8</sup>
- Due to the pandemic, 8.5 million women migrant domestic workers on insecure contracts are facing income loss and much greater risks of abuse and exploitation, particularly those who cannot return home owing to travel bans and border controls.

## CHALLENGES AND RISKS FOR WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

### LOSS OF LIVELIHOODS:

- The International Labour Organization estimates that global unemployment figures could rise by almost 25 million as a result of COVID-19, disproportionately affecting the income security of women and migrants and the wider community.
- Women migrant workers are reported to be losing their jobs in large numbers in some sectors. Because they tend to work in the informal economy in precarious conditions without formal employment contracts and limited coverage by labour laws, employers can more readily end their employment in response to the economic decline caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Women migrant workers in formal employment are also vulnerable to losing their jobs due to the economic



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downturn, leaving many in limbo regarding their work authorizations and visa status and great uncertainty about income and housing prospects.

- Navigating red tape and language barriers to access unemployment or other benefits are significant hurdles, exacerbated by the shutdown in migrant support services.

### REDUCED REMITTANCES:

- Remittances are key for the survival of many households and communities all over the world. A recent analysis estimates that remittances will register a negative seven per cent decline in 2020 relative to 2019, from \$76 billion to \$70 billion.<sup>9</sup>
- Women migrant workers' remittances are commonly used to meet the educational, health and livelihood needs of families and communities in their countries of origin. These remittances often act as a substitute for lack of social protection in countries with limited public welfare systems; the impact of lost remittances will be hardest on poor families, who are least likely to have access to social protection.
- With large numbers of women migrant workers losing their jobs due to the global recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on the individuals and local economies dependent on this income will be devastating.
- Many in-person cash transfer services are unable to operate during the pandemic, a key concern for many migrant women lacking the digital literacy to use online money transfer services. The reduction in in-person cash transfer services is also a problem for migrants with irregular migration status who do not have the required documentation to access the formal digital transfer services usually operated by the banking system.

### STRESSES ON CARE AND DOMESTIC WORKERS:

- Women migrant domestic workers are at particular risk of losing their jobs due to COVID-19 as they tend to be in informal employment, often unregistered and excluded from labour protections. The lack of assistance and protection mechanisms for women migrant domestic workers, their social isolation due to language and cultural differences, and the limited availability of accurate information heighten their vulnerabilities during the pandemic.

- Women migrant domestic workers face a significant risk of abuse, leaving them trapped and unable to reach their homes as a result of increased travel restrictions.<sup>10</sup>
- Migrant women working in households caring for children, the sick, and the elderly face an increased risk of contracting the virus as they are likely to be in direct contact with persons who may have COVID-19.
- Many women migrant domestic workers, cleaners and care workers in COVID-19 affected countries have had to cope with increased workloads to ensure cleanliness and hygiene and provide the necessary care, often without personal protective equipment or overtime compensation.
- Violations of the human rights of women migrant workers in domestic and care work – excessively long hours, no guaranteed days off, lack of social protection (i.e., maternity leave, sick leave and employment injury benefit), sexual and gender-based violence and restrictions on freedom of movement – are further exacerbated during the pandemic.
- COVID-19 has increased the burden of unpaid care work on most women, including migrant women, as a result of closure of schools, kindergartens, creches and other public and social services. This extra burden of unpaid care work on women needs to be addressed as part of a comprehensive response to the pandemic.

#### **LIMITED FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT:**

- Travel bans and restrictions are preventing women migrant workers from returning to their countries of origin as cross-border travel becomes more complex and difficult. This includes screening measures and health certificate requirements for entering a country.<sup>11</sup> Those who want to go home may decide against travelling for fear of not being allowed to return to the countries where they are working.<sup>12</sup>
- Women migrant workers who are unable to return to work due to travel restrictions may experience a complete loss of their livelihoods, in the absence of social protection, as well as of their families who depend on their remittances.<sup>13</sup>
- In some countries, the impact of city/province/country lockdowns and business closures has led to mass movements of migrants trying to return to their countries of origin, increasing the risk of community transmission of COVID-19 and spreading the virus to areas with less preparedness and capacity to respond.

#### **LACK OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND HEALTH CARE:**

- Migrant women, particularly those working in the informal economy, have limited or no access to social protection, health care and maternity protection, because they are generally excluded from contributory social insurance schemes.<sup>14</sup>
- Women migrant workers lacking health insurance or with irregular migration status may be hesitant to comply with COVID-19 screening, testing and treatment procedures due to fear of documentation checks by authorities and potential fines, arrest, detention or deportation.
- Women migrant workers' sexual and reproductive health is compromised by a lack of health insurance and access to health care, and even more so as health systems are stretched to the limit by COVID-19. In the United States, for example, which has a fully privatized healthcare system, an estimated 20 per cent of all migrants are uninsured (as compared to 8.5 per cent of the population overall) and for those with irregular migration status the figure is expected to be even higher.<sup>15 16</sup>
- Women migrant workers without access to child or family benefits are obliged to leave their children at home, often without supervision, to go to work.
- Women migrant workers in sectors requiring physical contact with other people often have limited access to personal protective equipment and hand-washing facilities.
- Existing legal services and emergency shelters are operating with limited capacity or have closed down due to COVID-19 measures and impacts.

See also: [UN Women's Policy Brief on access to social protection for all migrant women](#)

#### **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS:**

- COVID-19 exacerbates women migrant workers' increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence at all stages of migration,<sup>17</sup> particularly migrant women with irregular migration status or sexual and gender minorities who are least likely to report violence due to discrimination or fear of arrest or deportation.
- Past epidemics demonstrated that women and girls, including migrant women and girls, were at heightened risk of gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. The Ebola pandemic showed that multiple forms of violence are exacerbated

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within crisis contexts, including trafficking, child marriage, and sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>18</sup> COVID-19 is likely driving similar trends at present<sup>19</sup> and will particularly affect migrant women and girls given their vulnerable situations.

- Domestic violence has skyrocketed because of forced coexistence, cramped and confined living conditions, economic stress, and fears about contracting the virus. This is intensified for migrant women who struggle with language barriers and lack of accessible information to access essential services (health, police, justice and social services), which have, in turn, been severely curtailed by COVID-19.
- Migrant women may be forced to live with potential perpetrators and may not be able to leave abusive relationships because of travel restrictions, quarantine measures or job loss. Migrant women and girls who experience gender-based violence struggle to access healthcare and essential support services owing to restrictions on movement, closed clinics, and fear of contracting coronavirus.
- Women migrant workers in the health sector are at increased risk of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace due to the serious stress that the pandemic places on patients, their relatives and other healthcare workers. For example, in China, frontline healthcare workers, many of whom are migrant women, reported increased levels of physical and verbal attacks.<sup>20</sup>
- The potential of sexual exploitation and violence by state officials and armed guards abusing their power over migrant women at border crossings has increased.<sup>21</sup>

See also: UN Women's Policy Brief on COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Women migrant workers, irrespective of their migration status, should enjoy their full human rights during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, in compliance with international law. This means ensuring access to essential services, such as health, police, justice and social services, for all migrant women and sexual and gender minorities, including victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

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### RECOMMENDATION IN ACTION: PUTTING HUMAN RIGHTS FRONT AND CENTRE

The government of *Portugal* announced in late March 2020 that all migrants with open residency applications will be given regularized migration status, which will ensure that migrants have full access to essential services during the coronavirus outbreak. This measure will remain in force until at least July 2020.

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- To analyse and understand the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic requires the collection of comprehensive sex- and age- disaggregated data and gender statistics, including on migrant women and girls.

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### RECOMMENDATION IN ACTION: WOMEN COUNT

UN Women is working with partners to provide a more accurate picture of the gender dimensions of COVID-19, the socio-economic impacts on women and girls the measures that should be taken to address the needs of women and girls, including women migrant workers.

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- Women migrant workers should have full access to comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive health services. All residents, irrespective of migration status, should have access to COVID-19 testing. This is not only a human right under international law, but also a good practice from a public health perspective.

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### RECOMMENDATION IN ACTION: ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE FOR MIGRANTS

In *Thailand*, migrants irrespective of migration status are eligible for its Universal Healthcare Coverage Scheme, which was introduced in 2001 and extended to spouses and children in 2005. A number of initiatives have been established to access 'hard-to-reach' migrant communities, including mobile clinics, bilingual information services,

one-stop centres and workplace outreach. Health workers have been recruited from migrant communities to do outreach, including home visits, and to provide culturally appropriate health services in a range of languages.

In the state of *New Jersey, USA*, migrants with irregular migration status, or those without health insurance, are able to get access to healthcare as well as free COVID-19 testing done at local Federally Qualified Health Centres. To get access to this service only proof of municipal residence is required which can be provided using a utility bill. No state or federal identification is needed, which is particularly positive for migrants with irregular status. As of 30 March 2020, *Saudi Arabia* is providing free testing and treatment for coronavirus to all Saudi citizens and residents, including migrants with irregular status.

- Women migrant workers should be included and afforded the same treatment as nationals in national and local crisis response and recovery plans across all sectors of work, including domestic work, in line with international standards. For women migrant workers in the informal economy or returning to their countries of origin who have been rendered jobless by the crisis, one concrete response measure would be generating employment through Public Works Programmes. For example, supporting women in producing masks and other basic protective equipment could contribute to slowing down the spread of the virus and provide a modicum of income security.
- Women migrant workers' remittances are a critical source of income for households and communities around the world. With many in-person cash transfer facilities – such as Western Union – being closed during the pandemic, digital transfers are the only viable option. Women migrant workers need to be provided with information and guidance on how to send remittances digitally to help close the persistent digital gender gap.

#### RECOMMENDATION IN ACTION: DIGITAL CASH TRANSFERS FOR MIGRANT WOMEN

In *Qatar*, with the closure of in-person cash transfer services, the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs has asked companies to inform their migrant workers about online remittance services. Employers are specifically requested to ensure that migrant domestic workers understand how the online

transfer services work. These services are available in several languages, which is paramount for women migrant domestic workers.

- Universal access to gender-responsive social protection measures ensure that everyone, irrespective of migration status, has a social safety net in times of need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such access would help ensure that women migrant workers who lose their jobs would have a basic income and those with caregiving responsibilities would receive the necessary family and child benefits.
- During this public health crisis, governments are encouraged to refrain from deporting, detaining or arresting women, men, and children with irregular migration status. Immigration detention facilities generally provide poor opportunities for social distancing and other measures to protect against COVID-19 infection for migrants and staff. This is particularly important for migrants who come forward for screening, testing and treatment measures in order to support communities in managing the spread of the virus.

#### RECOMMENDATION IN ACTION: SUSPENSION OF MIGRANT DEPORTATIONS

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights called upon all Member States to review the situation of rejected asylum seekers and migrants with irregular status in immigration detention, and to release them to the maximum extent possible. The Commissioner noted that releases have been reported in several Member States, including *Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom*, with the *United Kingdom* announcing a review of the situation of all those in immigration detention.



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## ENDNOTES

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