

MONITORING COVID-19 IMPACT ON MIGRANTS

SPECIAL EDITION

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



Women and their children in Diffa, Niger

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IMPACT ON MIGRANT WOMEN AND GIRLS

To mark the occasion of 8 March as International Women's Day, this special edition of the COVID-19 Impact on Migrants highlights some of the main challenges and difficulties migrant women and girls have faced amid the pandemic.

It also highlights the grounds for a more gendered approach in response during the health crisis to ensure that policies have women and girls in mind. This includes critical messaging about accessing safe services for sexual health issues and reporting sexual abuse and Gender Based Violence (GBV) and ensuring equitable and quality health care. Additionally, the development of support programs that include reliable childcare, career coaching and mentoring, and mental health support is critical to ensuring the well-being of women, their children and family. This paper is developed as part of IOM's monitoring of COVID-19 Impact on Migrants, jointly done by several units including the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), Migrant in Countries in Crisis (MICIC), Migrant Protection and Assistance (MPA), Resettlement and Movement Management (RMM), and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT).

Disclaimer: Please note that the events and stories presented come from a range of sources that include IOM Regional Offices and Country Missions, IOM sitreps, IOM files and trusted media outlets. It is dependent on what is available and what is reported. As such, this paper is not intended to account for all the challenges that may have disproportionately affected women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic; instead, it captures trends and main issues identified through the range of sources noted previously.

Rise in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Domestic Abuse

COVID-19 mitigation measures such as stay-at-home orders, lockdowns and curfews have been attributed to instances of increased violence and domestic abuse. Limited access to services and safe refuge for women and girls living in lockdown with their perpetrators has further exacerbated their existing vulnerabilities. Displaced women and girls were reported to face a greater risk of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic as they are confined with abusers or forced into “survival sex”ⁱ with limited access to support services.¹ According to experts at the University of Birmingham’s Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS), forced migrant survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, many of whom are women in Australia, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, experienced increased abuse during the pandemic. They also experienced other insecurities including a lack of access to shelters and organizations that provide advice and increased in anxiety and depression, without having adequate recourse to support systems.² Additionally, legal experts at Kingsley and Napley stated that migrant women with insecure immigration status in quarantine with their abusers face a unique form of oppression in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Perpetrators of domestic violence may exploit migrant women’s fear of forced return and detention by threatening to report them to authorities if they reach out for support. In other cases, migrant women from minority ethnic backgrounds may experience additional pressures to remain silent due to cultural and community concerns. They fear social exclusion if they leave their abusive partners while language barriers may prevent them from accessing support.³

Negative Coping Strategies

Migrant families who have been experiencing loss of employment and income have resorted to negative coping strategies in an effort to manage the economic challenges they face during the COVID-19 pandemic, with detrimental impact on women and girls. An increasing number of Syrian refugee families were reported to be marrying their underage daughters to Turkish men, according to Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT), a network of organizations that aims to end sexual exploitation of children. Many Syrian families have been unable to earn money or afford food for their children as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Relatedly, due to sudden loss of household livelihoods, it was also reported that more than two-thirds of Yemeni girls are being married by the age of 18.⁴ In some situations, like the migrant women who returned home to Ethiopia from Gulf countries, many have resorted to other forms of negative coping mechanisms, such as sex work to manage their basic needs during the pandemic; exposing them to additional risks and challenges including GBV and trafficking.⁵

Socio-economic Repercussions of COVID-19 Measures

Migrant women have been reported to be experiencing the brunt of the negative socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 related to employment. In Cameroon, most employers chose to keep men on the job as they felt that they would not be as “weighed down” by family obligations as women would be due to their role as primary caretakers. In other instances, such as in Sierra Leone, women often faced the difficult decision of either going to work as an essential service worker or staying home to look after their children who were not at school because of COVID-19 mitigation measures.⁶

i Survival sex is an exchanging of one’s body for basic subsistence needs, including clothing, food, and shelter.

Meanwhile, an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Carleton University in Canada conducted an in-depth study of 50 high-skilled foreign professionals between July and August 2020 on their employment experience during the pandemic to understand the gendered effects of the pandemic on social and gender-based inequalities. The study found that 41 out of 50 respondents were negatively impacted by the pandemic, including reverse career trajectory due to layoffs or decreased availability of short-term opportunities as well as the pressure to take on increasing family responsibilities which contributed to interruptions in their career trajectory. Moreover, some of the interviewed women had job offers revoked, were laid off or faced limited job opportunities as COVID-19 lockdown measures were imposed. The delays and interruptions have also made many of the women in the study ineligible for emergency government support. In general, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation in which decreased job stability and a move towards lower-skilled jobs are keeping migrant women in low-level occupations.⁷

Precarious work conditions

Amid the pandemic, migrant women in essential jobs are placed in precarious work conditions that may increase their risk of contracting COVID-19 and/or expose them to exploitation and abuse by their employers. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), migrants working as domestic workers, many of whom are women, have struggled to find employment during the COVID-19 pandemic as households are no longer willing to hire live-in carers and cleaners over fear of COVID-19 transmissions. Many, however, are not eligible for government benefits during the pandemic and have had to continue looking for work where they may be placed in situations of workplace abuse, heightened risk of exploitation, and limited protection from COVID-19.⁸ Additionally, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), female health workers were more likely than men to be infected, largely because approximately 70 per cent of healthcare workers are women, according to data from 38 countries and territories.⁹

Decrease in Access to Essential Healthcare Services

COVID-19 response measures have had a significant impact on the assistance and care available to women and girls as resources were re-allocated to support in the fight against COVID-19. Access to essential healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive care, has dropped during the pandemic. Particularly affected has been women and girls in disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including migrants and people with disabilities. In the Gambia, one of only two gynaecological facilities in the country was closed, converted, and repurposed to support COVID-19 efforts, making it more difficult for women and girls to access much needed services¹⁰ while in Ghana, cervical cancer screenings were suspended or postponed over safety concerns of nurses and midwives.¹¹ In Colombia, women seeking a voluntary termination of pregnancy faced challenges due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions. This include having to find their own means of transportation – an additional expense many are unable to afford, limited or no access to internet to understand the process to request the procedure, and lack of access to childcare. Migrant women in Colombia have been particularly affected as they do not have existing support networks and either had to postpone the procedure or turn to unsafe methods.¹²

Increase Risk of Exploitation by Traffickers and Smugglers

Traffickers and smugglers have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to exploit vulnerable groups. The United Nations Women stated that 72 per cent of trafficking victims detected globally are women and girls and 77 per cent of identified female survivors were trafficked for sexual exploitation.¹³ The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to push 47 million more women and girls into extreme poverty, and many will seek negative coping strategies that render them vulnerable to traffickers. The few resources available to prevent, rescue and rehabilitate women in precarious situations have been overwhelmed, leaving women's health and safety on the line.¹⁴ Moreover, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that migrants and people without jobs were among the groups most targeted by human traffickers due to the economic downturn brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing millions to the risk. The Agency found that traffickers integrate technology into every stage of their operations, from recruiting to exploiting victims. Children are particularly vulnerable on social media. The report also found that the share of children among trafficking victims tripled over the past 15 years, with girls mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation and boys for forced labour.¹⁵

The challenges directly associated with COVID-19 have disproportionately affected migrant women and girls in many ways. This special edition of COVID-19 Impact on Migrants highlights the main difficulties they faced, which may also intersect with their pre-existing vulnerabilities. The identified issues include a rise in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and domestic abuse, resorting to negative coping mechanisms to survive, experiencing the brunt of the socio-economic repercussions of COVID-19 measures, having to continue working in precarious conditions, decreased access to essential healthcare services and increased risk of exploitation by traffickers and smugglers. These challenges and risks, faced by women and girls, should inform the development and implementation of COVID-19 response and recovery measures.

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