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Migrant Women

Two women walk with their children in a refugee camp in Eidomeni, Greece, in March 2016.

Trapped in the Vicious Circle of Harassment and Inequality

by Cláudia Santos

Migrants customarily embark on perilous journeys and endure arduous circumstances to protect themselves from immediate and often unavoidable harm in a determined effort to improve their lives. Since 1960 the number of international migrants has more than tripled. Today there are 272 million migrants worldwide, of which 48% are women.¹ According to the

International Labour Organisation, female migrants represent a large proportion of the total number of migrant workers globally and outnumber the nonmigrant women in labor participation. Their jobs are mostly concentrated in high- and middle-income countries. However, many remain stuck in low-paying jobs, often without employment rights or access to even minimum social and health protection.

Across the globe, these social injustices have been amplified by the present pandemic with grave consequences to the well-being of migrant women and girls, as well as other minority groups. Contrary to a commonly held belief that they are a burden to any receiving society, for the most part they help drive economic growth and add socio-cultural value to host societies.² Overcoming their harsh conditions should therefore be everyone's priority,

yet their plight remains unexplored and underreported.

Migrant women have remained in the shadows yet are hostages within a global economic system that perpetuates inequality. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly goals 5 and 8, offer an opportunity to tackle many injustices related to labour rights and gender disparities. However, they may be redundant and hence sadly ineffective on their own, if not accompanied by transformation in migration policy, regulations that foster integration, a fresh assessment of civil rights, and constant vigilance by an active civil society. The implications of strengthening the role of the SDGs for the improved well-being of migrant women are among the features of this commentary.

Violent Trajectories

Over the last four decades, women have progressively become independent

migrants, despite limited opportunities to migrate legally. Their struggle to obtain legal documentation remains a major concern. Their difficulties stretch well beyond paperwork, however. These begin with the strenuous decision to leave their home and families behind, followed by an often unsafe and risky journey until a safe border is reached. Once at the border, those seeking legal entry have their dignity set aside as they are forced to become detainees while awaiting a verdict on their immigration status. Detention facilities for their health and safety are deeply unsatisfactory, even in countries that are signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.³ The living conditions in these confined spaces, as well as the health status and care needs of migrants, are usually underdocumented and often unknown. But testimonies from across the world reveal a tragic litany of poor health and lack of adequate care in many of these places.⁴ Informal camps,

frequently many migrants' long-term homes with miserable living conditions, easily become prisons for those struggling to successfully cross borders. Migrant women are often both racially discriminated against and vulnerable victims of gender-based violence, trapped in the hands of oppressive men, including those controlling border crossings. Their migrant opportunities, both to find work and to return to their families, place them in double jeopardy of destitution and harassment.⁵

Crossing a border and attaining immigration status is only a first step into a world of unequal opportunities. Even when the right to stay is obtained, restrictions to accessing appropriate health care multiply. Migrant women and girls face more difficulties compared to men.⁶ In many places they become victims of gender-based violence with denied or restrained access to social protection, due to reasons that go well beyond their legal status. For example, they may have



Residents of a refugee camp in Suruc, Turkey, photographed in April 2015.



The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted health services across the globe, and migrants and refugees are often last in the national public health queues.

special needs during pregnancy or when caring for children but be discriminated against or misinformed over the availability of healthcare services.⁷ According to the World Health Organization, little attention is paid to the maternal and newborn health of migrant women and their children compared to the conditions available to nonmigrants.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted health services all over the globe, so migrants and refugees are often last in the national public health queues.⁹

Multiplying Disproportionate Impacts

Many migrants fleeing poor living conditions at home arrive at destination countries to be confronted with difficulties when integrating with new social systems. They are more likely to experience destitution and have their rights denied in comparison to nonmigrants.

Heavily represented in the domestic and care sectors, migrant women face inadequate working conditions or undignified social protection. Of the 11.7 million migrant domestic care support workers globally, 73.4 percent are women.¹⁰ They are concentrated in Southeast Asia and the Pacific; Northern, Southern, and Western Europe; and the Arab states. However, many are deemed irregular employees or under illegal residency status, and so are excluded from statistics. Primarily working in private households¹¹, they are responsible for securing the health of others despite the recurrent unequal and unjust treatment they receive for their own health care. They often face cultures that create unfair traditional gender roles in both their home and host countries, while their onerous duties are all too readily deemed inferior or of little social value. Yet because of demand for their services, they continue to respond to the increasing openings for domestic and care work, particularly in

prosperous countries with aging populations. Despite the demand, migrants are affected by major disparities in payment for their work. Even in high-income countries, they receive 13% less in compensation compared to nationals, both men and women. Due to gender discrimination, migrant women earn less than migrant men.¹²

When the COVID-19 pandemic knocked on all our doors, the deep-rooted structural inequalities posed profound implications for all migrants, but particularly for women, girls, and other minority groups. The economic downturn has created uneven impacts on the employment and pay rates of those with “low-skilled,” low-paying jobs.¹³ Consequently, many are forced to return home, while others remain stuck, often in cruel conditions, due to restrictions on global travel.¹⁴ For a group of 100 Ugandan women working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, some of whom were victims of human trafficking, the

pandemic translated into further exploitation, with special assistance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) becoming their only way out.¹⁵

Deprived of social protection and public health or living in countries where such safety is effectively absent, many migrant women are pushed to work longer hours with little or no financial compensation.¹⁶ During the pandemic, this precarity has become even more problematic since those in domestic and care work remain unprotected and hence more exposed to the virus due to the close contact nature of their jobs. In some cases, they lose their employment due to fears of possible virus transmission within households.¹⁷

Damaged by long-standing disparities but determined to fight their invisibility, many migrant women have since raised their voices to expose their vulnerabilities. In doing so, they also make known

their strengths for overcoming oppressive circumstances.¹⁸ When external assistance is not available, many women become self-carers as they look for alternative activities to provide an income for them and their families. Through collaboration, sharing, and caring, community bonds are being strengthened; hence, what look like hopeless circumstances became endurable.¹⁹ Aside from fighting their own battles, their indispensable contribution in lifting societies up from the impacts of a global pandemic received some late but deserved recognition.²⁰

Necessary but Not Sufficient

The incommensurate burden of the pandemic on migrants and migrant women has highlighted the need for migration policies that promote positive outcomes and enhance their rights. Their systematic social exclusion is not only

unjust but inhuman. There are, nevertheless, bright spots. For one, as the pandemic raged on, Portugal took benevolent action to ensure access to the national health care system, social benefits, and labor markets, offering temporary residence to all migrants and asylum seekers with pending residency applications.²¹ These provisional measures lessen the negative health effects of the ever-present virus, but they hardly ensure full integration, particularly when such measures are only temporary. Among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, only France, Belgium, and Portugal provided full access to health care during the pandemic. Most countries also closed migration asylum offices and consular services, thus putting many lives on hold.²² Migrants' risk of falling back into unsafe and risky living environments is imminent and pervasive, especially considering the long-lasting effects of the



Women and children at a refugee camp in Chios, Greece, wait in line for a meal served by international and local volunteers in March 2016.



Refugee camps frequently become long-term homes for migrant women and their children.

pandemic in the socioeconomic fabric of societies. If we are to move forward and provide fair protection to groups at risk, meager and temporary measures no longer suffice.

First, we should fight common misconceptions of migrants as a cost and a threat to the security of affluent countries. In a context of rising populism, these preconceptions have become more prevalent. Magnifying these misconceptions, certain politicians have also taken advantage of the pandemic to propagate the idea that migration could exacerbate the spread of the virus,²³ an incongruity given that affluent countries opened exceptions to facilitate the movement of citizens for business purposes.²⁴

Second, societies should adopt strategies to address gender inequality and attend sensitively to the needs of all women who migrate. As a recent IOM report puts it: “Pandemics and their

fallout are not gender-neutral, because societies and labour markets are not gender-neutral.”²⁵ Reviewing and amending policies that enhance the gender divide should be part of any post-COVID-19 recovery strategy. These should consider labor and human rights, access to adequate health care, and social protection schemes, regardless of women’s immigration status. Such gaps and concerns are well documented but continue to wait for firm political action. Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should continue to foster women’s empowerment and eliminate prejudice, violence, and the disparities experienced by migrant women and girls.

Third, societies should offer proper health protection to all immigrants. The COVID-19 vaccine distribution among vulnerable communities can be indicative of any inclusion plan underway. Surely, the vaccination rollout will be a test to the

political engagement toward addressing local and global inequality. Several recommendations have been drawn to equitably engage all migrants in vaccination arrangements.²⁶ In practice, and according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), migrants are being left out of vaccination campaigns, although they may be at higher risk of exposure and infection than other groups.²⁷ The UK government has announced that all migrants will be eligible for vaccination regardless of their legal status, but undocumented migrants fear public authorities and the tragic outcomes of putting themselves forward.²⁸ In the United States, Black and Hispanic communities are experiencing lower vaccination rates in comparison to White people.²⁹ International organizations are issuing criticisms over accessibility and distribution for safeguarding migrants and refugees globally. Presenting a pessimistic analysis, a 2021 Red Cross/

Red Crescent Global Migration Lab report found that even in cases where migrants were included in COVID-19 policies, their access to basic services is often blocked, regardless of the migrants' legal status.³⁰ In addition, if certain governments and powerful individuals continue to fiercely protect vaccine intellectual property rights on behalf of their own profitable pharmaceutical industries, it will be difficult to ensure fair access to everyone globally.³¹ The world, particularly the less affluent countries, can then expect to be the long-term hostages of the "Vaccine Apartheid."³²

Moving Forward Together

Many bear silent witness to all of this in a context of pervasive feelings of being powerless to effectively respond to and recover from disasters of a variety of kinds, wondering whether any promising political alternatives exist. New public health policies must be inclusive and considerate of the differences that shape our world. While global crises increase inequalities, they may also offer opportunities for understanding of interconnections; the deep, previously ignored global costs of inequality; and the extent to which these also harm the rich. This offers promising ground for improving the well-being of marginalized groups and promoting multicultural integration. States should move away from the neoliberal economization of individuals and communities as "entrepreneurial subjects" whose mere existence is to be economically, financially, morally, and emotionally optimized.³³ If equitable citizenship attribution continues to be undermined by the market logic of self-interest, then any subsequent (human) rights would be difficult to attain. If on the one hand we applaud migrant workers for their essential services, while on the other we discriminate and condemn them for the global pandemic, we apparently praise, or blame, according to market value.³⁴

For female migrants, who face stronger prejudicial and immoral treatment, such misconceptions only lead to poorer integration outcomes in the labor

markets and in host societies overall. Adequate support systems, fair migration mechanisms, and policies that are gender and culture sensitive have repeatedly figured in many expert calls for governments and other stakeholders to effectively take action. Under the auspices of the Council of Europe, the Istanbul Convention has set crucial obligations toward the protection of women against violence regardless of their status. However, the United Kingdom, which signed the convention in 2012, has been accused of not complying with it, thus failing to protect migrant women and girls.³⁵ One way of overcoming political inaction may be to become less reliant on our governments. In Germany, civil society actors have demonstrated that it is possible to address some of the issues affecting migrant women by investing and supporting them for a better integration in the labor market.³⁶ On the other hand, government support is important, as the public can only shoulder so much, risking mobilization fatigue.³⁷

Becoming mindful of the most vulnerable and of the reasons behind migrants' vulnerabilities demands not only a great deal of compassion, it also requires deep changes that are truly respectful of them. Reforms such as those planned for the United Kingdom's asylum system, which impedes migrants who take "illegal routes" from having the same rights as those pursuing legal ones, are widely condemned for being cold-blooded and nowhere near the needed delivery of humanitarianism.³⁸ This highlights the urgent need for transformation in institutions and legal systems to work together with migrants on a supportive basis. A civil society actively engaged in the principles embedded in the 2030 agenda is crucial to exert political pressure and trigger the necessary change to achieve more inclusive and just societies.³⁹ Capturing this unprecedented crisis to build a collective future where nation states are governed by empathy and solidarity is the optimal route toward addressing inequality and for achieving the justice we all deserve.

Tragically, in all of this convoluted tangle of rights, obligations, and

humanitarian respect for desperate peoples, the role of the SDGs is ambivalent. By any standards a number of these goals are being violated: poverty (1); well-being (2); gender equality (5); and reduced inequalities (10). In almost all of the debate the connections to these SDGs is rarely, if ever, mentioned or given credence in either political or legal analysis. As the decade leading to the formal global adoption of these SDGs crosses its second mid-year, surely it is time for the centrality of these goals to be given greater attention in the meandering migration misery.

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NOTES

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