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Migration, Gender, and COVID-19: Socio-Economic and Policy Perspectives



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MIGRATION, GENDER, AND COVID-19: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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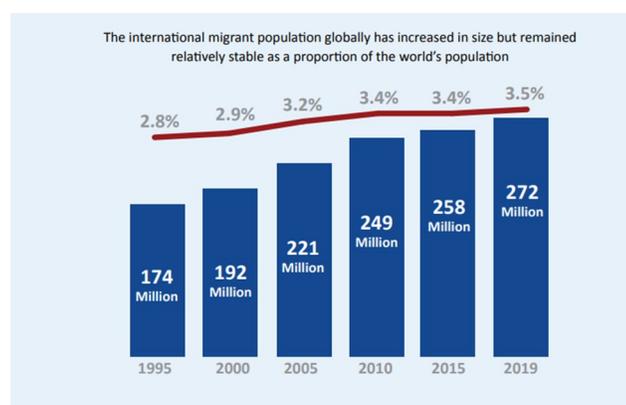
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Migration, Gender, and COVID-19: Socio-Economic and Policy Perspectives

Anuja Tripathi and Paige Fabry*

Executive Summary

Statistics provided by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) indicate that there are 272 million migrant workers worldwide, with women accounting for roughly 40 percent of this population (IMO, 2020).



Source: IOM World Migration Report 2020

Female migrants form a large percentage of the workforce globally, contributing significantly to the global economy. While accounting for a large part of the workforce, they are amongst the most vulnerable population groups. Female workers are heavily concentrated in the informal economy; an economy characterized by precarious living conditions, low wages, no social protection, and immense discrimination. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 impacted both national and global economies, further marginalizing female migrant workers. The consequences of this pandemic are worse for female migrant workers, as their concerns are invisible and their work undocumented. Female migrants

face increasing levels of abuse and violence, especially those employed as domestic workers and caregivers.

Multiple scholars have documented the disproportionate amount of women migrating for work, often in unsafe and risky conditions, belonging to the most marginalized groups and bottom of the pyramid communities. Their status as “employee” is often questioned, as they are customarily viewed as helpers or casual wage workers contributing to the family income. Inherent gender disparity and patriarchal norms not only have a significant role in determining their wages and the significance of their work, but they also have a tremendous impact in defining the vulnerabilities and insecurities in the labor market. Nationwide lockdowns have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women, specifically female migrant workers. Despite the increased international attention and publicity of migration issues, there are hardly any reports or news articles specifically arguing for the rights and issues of female migrant workers. The question that needs to be addressed is why there is an inherent tendency to not include women and their work when discussing migration and creating policies? There is a need to implement policies and measures that address and act upon the issues female migrant workers face. Therefore, bringing to light the issues at hand; making the invisible work of female migrants visible, voicing their issues fearlessly, and breaking the vicious cycle of abuse and discrimination. A rights-based and gender-sensitive approach is required to ensure the inclusion of the various concerns of migrant workers in COVID-19 policies.

Key Words: Women, Migration, Informal economy, COVID-19

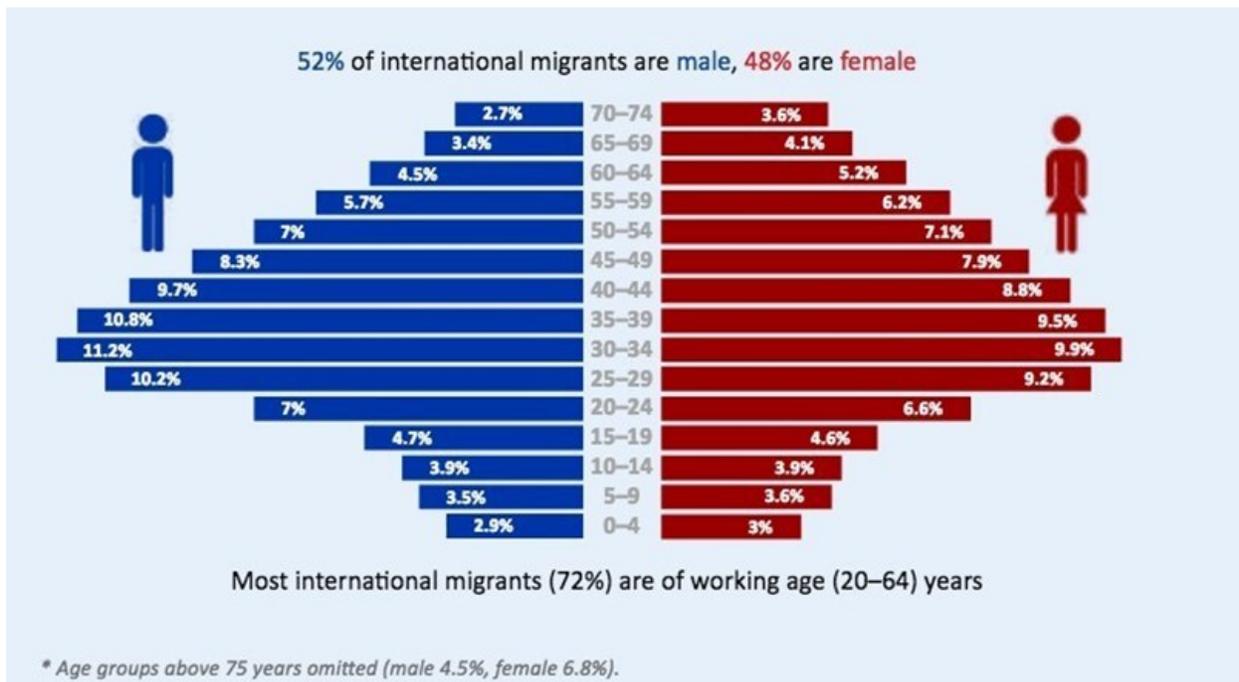
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Note: Views expressed are of author(s).

Introduction

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented situation, with its' effects being felt around the globe. Economies and health care sectors were impacted heavily, as economies were brought to a halt and healthcare facilities struggled to cope with a large amount of COVID-19 cases. In a recent webinar, hosted by the Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT), an esteemed group of panelists offered their experiences, insights, and knowledge of the various aspects of COVID-19 and its effects on migration and gender. The webinar titled "Migration, Gender, and COVID-19: Socio-Economic and Policy Perspectives", covered the socio-economic perspectives and policies surrounding COVID-19 and female migrant workers. This policy brief will cover the main points from the webinar and the proposed policy recommendations.



Source: World Economic Forum, 2019

COVID Does Not Discriminate but Rather Highlights Inequalities

The COVID-19 virus has not discriminated in terms of the people it has infected. Young or old, rich or poor, men or women, all have the possibility of being infected by the virus. However, COVID-19 has highlighted the inequalities of national systems and economies.

The pandemic affected certain sectors more adversely considering the social, economic, and cultural inequalities prevalent in our society. The group most affected by the pandemic was migrants, especially females. During the government-mandated lockdowns, the notion of home as a refuge and safe haven for women was jeopardized.

With the lockdown, non-essential companies switched to teleworking, in an effort to stop the transmission of the virus. With the switch to teleworking and the mandated stay-at-home orders, people were spending more time in the home, both men and women. News reports have called COVID 19 the double pandemic, as the number of gender based violence (GBV) and domestic violence cases increased, with women and children largely being at the receiving end (Council of Foreign Relations, 2020). Multiple regions and countries, including China, the Middle East, Palestine, North Africa, Latin America countries, Germany, France, Australia, and United States among others, have seen an increase in the number of domestic violence reports and calls to helplines (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020; UN Women, 2020a; UN Women, 2020; Wanqing, 2020; Sigal, 2020). In a report released by UN Women, they state “the number is likely to increase as security, health, and money worries heighten tensions and strains are accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions” (UN Women, 2020). Many women find themselves trapped in their homes with their abusers. Due to the lockdown, they were unable to leave the situation and were left without access to resources.

Not only did women face increased cases of domestic violence due to the pandemic, but women were also faced with the pressure of juggling both work responsibilities and the increased pressure of home life. Due to the gendered division of labor and persuasive patriarchal norms, women are expected to be the primary caregivers. The implication of the pandemic and nationwide lockdown resulted in increased labor, as schools, colleges, and workplaces closed and people remained at home. It is far more challenging for women working in the organized sector with white-collar jobs since they are constantly struggling between maintaining their professional responsibilities and work at home. Women were expected to not only work from home, but also juggle the increased load of housework, childcare, and the education of children (UN Women, 2020).

Migrants, especially female migrants, were greatly affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the rise of COVID-19 cases, the concept of social distancing increased. However, not all groups are able to follow social distancing guidelines, especially those living in poor urban areas. Social distancing presents a challenge for those living in slums, ‘*chauls*’, and other densely-populated areas, as it is nearly impossible to respect the guidelines due to limited space.

Migrants, including female migrant workers, were also affected by the economic implications of COVID. COVID-19 brought economies to a halt worldwide, as only essential businesses and resources remained open. A large majority of migrants work in the informal sector, characterized by casual labor and daily wage workers. With the lockdown, the informal sector stopped, leaving migrants without work and a source of income. According to the IOM Global Report 2020, nearly 3/4 of the service industry (greatly affected by the virus), including domestic work, consists of female migrant workers (IOM, 2020). The informal sector is not protected by government responses and relief packages, leaving the migrant workers vulnerable during times of crisis.

‘Significance of Care Labor in the Health Economy’

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the structural crisis in social reproduction and the increasing presence of migrant and racialized women working in the care labor economy. Women's paid inclusion in the labor market has increased globally. However, men have not taken up their share of the double burden of social reproductive tasks. In many higher-income nations such as the USA or Canada, there's increased reliance on marginalized migrants, especially females, to provide child and elder care, a low-paid domestic service. This process is being conducted through global care chains. Global care chains form connections across different locations, often exploiting intersectional divisions based on, but not limited to, gender, ethnicity, and class. Families have turned to global care chains to fill the gaps, as

governments have restructured welfare systems and support for the young, old, and infirm. The care labor industry is essential to the functioning of the global economy. Three quarters of care labor and other domestic services employ female migrants, both internal and international. While essential to the functioning of the global economy, care labor has been devalued and commoditized. According to OECD research, if socially reproductive labor were fully accounted for in national calculations, it would increase the national GDP anywhere between fifteen to seventy percent. Therefore, this is not an inconsequential sector of human activity.

Statistics paint a significant role of gender in healthcare, as well as, the vulnerability of the migrants. Seventy percent of healthcare workers are women. While many conditions of their work have improved, women remain less represented in leadership positions in their place of work.

Compared to their male counterparts, women are paid at least 28% less in similar positions. Intersectional divisions, including gender and migration status, lead to greater vulnerabilities for these groups. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance and presence of immigrant health and allied care workers. According to a recent MPI report, migrants make up 29% of physicians and 22% of nursing assistants in the USA. In the UK, 13% of NHS workers were reported as non-British. In Canada, 8.5% of nurses and about 26% of physicians were internationally educated (Baker, 2020)

Frontline health care workers, such as nurses and doctors, have been prominent in the public's understanding of why we need to flatten the curve. Domestic workers also carry a substantial burden in light of this crisis. In the domain of gender, it is equally important to mention the vulnerability of male migrant workers. For example, construction workers in Singapore who were faced with overcrowding and lack of attention from public healthcare workers. Similar situations have occurred in other regions and industries as well. In that sense, gender-disaggregated data would be useful and relevant in understanding the context of the problem and possible policy recommendations.

'Invisible and Undocumented Work of Female Migrants'

There are many reasons why people choose to migrate, including but not limited to, improving livelihoods, economic reasons, and better work opportunities. Individuals migrating to UAE often migrate for economic reasons. These migrants are not well-off economically and socially, leaving them at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. It is estimated that about 8.5 million Indian migrants have contributed to the economy of the Gulf countries and 2.4 million have contributed to UAE.

While there are no exact statistics on the number of female migrant workers working in the healthcare and domestic service industry, it is reported that a large percent are female migrant workers. Domestic workers are subjected to uncertainties, due to the lack of employment contracts, expired visit visas, and the Kafala system in the UAE.

The Kafala system exploits migrants' vulnerabilities. According to the Migration Forum in Asia, "Under the Kafala system a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (Kafeel) for their contract period. The migrant worker cannot enter the country, transfer employment, nor leave the country for any reason..." (Migration Forum in Asia, 2020; 1). This system

puts migrants into precarious situations, as this system often translates into exploitation and abuse against migrants. Unfortunately, no action can be taken for the migrants, as it often the employer's word against the migrants. Undocumented migrants, due to expired visit visas and the non-existent work contracts, are extremely vulnerable to abuse as they cannot leave or report the abuse due to their undocumented status.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, women migrants in the UAE are the most vulnerable, as they are at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid and are most often undocumented. There are no records indicating the number of female migrant workers in the UAE, especially domestic workers. They contribute huge amounts to their families back home, yet there is no mention of how much they are sending home, their resources, and least of all, their coping of issues.

COVID-19 has affected everybody, but the women's domestic workers are the most affected groups. Their living conditions do not allow for social distancing and they have limited or no access to health care services.

These women are trapped in difficult and fragile situations and cannot even return to their home countries owing to abusive and complicated procedures. With this system, the lack of statistics, and their undocumented status, the work of female migrants and the migrants themselves become invisible. The situation in Madagascar is slightly different. No new diasporas are coming from India, but there is a domination of three or four generations of women diaspora who immigrated four or five generations ago. After Madagascar became independent, there were a substantial number of women who became stateless, as they were not given citizenship. With the lack of citizenship status after decades in Madagascar, these women once again turned invisible. The invisibility of female migrants around the world makes them vulnerable to pandemic, abuse, and exploitation.

The Importance of 'Making the Invisible Visible'

With the pandemic, most migrants were faced with the decision to stay or return home. However, the notion of home is gone. The atrocities facing female migrant workers is illustrated by the following phrase,

'The heartbreaking images of working-class woman with the child on her back, walking miles to reach her native village as the place of work, which has become her home has either asked her to go back or left her with few resources to survive. Upon reaching her 'home', she is sprayed with disinfectant in a most insensitive manner or locked up in quarantine'.

This scenario paints a generalized condition of homelessness, as her home does not want to welcome her back, due to the possible presence of the virus. The circumstances in which they return to are not favorable for social distancing. This kind of global health crisis compels us to turn the lens back on the struggles and insecurities of migration and settlement. Dependent migration has been the lens and the axis around which a lot of research of migration has been completed, and for decades, women have been classified as dependent migrants. Ironically, women have been classified as dependents, as in many contexts they are, in fact, the primary breadwinners.

The care economy in India is extremely gendered, nurses, domestic workers, and the caregivers to the large aging population of our country. The care economy prefers to have a female worker inside the homes, rather than male workers. Even as researchers and academicians, there is a need to comprehend and analyze the lives and work of these women. Female caretakers face violent circumstances at home. During a crisis, when everyone is at home, they often cannot maintain social distance. In that situation, men without work, as studies have shown, become the most violent in these circumstances. Often a double-edge sword, the national lockdowns have increased time spent at home, but the virus has also seen an increase in the number of domestic violence cases.

Three lessons/agendas can be taken away from India. First, the categorization of female migrant as dependents makes their work invisible. Second, we must make their invisible work visible, in order for the migrants to be protected socially and economically. Third, the need to make public places more friendly for female migrant workers. There is a need to talk about public health facilities for these women. There is a need to acknowledge the fact that nannies, female nurses, and maids are the ones who are moving the economy whether they are internal or international migrants. The Indian context, today, is unstable as far as migrants are concerned.

‘Women Within the Informal Sector are the Most Vulnerable’:

Poverty and debt are large factors in the discussion of gender, migration, and COVID-19. Women and young girls are the most vulnerable due to lower education levels and the lack of access to resources. Due to poverty, lack of education, and many other factors, women often take jobs in the informal sector. The informal sector is prominent on the African continent. The Informal economy is largely dominated by women in trade and services, as there is a lack of access to public spaces and the formal sector of the economy. The migration flow in African countries often flows from rural to urban areas. Opportunities for work in urban areas and the lack of opportunities in rural areas drive the migration of domestic workers, primarily females, to urban areas. Multiple countries in Africa are working towards regional migration, which is close to 7 percent of the continent. Women migrating for work often face abuse, violence, and discrimination. Despite regional and cultural specificities, women in the informal sector in Africa are also the most vulnerable. With COVID-19 the informal sector halted, leaving migrants in Africa without a job, means of income, or access to resources.

‘Immigrant women not as victims, rather as game changers’

Migration has an impact on the daily lives of migrant workers. The western world has been created with the contributions of immigrants around the world. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the USA is adopting restrictions to stop migration into the country. There has been tremendous discrimination in the visa application in the United States. During the pandemic, access to green cards and work visas were halted for all professions except healthcare workers. Women, often seen as dependent migrants despite being highly educated, do not have the right to work in the United States. According to Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, there are over 4 million people of Indian origin in the United States. According to the Census Bureau, around 3/4 of the Indian born immigrants in the USA have done extremely well economically. However, most immigrants face multiple disparities, particularly women. The United States visa has reshaped the family structures and familial relationship for these high-tech workers by reinforcing a patriarchal family form with the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker. The private sector labor market is benefiting at the cost of the well-being of migrant families. The H4 visa is dubbed as the depression visa or the prisoner visa for women who are often highly qualified, as they become frustrated and depressed in the role of housewife. Gendered restrictions affect their self-confidence, their idea of self-worth, constrains them financially, disables

them in social settings, and provides no opportunities to build economic or human capital and skillsets.

The patriarchal values and conventional gender relationships are reinforced in the form of numerous cases of domestic violence, family conflict, separation, and divorce. Women are being isolated from their familial support system through this kind of unequal relationship.

Outlined by professor Annapurna Pandey, we must not see these women as victims, but rather as game players. These women are trying to make the best out of tough situations despite their lack of opportunities.

‘The Lockdown has Exposed Migrant Women and Girls’

COVID-19 is an unprecedented pandemic that has hit the globe with far-reaching consequences and impacts that are still under investigation. The impacts of the pandemic are anticipated to last for years. Women migrant workers around the world are on the frontlines 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.

In 2019, nearly half of the estimated 272 million working outside their home countries were women. Out of this figure, 8.5 million women were working in domestic services, among the most vulnerable sector of migrant workers.

These women are at high risk of losing their livelihood, as they belong to the informal sector of the economy. As migrants lose their jobs, they also lose their main source of income and places of residence. The suffering felt by migrants also extends to their home countries. Most migrants send remittances back home to their families, but COVID-19 jeopardized these remittances. As economies faltered, female migrant workers were often the first to lose their jobs and their sources of income. Domestic workers, primarily female, often lack the documents and access to medical care and health insurance. As a domestic worker, they do not fall under the social protections and relief packages offered by the government. COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns limited the freedom of movement, limiting their ability to seek alternative solutions for the living expenses, or at best to go home. The strict lockdown also exposed female migrants and girls to gender-based violence, as they were trapped in their homes in abusive situations without access to resources or safe havens.

Policy Recommendations

- There is a need to implement policies and measures incorporating and adopting a feminist agenda for making the invisible work of women migrants visible, voicing their issues fearlessly, and breaking the vicious cycle of abuse and discrimination.
- To ensure recognition of social justice and equality, there should be an inclusion of women migrant workers in the COVID-19 policy responses.
- The government should incorporate women migrant workers as their target population for various frameworks related to COVID-19 policies, with special attention to the concerns of women, such as

access to health services, their safety during the lockdown, and the increased cases of gender-based violence.

- Women migrant workers who are working as health care providers against COVID-19 should be provided with necessary safety equipment, legal, social protection, and financial entitlements.
- Policies recommendations and responses should be framed based on effective monitoring and evaluation of well- documented gender-based data. Gender-disaggregated data would be extremely relevant in understanding the context of the problems that women migrants are facing and the implications of COVID-19.
- Governments need to adopt safer migration pathways that are accessible to all migrants and are capable of protecting them from life-threatening situations.
- For the post- COVID-19 scenario, women are needed to be included in the rebuilding of economies and social life. By including women in rebuilding after COVID, we ensure that their needs and concerns are addressed in the new systems. We need to level the playing field, making sure that women are not discriminated against based on gender.
- Governments need to consider the categorizations used in policies and visas. Often seen as dependent migrants, females face discrimination, abuse, and exploitation, despite their skills and education. The inherent concept of migration as a ‘male-dominated phenomenon’ needs to be reconsidered and aggressive efforts are required to incorporate women’s issues and vulnerabilities.

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