



## When the Pandemic Hit, Were Migrant Workers Left Out in the Cold? A Time for Change

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The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an enormous toll on the world of work. The International Labour Organization (ILO) [reports](#) that in 2020, the pandemic resulted in the loss of working hours equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs, four times greater than during the global financial crisis in 2009. All told, 114 million jobs were lost along with 3.7 trillion USD of labor income.

Migrant workers, who represent 4.7 percent of the global labor pool or 164 million workers—nearly half women<sup>1</sup>—are some of the most acutely impacted by the crisis. Many are concentrated in sectors characterized by high levels of temporary, informal, or unprotected work, including in terms of occupational safety and health, low wages, and lack of social protection.

During the pandemic, migrant workers have faced rising levels of discrimination and xenophobia, with many also facing food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions, reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns. Women migrant workers, including migrant domestic workers, [have reported](#) particularly difficult circumstances, including higher levels of violence.

ILO will release a global report in the coming weeks with findings from the rapid assessments it conducted around the world to document the significant impacts of the pandemic on migrant workers. While quite a number of governments extended visas and social protection to migrant workers

during the pandemic, others did not. The findings show that many migrant workers, particularly in Gulf countries, were stranded when businesses were closed, with some left homeless, living in the streets. High rates of job losses also occurred across Africa.

Many Asian migrant workers who lost jobs returned home voluntarily or were deported. In Thailand, an estimated 700,000 migrant workers lost their jobs, and in Sri Lanka, 39 percent of those surveyed had been forced to return home after their contracts were terminated prematurely. India repatriated over 2 million of its workers.

Similarly, in Latin America, 24 percent of unemployed workers surveyed had lost their job due to COVID-19. ILO has observed that migrant workers lost earnings in both the United States and in Mexico. In the case of the United States, ILO's [global wage report on migrant workers](#) found that at least 8 percent of migrants had lost their jobs, and they are mostly low-paid workers.

Migrant workers faced poor working conditions even before the crisis, but the pandemic laid bare the weaknesses in current labor migration governance systems. Particularly problematic is the lack of coherence among migration and employment policies and regulatory frameworks, and in general, the lack of human and labor rights implementation for migrant workers. The lack of labor protections, including social protection for migrant workers, exacerbated not only the

suffering of workers but also the spread of the pandemic in societies. Failure to close these gaps as countries emerge from the pandemic will continue a downward spiral of inequality of treatment and opportunity for migrants, depressing wages and working conditions, or otherwise encouraging social dumping.

Some governments are now re-examining their migration systems as they rebuild their societies and economies. For those seeking to “build back better,” there is growing recognition of the need to eliminate discrimination and to raise awareness that migrant workers represent a significant share of the workforce and make important contributions to societies and economies.<sup>2</sup> As the COVID-19 pandemic highlights, migrant workers also carry out essential jobs in healthcare, construction, transport, services (including hospitality, restaurants, and hotels), and agriculture and agro-food processing. Women migrant workers [represent a significant share of those in domestic work](#), comprising 73.4 percent (or 8.45 million) of all migrant domestic workers, and a growing share of the healthcare sector generally.

There are a number of ways countries can adopt fairer and more effective labor migration frameworks. A first step is to better link migration schemes to rights-based, employment policies and strategies, and to engage in social dialogue with employers’ and workers’ organizations, as well as other relevant stakeholders. Recovery can include strategies for increasing local decent work opportunities as investment in local business ticks up, including to benefit women and youth workers. This can help to make migration a choice rather than necessity.

ILO promotes fair labor migration frameworks that respect the human rights, including labor rights, of all migrant workers. ILO has specific standards, guidance, and good practices to help countries meet these goals. Ratifying ILO conventions on migrant workers can ensure that countries build longer-term, more human-centred, and sustainable labor migration management systems. Such frameworks can ensure that fair recruitment practices are adopted by business and that laws extend equality of treatment to migrant workers, including on social protection.

A number of areas warrant new investment, such as data collection. Investing in designing modern data and labor market information systems, including on skills needs can benefit businesses, national workers, and migrant workers. Improved skills and jobs matching, for example, can lead to improved productivity, economic growth, and upward mobility for all workers. This is, after all, one of the premises of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and captured in the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration](#).

Stronger partnerships and cooperation between origin and destination countries, along migration corridors, are essential if migrant workers are to be fully protected, and this can contribute to healthier labor markets. In this regard, bilateral labor migration agreements can be important tools when based on international labor standards. ILO together with the International Organization for Migration are leading an effort under the UN Network on Migration to adopt the first UN system-wide guidance on bilateral labor migration agreements. ILO is also promoting models

for incorporating skills recognition<sup>3</sup> and social security portability<sup>4</sup> that can help migrant workers maintain health and human security while working abroad but also help them bring back their entitlements when returning home.

While the reintegration of returning migrant workers is a critical challenge, particularly for low- and middle-income countries, there is a growing understanding that returning migrants have important roles to play in social and economic recovery. They bring skills and talent that can help local economies rebuild. The key to unlocking this potential is the establishment of rights-based and orderly return and reintegration systems. Putting in place appropriate skills recognition mechanisms can ensure migrant workers can deploy the new skills gained, and entrepreneurship training can help them start their own businesses. These steps can help to increase productivity for national industries, while working in coordination with cities and local authorities can help to guarantee strategies are sustainable.

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## References

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