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Gender and Migration in Times of COVID-19: Additional Risks on Migrant Women in the MENA and How to Address Them

(2020-07-21)

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1. Background

The Coronavirus does not discriminate who it affects, and the health, political, economic and psychosocial responses to the virus should not either. At one of the most difficult times we are undergoing as a humanity, women migrant workers across the globe currently stand on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic in almost every capaci-

ty. These women work in essential but low-paid and vulnerable jobs, as health and care workers, nurses, cleaners and domestic workers, not only placing them at an elevated risk of exposure, but also rendering them one of the most vulnerable populations to COVID-19.¹ With women migrant workers inherently having to grapple with intersectional forms of discrimination and inequalities, gender-specific violations in migration policies, insecure forms of labor, racism, and xenophobia, to name just a few, the virus currently adds another layer to this intersection that has not been explicitly addressed in policies on the ground.²

Moving from this reality, these women face a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, having their labor and human rights violated and contracting COVID-19. In the MENA region, they currently work in the informal economy, particularly as domestic workers or caretakers, with insecure contracts, inhumane sponsorship laws, and no paid leave or ability to work from home.³ They are frequently engaged in short-term, part-time or informal working arrangements.⁴ Their jobs are excluded from contributory social insurance schemes, labor laws, and social safety nets which would ultimately be able to compensate for currency devaluation and economic crises, as well as for limited or no access to health care and maternity protection during these critical times.⁵

With the true number of women migrant domestic workers who currently reside in the MENA is close to impossible to assess, the true impact of the COVID-19 global economic crash on these women is close to impossible to pin down. The onset of the pandemic has led to job losses across the region, with their health and safety ignored and even violated.⁶ For live-in migrant domestic workers

¹ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women," *ReliefWeb* (April 9, 2020). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf>.

² United Nations, "Policy Brief."

³ Jasmin Lilian Diab, "On Selective Racism: All Black Lives Matter, Including the Ones You Hired Under the Kafala System," *Foreign Policy News* (June 5, 2020). <https://foreignpolicynews.org/2020/06/05/on-selective-racism-all-black-lives-matter-including-the-ones-you-hired-under-the-kafala-system>.

⁴ Diab, "On Selective Racism."

⁵ Amnesty International, "MENA Governments Must End Discriminatory Crackdowns and Abuse of Migrants," *Amnesty International* (December 18, 2018). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/12/mena-governments-must-end-discriminatory-crackdowns-and-abuse-of-migrants>.

⁶ Ben Hubbard and Louise Donovan, "Laid Off and Locked Up: Virus Traps Domestic Workers in Arab States," *The New York Times* (July 6, 2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/world/middleeast/coronavirus-saudi-domestic-workers-maids-arab.html>.

in the region, losing their jobs ultimately means losing their place of residence. The onset of travel restrictions has increased financial challenges and uncertainty, with many stranded far from home, unwelcome and unsafe.⁷

2. Impacts and Implications

The impacts and implications of COVID-19, no matter from which intersection they are addressed, are different for men and women and will ultimately create larger inequalities for individuals who are in vulnerable positions, such as migrants. UN agencies and international organizations alike are well aware of this inequality and have voiced their concerns publicly – urging governments to look at the existing realities from gender and intersectional perspectives whilst implementing policy and precautionary directives.⁸ This critical step in the area of policy would not only permit for the identification of these inequalities, but will further assist in the incorporation of greater protection and assistance to more vulnerable populations in response plans.⁹

According to UN Women, among the particular risks COVID-19 has caused for women migrant workers, are: (1) job insecurity, (2) exploitation, as well as (3) socio-economic impacts.¹⁰ The UN Migration Agency (IOM) in its *World Migration Report 2020* reminded us that migrant women represent around 74% of the service industry, which includes domestic work, and in many cases experience job insecurity.¹¹ A significant portion of their income goes towards supporting their families in their countries of origin, with the economies of many countries around the world sustaining themselves by the remittances sent home by women migrant workers.¹² Remittances provide a lifeline for families and communities in their countries of origin, and particularly amid this ongoing global economic crisis.

⁷ Hubbard and Donovan, "Laid Off and Locked Up."

⁸ United Nations, "Policy Brief."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ International Organization for Migration, "World Migration Report 2020", *IOM Online Bookstore* (2020). <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020#:~:text=The%20World%20Migration%20Report%202020%2C%20the%20tenth%20in%20the%20world,of%20migration%20throughout%20the%20world.&text=This%20flagship%20World%20Migration%20Report,and%20is%20available%20online%20only.>

¹² International Labor Organization, "A Migrant Centered Approach to Remittances," *International Labor Organization* (2020). <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/policy-areas/remittances/lang-en/index.htm>.

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.¹³

As UNDP indicates, throughout a health crisis with implications on the mobility of people, migrant women who are domestic workers, and especially those that are irregular, become more dependent on their employers and are further removed from social protection services – at least the minor ones the *Kafala* System provides.¹⁴ Even when the isolation from the health crisis ends, the stigmatizing that migrants have COVID-19 "just because they are migrants," makes them a target to threats on multiple levels.¹⁵ In the specific case of migrant women, this discrimination can have dire implications upon their health, such as the lack of adequate care in a medical center and other healthcare settings that are specific to women, such as pregnancy care or gender based violence.¹⁶

3. Gender-specific Hindrances and Obstacles

In order to increase the understanding of the gender-specific impacts of COVID-19 and subsequently ensure that the needs and priorities of all women migrant workers are fairly and adequately addressed in response plans and policies, multiple specifics need to be taken into account by governments and policy-makers alike.

Primarily, the UNDP has highlighted the limited ability of the majority of migrant women to access protective face masks and hand sanitizer, as well as their greater tendency to live in overcrowded conditions which leaves this population less prepared to face the virus.¹⁷ The UNDP further highlighted the reality that women do approximately twice as much unpaid care and domestic work as men.¹⁸

¹³ International Labor Organization, "A Migrant Centered Approach."

¹⁴ Marie-José L. Tayah, "Claiming Rights Under the Kafala System," *Open Democracy* (August 17, 2017). <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/claiming-rights-under-kafala-system>.

¹⁵ Jeremy Douglas, Karin Hulshof et al., "End Stigma and Discrimination against Migrant Workers and their Children During COVID-19 Pandemic," *Relief Web* (2020). <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/end-stigma-and-discrimination-against-migrant-workers-and-their-children-during-covid>.

¹⁶ Douglas et al., "End Stigma."

¹⁷ UNDP, "COVID Emergency Appeal Lebanon," *UNDP* (2020). <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/2020/Publications/COVID19LebanonAppeal.pdf>.

¹⁸ UNDP, "Appeal."

The workload resulting from the closure of academic institutions and the care required for individuals who fall ill is predominantly assumed by and imposed on women.¹⁹ In the case of some migrant women, such as refugees and migrant domestic workers, when their livelihoods are affected in their country of residence, caring for other people disproportionately falls on them on multiple levels.

In addition to experiences within their immediate working requirements, mobility and quarantine restrictions force a significant number of women to isolate themselves with their abusers or potential abusers. As the ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality insists: "... in cases where there is a predisposition for violent behaviors, the frustration of being locked at home will likely cause that violence to increase."²⁰ Gender-based violence is exacerbated by labor and migration uncertainty, as well as social distancing.²¹ For many migrant women who do not have sufficient support networks in transit and destination countries, isolation with their aggressor is not only a potential threat on their lives, but often the only choice they have.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

A number of UN agencies and international organizations have contributed to ensure that COVID-19 response policies are both tailored and comprehensive. Particularly, that they encompass tailored policies which take the complexities of the "migrant woman" into account. The UNDP stresses that safe facilities, especially at borders, may assist in the reduction of "the risk of contagion and situations of sexual and gender-based violence," as well as stressing that this must be provided to the migrant population – even those with irregular statuses without exception.²² It further insists on the provision of bonuses and extraordinary payments with the intention of guaranteeing that migrants, and women in vulnerable situations specifically, have access to economic compensations throughout this stagnation period, regardless of their immigration status.²³

In addition to the UNDP's recommendations, it is pivotal that governments ensure access to care services without discrimination. As women often fall victim to double discrimination (i.e., for being women and for being migrants), it is necessary to monitor the provision of non-discriminatory care across assistance centers, and in the health centers particularly. Confidentiality must also be protected in cases of sexual violence, domestic violence or exploitation.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Emily Lewis, "Coronavirus: Domestic Violence Grows Under Lebanon's Lockdown," *Al Arabiya English* (April 13, 2020). <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/04/13/Coronavirus-Domestic-violence-grows-under-Lebanon-s-lockdown>.

²¹ Lewis, "Domestic Violence."

²² Ibid.

²³ Idem.