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## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS**

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**Abstract:** *In the last decades, worldwide, international migration has increased significantly, the stock of migrants reaching over 281 million people in 2020 compared to 173.59 million people in 200. Of the total migrants, 48% are women, and of these, almost 2/3 work in the service industry. During the Covid-19 pandemic, mobility and travel restrictions jeopardized the income of migrant women, especially domestic workers. The paper presents a brief analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrant women employed in health and social care institutions, those working in households, but also on those with precarious and informal jobs, or with irregular migration status.*

**Keywords:** *migration, migrant workers, Covid-19 pandemic, gender differences*

**JEL Classification:** *F22, F24, O15, R23*

### **Introduction**

Population migration can be considered one of the most marked social phenomena, so that migration can influence all aspects of social life, both directly and indirectly, from the country of origin and the country of destination, while performing several functions.

The majority of people moving from one area to another are still domestic migrants, with international migrants reaching 279 million in 2019 and almost 281 million in 2020 (State of Migration in the World 2020, IOM).

The share of international migrants in the world population has varied, on average, in the last 50 years from 2.3% in 1970 and 3.6% in 2020.

In both 2019 and 2020, the majority of international migrants (approximately 74%) were of working age (20 to 64 years old), with women representing 52% of the total migrant population.

The year 2020 and 2021 meant an unprecedented change in human mobility. The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically reduced the international mobility of people with the closure of borders and the imposition of travel restrictions on an unprecedented scale. In general, border closures and travel restrictions have significantly reduced the regular movement of people across borders, except for essential medical staff in countries such as Peru, seasonal workers in Canada and Germany, and large-scale repatriation of citizens.

The World Organization for Migration has estimated that more than 160 million migrant workers will be subject to mobility restrictions in the first half of 2020. Migrant workers have been exposed to increased health risks as they regularly work in front-line industries and they live in precarious accommodation conditions.

The impact of the pandemic on migrant workers also has a gender dimension. According to international statistics, since the early 1980s, an increasing number of women (either single or married and often better educated than men) have moved to work in countries other than their home countries. Thus, the number of female migrants increased faster than the number of male migrants between 1970 and 2020, in the most important beneficiary countries, industrialized, reaching over 48% of the total migrant population in 2021.

During the pandemic, hostile social norms, the poor prospects of entering the labor market for women, lead to a precarious situation that threatens to stagnate their participation in the labor force. As a result, migrant women are less protected from job loss and the economic downturn (UN Women, 2020). Also, while migrant women have the lowest wages, they remit a higher percentage of their income than men. Many of these inequalities have been revealed and are likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted mobility, blocked migrants, destroyed jobs and incomes, reduced remittances and pushed millions of migrants and vulnerable populations into poverty. However, migration, although declining, continued.

## **1. Recent developments in women's migration for work**

Women, like men, migrate in the hope of better living conditions, to support their children, to escape the precarious economic, social and political situation in their country of origin. Female migration is motivated by both economic and non-economic factors, including community surveillance and patriarchal

traditions that limit their opportunities and freedom, exit from unwanted and / or abusive marriage, release from domestic violence and desire equal opportunities.

Women's labor migration tends to be highly concentrated in occupations that are traditionally associated with gender-specific roles. One such example is housework and care, including nursing, caring for the elderly and children, cleaning and other related household activities, which is usually undervalued and undercompensated.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimated for 2019 that the stock of international migrants worldwide was 272 million, of which 245 million were of working age (aged 15 and over). The number of international migrant workers amounted to 169 million, an increase of 5 million migrant workers (3.0%) compared to the 2017 estimate and 19 million (12.7%) compared to the 2013 estimate of migrant workers, women represent 41.5% and men 58.5%.

The vast majority of international migrant workers are adults aged 25-64 (Figure 1), with an estimated 146.2 million in 2019 (of whom 41.52% were women) and young migrant workers (aged 15 to 24) to 16.8 million.

The analysis of the distribution of male and female migrant workers by categories of economic activity highlights substantial differences between male and female migrant workers: a higher concentration of women in the service sector than that of men (in 2019, 79.9% of migrant women workers were in services, 14.2% were in industry and 5.9% in agriculture).

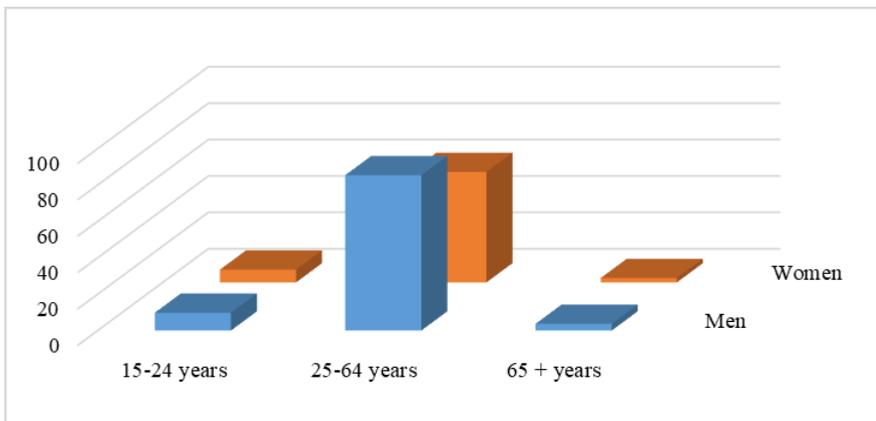


Figure 1. Global estimates of international migrant workers by age, 2019 (millions)

*Data source: compiled by the author based on statistics from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs*

It should also be noted that the global share of women among migrant workers varies significantly from one region of the world to another, with large parts of the world having different shares of the global stock of immigrant and migrant women. Thus, in regions such as Northern, Southern and Western Europe, the share of women among migrant workers is over 29.4%, compared to less than 6% in the Arab States.

Given that migrant workers' wages are usually lower, however, they send home more of their earnings more frequently than migrant workers. Remittances from migrant workers are more likely to be spent on health, education, family and community development. In general, migrant women often send remittances to the person (often a woman) who cares for her children left in the country of origin, to ensure that the money is spent for the benefit of the children and the household. Migrant women workers also tend to take greater responsibility for remittances from extended family members.

## **2. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the migration of women for work**

Early estimates by various international bodies (UN, IMF) on the effects of measures to block all or part of the labor market indicate that almost 2.7 billion workers (representing around 81% of the world's workforce) have been affected. of these and the significant contraction of global production in 2020 leading to a global recession, which will be strikingly different from past recessions.

Migrants (both legal and illegal, regular or irregular) represent in many countries a significant share of the workforce in essential services (provision of health and social care, transport) and supply chains. Migrant women work in all these sectors, but are better represented among medical and social service providers.

In many countries, migrant workers make up the majority of health care workers who care for patients, and many others work as cleaning agents in hospitals and social care facilities. In the field of health and social care, worldwide, women represent 70% of employees, who during the health crisis worked in the front line: in hospitals, in care units and in private homes, caring for patients affected by Covid-19.

There are an estimated 11.5 million migrant domestic workers in the world (of the 67 million domestic workers, 80% of whom are women). A large proportion of childcare and elderly care services are provided by migrant women, who are usually poorly paid and mostly part-time. These activities have become the epicenter of Covid-19, because working conditions, and not

infrequently the lack of personal protective equipment, have exacerbated the spread of the virus.

Unlike the previous global economic and financial crisis, in which unemployed migrant workers were often able to change sectors of activity, in this health and economic crisis, sector change may not be as feasible due to the skills and experience required for the sectors. (World Bank, 2020).

Many migrant women also work informally (without employment contracts and work permits) and therefore, for them, during the pandemic, going to work meant the risk of fines, detention for illegal immigration and / or deportation if request documents while traveling to work.

As a result of the pandemic, migrant women employed in health care and social work activities have faced, in addition to the extension of working hours and increased responsibilities at home: the widespread closure of schools and the lack of available childcare services have created additional responsibilities for them. caring for children and the elderly at home.

The average value of remittances from migrant women workers is the same or even higher than that of migrant men, pointing out that they are more likely to send home a larger share of their salaries on a regular basis (their remittances are more likely to be spent on health, education, family and community development). However, the Covid-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on the ability of migrant women to send remittances to their country of origin. World Bank (April 2020) analyzes of the effects of the global health crisis on remittances indicate a decline of almost 20%, from \$ 548 billion in 2019 to \$ 445 billion in 2020. Despite the global pandemic. Covid-19, however, remittance flows remained strong in 2020, falling less than previously forecast. However, in the wake of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, migrant women have sent fewer remittances, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of households' dependent on this income.

During the pandemic, some states adopted a series of measures of assistance and social protection for migrant workers in their country. Thus, Canada has granted wage protections, eligibility for employment insurance to temporary workers in the country's agricultural sectors who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

In order to allow migrant workers to access basic social protection programs, Portugal has granted them temporary residence rights and France has temporarily extended their residence permits. Spain has extended unemployment insurance to domestic workers. Employers in Qatar paid full-time migrant workers in quarantine or those receiving medical treatment for Covid-19. The health and economic crisis have once again highlighted the important political gaps in the provision of medical services, the harmful

consequences of excluding migrants from accessing health and social care, and the repatriation of migrants. Due to border closures, many migrant workers have been stranded without jobs and little money. Difficulties in organizing repatriations, and especially disagreements over which is the responsibility, have highlighted the need for bilateral labor agreements between labor-supplying and receiving countries to have clear clauses on the repatriation of workers. in crisis situations to ensure that migrant workers are not put in difficult health and life situations.

## **Conclusions**

A brief analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women migrating to work has led to a number of conclusions, namely:

- the number of migrant women has increased in recent decades, reaching almost half of the 169 million people working outside their countries of birth in 2019, which has led to the feminization of migration;
- migrant workers face vulnerabilities and gender risks that affect their ability to work and live in their destination countries, but also their integration upon return to their country of origin;
- There are many migrant women workers with a high level of training and qualifications, but the vast majority are over-represented in low-skilled jobs, such as in the manufacturing industry, agriculture, services (care for the elderly or children, cleaning and other related activities in households and in public and private institutions), small-scale entrepreneurship and not infrequently without access to health and social protection services;
- the work of migrant workers is paid less, is generally poorly qualified / unskilled and largely informal and unprotected;
- Covid-19 has increased labor market uncertainty for both migrant and native women.

The lack of assistance and protection mechanisms for migrant women workers, their social isolation due to linguistic and cultural differences and the limited availability of correct information have increased their vulnerabilities during the pandemic.

In this context, it is necessary to adopt and implement policies to support migrant workers, to facilitate their access to essential services such as health, police, justice and social services.

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