

Women in Migration Need States to Act Boldly in their Commitment to the Global Compact for Migration

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As the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare intense inequities and multiple, interlocking crises throughout the world, the acceleration of implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) is urgently needed.

The rise of COVID-19 has exposed numerous systemic problems: pervasive unregulated informal economies; weak health care systems; an absence of social safety nets; structural racism; gender-based discrimination; inhumane migration regimes; gaping inequalities between nations; and more.

As we celebrate International Women’s Day this month, we are especially aware of the ways these crises impact women on the move. For migrant women, the pandemic has exacerbated the trauma, instability, and uncertainty in their lives, and those of their families. Bold action by States is needed to roll back exclusionary, discriminatory, and harmful policies, and to embrace the Compact’s focus on the well-being of all migrants. More than ever, we need States to commit to prioritizing gender sensitivities in their migration policies, promoting gender equality and the leadership of all migrant women and girls, and recognizing their independence, agency, and leadership, as called for in the general principles of the GCM.

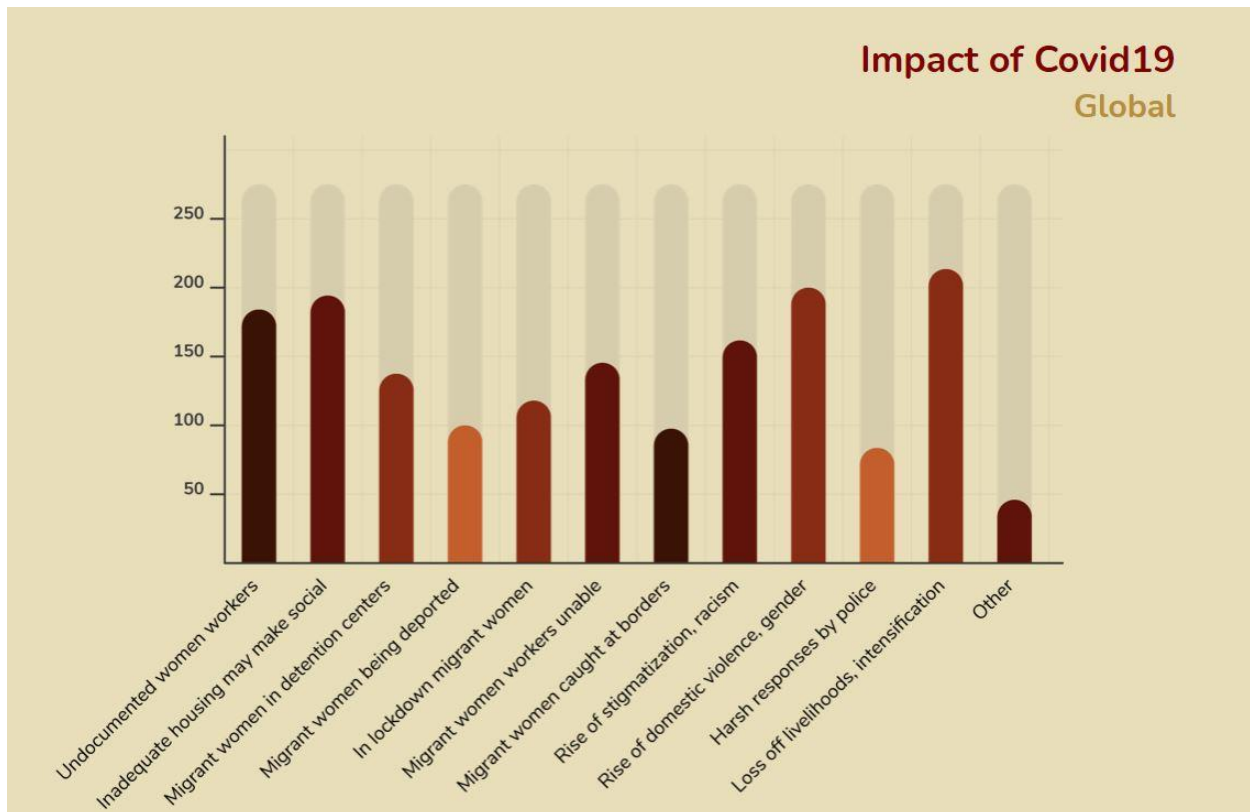
Global Realities

Migrant women are overrepresented in both the “essential workers” and “disposable workers” groups impacted by COVID-19. Jobs in health care, cleaning, care for the elderly, farm labor, transit, shipping, warehouses and more may have continued, but often without decent wages, paid, sick, or medical leave, access to health care, or adequate protective gear.

Moreover, as restaurants, markets, and retail stores shut down, low wage service workers, many of them migrant women of color, have found themselves without jobs and with no safety net. Similarly, many migrant women workers on temporary labor contracts, particularly for domestic work, were suddenly without jobs, scrambling to return to home

countries even as borders were closed. Some were evicted from employers' homes and left without support. Wage theft has been rampant.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit especially hard on groups most marginalized by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and migration status. The lack of access to health care, environmental racism, overcrowded housing, and work in unhealthy and often dangerous jobs has long put communities of color and migrant communities at higher risk. This, added to the higher COVID-19 death rates in some nations, has demonstrated the structural violence of these inequities.



On a global level, the gaping North/South divide and unequal global financial system have left poorer nations scrambling to meet needs with limited external support. This has meant little fiscal space for poorer nations to offer stimulus packages and provide much-needed assistance. And too often, such assistance is out of reach for migrants, especially those in an irregular status.

The production and distribution of, and access to, COVID-19 vaccines have further highlighted these inequalities. As of mid-February 2021, there were 4.2 billion doses of [vaccine](#) for 16% of the world's population, primarily in the global North, and only 2.5 billion

doses for the rest. We echo the United Nations Network on Migration’s [call for States](#) to “guarantee rapid, fair, and equitable access to vaccines for all and the inclusion of migrants, regardless of their status in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes and other public health interventions.”

Regional Realities

The Women in Migration Network embarked on a [global mapping of civil society organizations working on gender & migration](#) in 2020 just as the pandemic was unfolding. We asked about the priorities of organizations as well as how migrant women were being impacted by the pandemic. **The [report](#), launched this month, highlights regional realities, offering important civil society input for ongoing Regional Reviews of the GCM**, including needed national and regional policy responses.

- In **Latin America**, Black and Indigenous women, and women from Africa who are in transit have faced greater discrimination and exclusion and have fewer organizations representing them. Extractive industries are pushing Indigenous peoples off of their land and are drivers of migration. Gender-based violence and sexual assaults are ubiquitous for women in transit and at borders.
- A **new European policy** is creating greater restrictions. Many migrant women remain dependent on an employer or spouse for their status, while asylees may end up in irregular status and therefore be unable to access basic services.
- In **Africa**, as elsewhere, migrant women have experienced increased gender-based violence and xenophobia during the pandemic. The securitization of borders and criminalization of migrants is widespread and is on the increase. COVID-19 has caused a loss of livelihoods for many migrants, contributing to greater poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Those in transit and detained in the Maghreb area have been deported to countries of origin without adequate pandemic measures in place.
- In the **MENA region**, domestic workers have been excluded from some reforms in the Kafala system, which ties workers to employers. Many domestic and hospitality workers have lost their jobs without any unemployment or social benefits. There is limited space for freedom of association and collective bargaining.

- In **Asia**, some countries have issued travel bans on women’s migration to prevent exploitation -- only to increase risk with restrictions on women’s freedom of movement. Widespread temporary labor schemes, without standard norms regarding wages and working conditions, make migrant women vulnerable to abuse. Debt bondage to recruiting agencies has continued as a major issue for migrant women, who may not report employer abuses for fear of job loss.

There is a stark gap between the values of the Compact and the inward-looking responses many States have employed during the pandemic. We must not “build back” to the “normal” of inequities and injustice. We must create permanent solutions that provide support and services to all, regardless of status, and that will close the gaps in protections that continue to exclude millions of migrants, and undocumented migrants, in particular.

This requires **rights-based and gender-responsive approaches that include durable social protections in countries of origin, transit and destination, and robust labor protection frameworks**. Gender sensitive, rights-based immigration systems; emergency responses that contribute to regenerative, sustainable economies; clear checks on corporate power; and stronger democratic institutions are critically needed. As we also give thought to addressing the world’s climate crisis, these commitments are of existential importance.

States supporting the GCM have affirmed that “**our success rests on the mutual trust, determination and solidarity** of States to fulfil the objectives and commitments contained in this Global Compact.” **Such determination and solidarity is needed now! Migrant women and their allies are ready partners to make this happen.**

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