COVID-19 AND WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS:
IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract. Actuality: worldwide, international migration has significantly increased in recent decades. Thus, the stock of migrants increased from 173.59 million in 2000 to 271.64 million people in 2019 (of which 48% were women). About 74% of migrant women are in the service industry, which includes domestic work and, in many cases, at high risk of losing it. During the Covid-19 pandemic, mobility and travel restrictions endangered the income of migrant women, especially domestic workers. Purpose: analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic impact on migrant women, employed in various sectors of activity. A number of good practices are presented in terms of the level of social assistance and protection for migrant workers, including domestic workers who have lost their jobs. Methodology: descriptive statistical analysis (graphs, tables, calculation of averages and dispersions) was used mainly for visualizing and synthesizing information from a data set. Results: an analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic effects on migrant workers in health and social care institutions, those working in households, but also on those with precarious and informal jobs, or with irregular migration status. The analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic impact on migrants has highlighted the fact that migrant workers, although occupying essential jobs in our societies, are often deprived of human rights and access to essential services.

Keywords: migration, migrant workers, level of training, gender differences.


Cuvinte cheie: migrație, lucrătoare migrante, nivel de pregătire, diferențe de gen.

JEL Classification: F22, F24, O15, R23.

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Introduction. The phenomenon of migration has always existed, materialized by the movements of people who sought a better life, livelihood or refuge or fled from natural disasters. The majority of people moving today are still domestic migrants, with international migrants reaching 279 million in 2019 and almost 281 million in 2020 (État de la migration dans le monde 2020, IOM). In terms of the share of international migrants in the world’s population, it has had an upward trend over the last 50 years, ranging from 2.3% in 1970 to 3.6% in 2020. However, in some regions the percentage is higher (in 2019): for example, in Europe it is 11%, while in North America it is 16%.

In 2019 and the first half of 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.

International statistics on the migration phenomenon show that, 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 country of origin. Thus, the number of female migrants increased faster than the number of male migrants between 1970 and 2020, in the most important, industrialized beneficiary countries, they accounted for 48% of the total migrant population in 2020.

One of the indicators of the feminization of migration is the share of migrant women in total migrants at regional level. Thus, in more developed areas, women represent more than half of international migrants, and in less developed areas of the world, less than half. These variations reflect prejudices about 'male' and 'female' work, but also differences in wages and living standards, government policies and employment practices.

The average value of remittances from migrant women workers is the same or even higher than that of migrant men, revealing that they are more likely to send home a larger share of their salaries on a regular basis (their remittances being more likely to be spent on health, education, family and community development).

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered the worst global crisis since the end of World War II, causing profound social, economic and political upheaval in all societies around the world. Migration was no exception. 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 its dynamics diminished, continued.

The World Organization for Migration has estimated that more than 160 million migrant workers were subject to mobility restrictions in the first half of 2020. Migrant workers have been exposed to increased health risks because 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. The effect of the pandemic can be studied taking into account: i)
social and religious constraints, ii) choice (availability of basic facilities such as fuel, drinking water, childcare, etc.) and iii) career (employment opportunities).

During the pandemic, hostile social norms, poor prospects for insertion into 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.

1. **Current trends 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 situations in their country of origin.

   Other factors that can make a significant contribution to women's decision to migrate include:

   i) increasing the demand for labor on the market of services in the destination countries,
   
   ii) family obligations,
   
   iii) high unemployment in the country of origin,
   
   iv) low wages in the country of origin,
   
   v) limited social and economic opportunities,
   
   vi) the desire to expand their horizons,
   
   vii) professional development for women educated in jobs in which to make better use of their skills and who are better paid.

   Female migration is also motivated by other non-economic factors, including community surveillance and patriarchal traditions that limit their opportunities and freedom, exit from an unwanted and / or abusive marriage, release from domestic violence and the desire for equal opportunities.

   In the way of their freedom of movement, women face more drastic financial decisions and restrictions than men.

   As migrant workers, women face more economic and non-economic barriers and are more likely to migrate as accompanying family members for reasons other than finding a job. They may experience gender discrimination in the labor market and the lack of social networks that make it difficult to reconcile work and family life in a foreign country. All of these are possible factors that reduce the representation of women among migrant workers.

   Women's labor migration tends to be highly concentrated in occupations that are traditionally associated with gender-specific roles. One such example is domestic and care work, including nursing, caring for the elderly and children, cleaning and other related household activities, which is usually undervalued and undercompensated.
In 2019, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimated 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, increasing by 5 million migrant workers (3.0%) compared to the 2017 estimate and by 19 million (12.7%) compared to the 2013 estimate.

In the total number of migrant workers, women represent 41.5% and men 58.5%. The lower share of migrant women workers can be explained either by their lower representation among international migrants (47.9%) or by their relatively low labor market participation rate compared to that of men (59.8% compared to 77.5%).

The vast majority of international migrant workers are adults, aged 25-64 (Fig. 1), their number being estimated at 146.2 million in 2019 (of which 41.52% were women), and young migrant workers (aged 15 to 24) to 16.8 million.

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

**Source:** elaborated by the author based on statistics from Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ONU

The analysis of the distribution of male and female migrant workers by categories of economic activity highlights substantial differences, with a higher concentration of women in the service sector than that of men (Fig. 2). In 2019, 79.9% of migrant working women were in services, 14.2% were in industry and 5.9% in agriculture. A greater representation of migrant women workers in the service sector can be, to some extent, explained by the growing demand for work in home care, in domestic activities, in the field of health.
These subsectors, predominantly involving a female workforce, tend to rely heavily on migrant working women.

**Figura 2. Global distribution of international migrant workers by category of economic activity, 2019, (%)**

*Source:* elaborated by the author based on statistics from Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ONU

In 2019, of the 70.1 million migrant workers, 69.3% (48.5 million) were in high-income countries, another 13.5 million (19.3%) were in upper-middle income countries, the rest being in lower-middle income countries (7.9%) and low-income countries (3.5%).

It should also be noted that the overall share of women among migrant workers varies significantly from one region of the world to another. 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 (*Fig. 3*).
Large regions of the world have different shares of the global stock of immigrants and female emigrants. For example, in 2019, Europe hosted 31.029% of the global stock of migrant women, whereas it was the origin of 55% of all migrant women (of whom 68.7% were living within Europe). Asia and North America hosted 25.16% and 22.31% of the total female migration stock, respectively, while they were the origin of 82% and 2.9% of all women emigrants. The majority of foreign births in Africa (58.6%), Asia (54.4%), Europe (68.7%) and Oceania (49.2%) remained in the same region (Table 1).

Although female migrant workers’ wages are usually lower, they send home more of their earnings more frequently than male migrant workers. Remittances from female 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 working women also tend to take greater responsibility for remittances from extended family members.
### Table 1. International female migrant stock (millions) by major area of origin and destination, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Latin America and the Caribbean</th>
<th>Northern America</th>
<th>Oceania</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Retention by destination (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Africa</strong></td>
<td>10.08 0</td>
<td>0.456</td>
<td>0.450</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>11.050</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asia</strong></td>
<td>1.560</td>
<td>26.837</td>
<td>3.861</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>32.741</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
<td>3.702</td>
<td>10.776</td>
<td>22.232</td>
<td>2.906</td>
<td>0.571</td>
<td>0.199</td>
<td>40.385</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Latin America and the Caribbean</strong></td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.691</td>
<td>4.171</td>
<td>0.616</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>5.676</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern America</strong></td>
<td>1.566</td>
<td>9.138</td>
<td>3.676</td>
<td>13.530</td>
<td>0.840</td>
<td>0.280</td>
<td>29.029</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oceania</strong></td>
<td>0.277</td>
<td>1.961</td>
<td>1.438</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>0.525</td>
<td>4.424</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17.201</td>
<td>49.345</td>
<td>32.347</td>
<td>20.939</td>
<td>2.408</td>
<td>1.066</td>
<td>123.305</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retention by origin (%)</strong></td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: elaborated by the author based on statistics from Department of Economic and Social Affairs*

2. **The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrant working women.** The Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly and dramatically changed societies and labor markets. Severe constraints on mobility through border and business closures, quarantines and traffic restrictions have negatively affected the activities of migrant workers.

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

   In 2020, 8.8% of global working hours were lost compared to the fourth quarter of 2019, which is equivalent to the loss of 255 million full-time jobs (48 hours/week). Losses in working hours in 2020 were about four times higher than during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 (ILO, 2021).
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 institutions.

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 house workers in the world (out of the 67 million house 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 employed. This makes them look for extra jobs in other care units. But, these activities have become the epicenters of Covid-19, because working conditions and not infrequently the lack of personal protective equipment, have exacerbated the spread of the virus.

Many migrant women working in care facilities and private homes do not have social and labor protection, have little or no access to health care services and cannot obtain unemployment or sickness benefits if they lose their jobs. 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 essential sectors. (World Bank, 2020).

The service sectors are difficult to transpose into a telework mode, which means that the periodic closure of these sectors has resulted in a considerable proportion of women being laid off. Also, the measures of blocking and social distancing meant that the activity of bars, restaurants, tourism and other sectors dominated by migrant women were completely suspended. The loss of jobs due to the health crisis leads to high levels of poverty and social exclusion in the years following the pandemic.

In addition, many migrant women 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 immigrants and / or deportation if they were requested to present documents while traveling to work.

Due to the pandemic, migrant women employed in health facilities, social assistance 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 generated additional responsibilities regarding care of children and of the elderly at home.

The pandemic and traffic restrictions, the loss of jobs and, implicitly, of incomes have led to economic pressures on migrants' households and to a "crowded" life in their homes. All this has generated a high level of domestic violence, with migrant women being particularly vulnerable in these situations (especially due to language and information barriers).

The Covid-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on the ability of migrant women to send remittances to their country of origin. The World Bank’s (April 2020) analysis of the effects of the health crisis on global remittances indicates a decline of almost 20%, from $ 548 billion in 2019 to $ 445 billion in 2020. Despite the global Covid-19 pandemic, however, remittance flows remained strong in 2020, falling less than previously forecasted. Officially recorded remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries reached $ 539.5 billion in 2020, just 1.62% below the 2019 total of $ 548 billion. Given the economic recession caused by the pandemic, migrant women have sent fewer remittances, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of households that depend on this income.

The pandemic has highlighted the fact that although migrant workers, especially women, perform essential jobs in society, the likelihood of these workers being deprived of human rights and not having access to essential services is quite high. Migrant workers are often excluded from accessing measures to reduce the effects of Covid-19 implemented by the countries in which they operate, including financial support packages, wage subsidies, income support and social protection. There are still many barriers for migrant workers, which stem from immigration and employment legislation, which puts them outside the scope of medical provisions.

For migrant workers, including domestic workers who have lost their jobs, states should provide the same level of assistance and social protection (unemployment benefits, sick leave, income support and wage subsidies) as they provide to their citizens.

During the pandemic, some states adopted a series of social assistance and protection measures 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 temporary residence rights for them, and France has temporarily extended their residence permits.

Spain has extended unemployment insurance to house workers.

Unemployment benefits in the event of a pandemic in Ireland applied regardless of the status of migrants: "employees or self-employed workers", people who have lost their jobs or been made redundant due to Covid-19. Also,
during the pandemic, testing was available to all migrants, regardless of their status.


Another example of good practice is Colombia, which has allowed its population of Venezuelan migrants to access medical care during the health crisis.

The health and economic crisis has 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 with small amounts of money. Difficulties in organizing repatriations, and in particular disagreements over which it 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.** Over time, the number of migrant women has increased, reaching in 2019 almost half of the 169 million people working outside their countries of birth, which has led to the feminization of migration.

Throughout the migration process, migrant workers face gender vulnerabilities and risks that affect their ability to work and live in their destination countries, but also their integration upon return to their country of origin.

Among migrant working women there are many with a high level of training and qualifications, but the vast majority are overrepresented 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 skilled / unskilled and largely informal and unprotected. Stereotypes and stigma of migrant workers aggravate their devaluation, leaving them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, from an economic, physical and structural point of view.

Covid-19 has increased labor market uncertainty for both migrant and native women. The pandemic not only affects current conditions in the women's labor market, but could also have long-term economic and social consequences. Relatively lower labor market participation, career breaks due to care responsibilities and lower earnings, place migrant women in a weaker and riskier position than men.
The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the negative economic and social consequences for women’s lives. In this sense, one of the gender issues highlighted by the pandemic is that of the formal and informal care sectors and the stereotypical role of women in the front line (they faced a higher risk of exposure to contagion, but without decision-making power).

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.

REFERENCES


