

A Feminist Participatory
Action Research project
on 'Safe and Fair'
Migration in Asia



Reclaiming Migrant Women's Narratives



AATW

Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

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'Safe and Fair' Migration in Asia

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About this Feminist Participatory Action Research project

In 2018-2019, the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS), in collaboration with eleven organisations across nine countries in Asia, carried out a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) on “Safe and Fair Migration: A feminist perspective on women’s rights to mobility and work”.

In our study, FPAR is used as a framework and approach to capture migrant women’s complex realities of and perspectives on labour and migration. What distinguishes FPAR from other forms of research is that it is deliberately women-centred and participant-driven; the knowledge comes from the community and is owned by them and based on their lived experiences; the research participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organise advocacy actions. This research project is an attempt to deconstruct dominant understandings of safe migration and fair migration and reshape the concepts from a feminist perspective. We believe our approach of building knowledge from the ground up and creating an evidence base will add value in addressing the structural causes of power disparities that affect women’s migration and livelihoods.

Our research community stretches across South, Southeast, and West Asia offering views from both countries of origin and destination, as well as adding the perspective of internal migration from rural to urban areas. Three distinct sectors of work are covered in this study: the domestic work sector, the garment sector, and the entertainment sector. The lead research groups who facilitated the discussions with women migrants were: Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women’s Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), and an independent researcher based in Jordan.

“Two people will shout as much as they can. But ten people are louder than two.”

Borrowing from one of our FPAR research participants’ words, we hope each piece of our collective study will help amplify women migrant workers’ voice to bring about structural changes for a safe and fair migration that works for women.

GAATW-IS gratefully acknowledges the support of Women’s Fund Asia in conducting this research project. We would also like to thank Praveena Kodoth (Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram) for her insight and the time she spent in contributing to this study. The country research briefs are available on the GAATW website (www.gaatw.org).

FOREWORD

In the past several decades neoliberal globalisation, increasing inequality between and within countries, conflict, climate change and environmental degradation have prompted unprecedented levels of migration. We are seeing a major trend towards increasing internal migration and urbanisation within countries – by 2050, the global population living in urban areas is expected to reach 66 per cent. Meanwhile there are around 250 million international migrants worldwide, of whom half are women. In some destination countries, demographic, labour market and economic changes (the privatisation of public services, aging societies, women’s increasing participation in the workforce) have created a demand for care and service sector work, with an expectation that this demand will be filled by low-wage female workers, in the domestic, care, manufacturing and entertainment sectors. In origin countries, climate change, economic restructuring and industrialisation have led to the loss of traditional livelihoods, agricultural decline, environmental degradation, wage stagnation and a growth in precarious work – resulting in gross inequalities, and creating push factors for women to seek alternative income generating activities, including through migrating for work.

While these structural changes play a huge role in shaping “push and pull factors” for migration, it needs to be acknowledged that women are not merely passive agents in their migration, but that for many, migration is a way of asserting agency and finding freedom from patriarchal societal norms. Many women choose to migrate in order to see the world and gain new experiences, find economic opportunities, to be able to support families and to exercise autonomy and social independence. Despite the many risks and the challenges in accessing information about migration processes and opportunities, women continue to migrate all over the world, including from marginalised communities and rural villages. However, there is a lack of recognition of migration as a right, and of women workers as independent economic actors. States’ labour migration policies are broadly missing a human rights and gender-transformative approach to migration and work.

Activists on the left have long critiqued the exploitative nature of some cross-border labour migration schemes that employ workers on poverty wages in substandard conditions, while outsourcing the costs of social reproduction to countries of origin. In the past 20 years, feminists, including GAATW, have tried to bring attention to the particular discrimination and risks created for women migrants by laws and policies governing, and failing to govern, labour migration. Although such initiatives have tried to stress women’s perspectives, the conversation about migration has sometimes backfired and produced unintended consequences. Governments of origin and destination countries have in some instances responded not by making migration protective of human rights, but by curbing it through restrictions on women’s mobility on the basis of age, marital status, pregnancy and maternal status, and category of work, especially for low-wage workers, and increasing border controls. Much of this is done with the supposed aim of ‘protecting’ women from trafficking and exploitation; however, what these protectionist restrictions have done is open up a market for clandestine and debt-financed migration, creating

or exacerbating the very vulnerability, violence, and exploitation they were intended to prevent. While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have tried to bring issues of human rights to the table, they have, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the repressive government agendas. Some anti-trafficking NGOs perpetuate narratives and images of migrant women as victims, and infantilising women by portraying them as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. As a feminist alliance, GAATW sees its role as supporting the empowerment of migrant women to move and work safely and with dignity. This feminist participatory action research project is our collective effort to deconstruct and reshape a narrative of labour migration that is safe and fair for women workers, especially those in the most marginalised segments of society. We hope that this study serves as evidence to fight for the rights of migrant workers and amplify women's voices in the local, regional, and international migration agenda.



Photo credit: GAATW-IS

INTRODUCTION

Conceptualising safe migration and fair migration

The term “safe migration” has gained currency in the past decade as a way to counter the traditional approach to curb trafficking in persons. This approach takes the view that rather than deterring people from migrating and strengthening border controls, it is better to provide would-be migrants with knowledge and information prior to migration so that they can make informed choices. The term “fair migration” was first introduced by ILO in 2014. It seeks to highlight decent work and fair recruitment as core components in rights-protective migration, recognising that migrants too are entitled to labour rights. These rights include the right to quality jobs, safe working conditions, dignity and equality in work, living wage, to organise and bargain collectively, and limits on hours of work, among others.

From inter-governmental bodies like UN Women, ILO and IOM, to governments, civil society and private sectors alike, numerous entities are using “safe migration” and “fair migration” for their initiatives and as an approach. However, the ambiguous definition (or lack of any clear definition) also created a notion that irregular/undocumented migration is an antonym of “safe migration”.

Some measures aimed at addressing migration at international borders, including irregular and undocumented migration, have adversely affected migrants’ human rights. For instance, states are creating an often artificial dichotomy between regular migration as safe and economically productive, and irregular migration as inherently unsafe and not economically or socially productive. In the intergovernmental policy space, this dynamic is reflected in the Global Compact on “Safe, Orderly and Regular” Migration. Within this process, some states seek to promote the idea that regular migration is always safe and orderly, and irregular migration is inherently unsafe, and disorderly. A worrying corollary to this binary is the extension to viewing regular migrants as “good and deserving of rights”, and irregular migrants as “bad”.

However, the dichotomy on which this view is based is clearly false: regular channels of migration do not always constitute safety and security to migrants and may still create conditions for forced labour or trafficking of migrant workers, especially for women migrant workers in sectors that are not covered by labour laws. For instance, across West Asia, and a number of other countries, migrant workers are governed by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, whereby a worker’s legal status is tied to her employer. This regular and legal system gives the employer total power and authority over the status of migrant workers, and opens up doors for rampant exploitation and abuse. Meanwhile, irregular migration, and irregular status often provide a more rights-enhancing life for migrants, as well as critical routes to safety for refugees.

Moreover, safe migration programmes in many cases rest on the assumption that information will make migrants safe and protected. The rationale behind this is that potential migrants do not have information about their rights and the migration process and therefore fall into dangerous situations. This is not always the case, however. There are limitations for migrant workers to act based on the information they may have due to structural barriers such as class, gender, nationality, language, lack of resources and bargaining power, among others. Even if there are

regular avenues available, aspiring migrants who are often from the most marginalised segments of society and are under extreme economic pressure, may have no option other than to knowingly take on the risk of irregular migration and work. Safe migration initiatives that depend on a migrant furnishing herself with and acting on information shift the responsibility on the migrant – deflecting from State responsibility to provide access to decent work, and to make migration safe. States must do better than paternalistic measures to “protect” citizens from harm by placing restrictive policies such as age restriction for women domestic workers to migrate, or “awareness raising” measures, which do nothing to redress asymmetrical power relationships between workers and employers.

Rationale for the study

While the terms of safe migration and fair migration provide a backdrop, our research inquiry sought to go beyond these definitions and ask critical questions about the conditions needed for women to live full and sustainable lives in dignity and equality. Although concepts of safe migration and fair migration have been gaining salience in the international arena, these concepts are not answers to the complex challenges migrants face. Moreover, in order to make safety and fairness a reality in the context of a late capitalist economy on the precipice of ecological collapse, as well as swift and radical changes to the world of work, both approaches need to situate women’s experiences beyond migration, anti-trafficking or anti-slavery agendas and governance mechanisms and see them in the context of a transformative agenda for structural change that can address working conditions in the labour market as a whole and the root causes of precarious migration and work.

It is also important to consider that migrants are far from a homogenous group or experience migration in the same way. For migrants, multiple hardships and intersecting forms of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, class and caste, among others, are compounded by gender-based discrimination. As most women migrants are employed in low-paid (so called “low-skilled”) and precarious jobs, (for example, in the highly feminised care sector, rarely covered by labour laws and mostly lacking protection) the barriers that women migrant workers face in achieving fair migration and decent work are all the higher. Other factors such as limited access to information, support networks, complaint and grievance mechanisms and the biased, patriarchal justice system also drastically impact migrant women’s enjoyment of decent work.

Since its foundation, GAATW has placed high value on knowledge building from the ground up and on legitimising experiential knowledge of women who are often pushed to the margins of society. We have been scrutinising well-intentioned anti-trafficking initiatives that lack a human rights approach and seeking to build recognition of the struggles of women in all their diversity, and under unequal power relations and dynamics of globalised capitalism. We have also been challenging disempowering victimhood and vulnerability narratives placed on women while highlighting the power and ability of women to speak for themselves, to advocate for their rights and assert autonomy over their lives. With a rights-based and gender lens, our thematic focus has been to highlight and reiterate the interconnected nature of unsafe migration with unfair

labour conditions. Therefore, this study on safe and fair migration from a feminist perspective should be seen as a continuation of our efforts to stay grounded in feminist principles, which address the structural causes of power inequalities and question the mainstream discourses on labour and migration while centring women’s lived experience and asserting their right to safe mobility and decent work.

Research objectives

The overarching objectives of the research include:

1. To **examine** and **interrogate** the terms “safe migration” and “fair migration” through the lived experiences of women migrant workers
2. To **mobilise** collective analysis and action in collaboration with women migrant workers on the issues of safe migration and fair migration and their broader socio-economic and political contexts, including factors which affect women migrants’ mobility and complex decision-making in the migration process
3. To **create** an evidence base to promote a feminist agenda for safe and fair migration on the national, regional and international level that works for women.

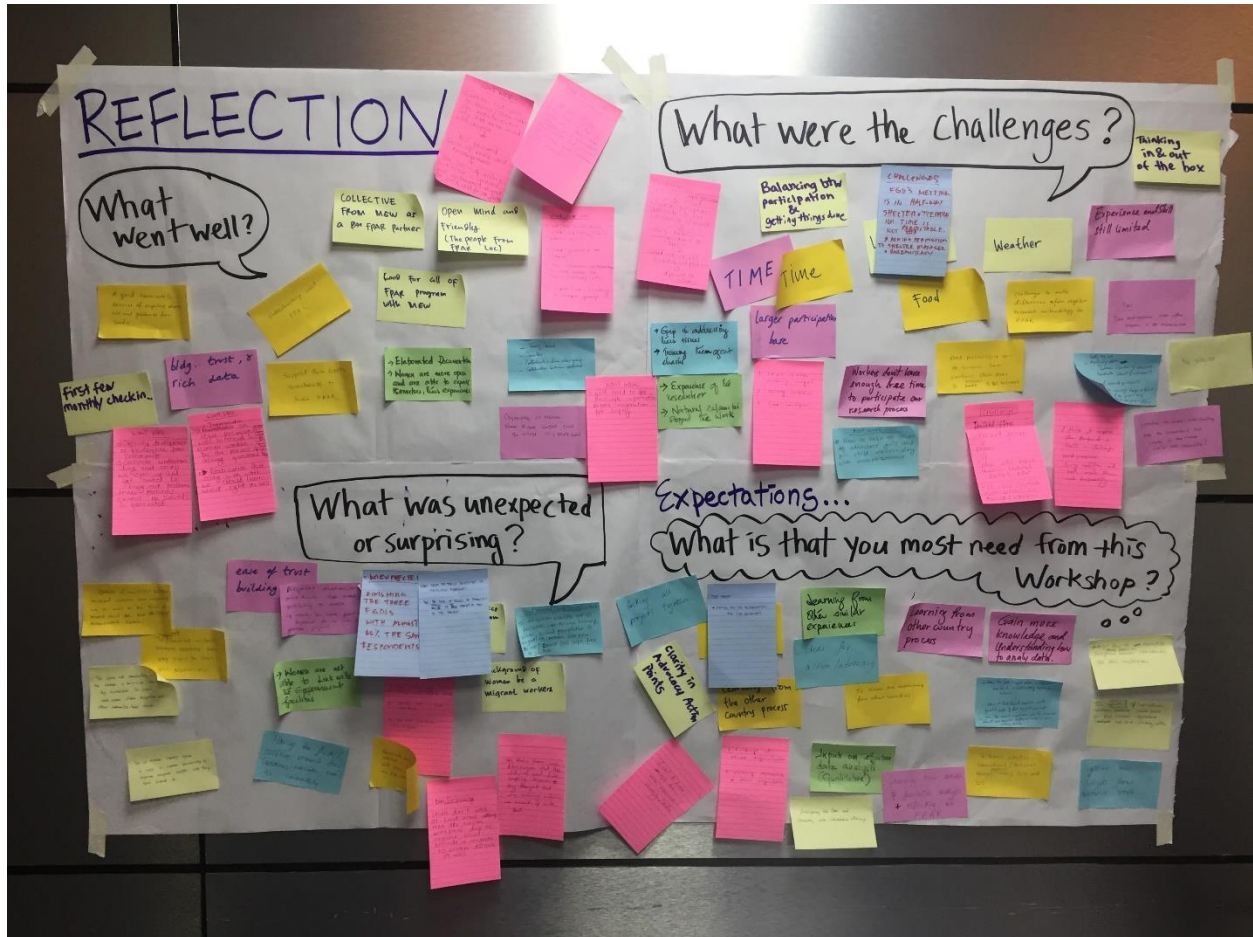


Feminist Participatory Action Research

This research project mainly employed qualitative methods and used Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) as the core framework and approach. FPAR combines principles of feminist research with those of participatory action research. What distinguishes FPAR is that it deliberately gives a voice to women, the knowledge is produced by the women and owned by them, and is based on their lived experiences, the research participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organise advocacy actions. We used FPAR as a tool

to capture women’s experiences of migration and labour while aiming to shift unequal power relations and challenge structural injustices that are embedded in women migrant workers’ daily struggles.

While our application of FPAR varied across different context and partners, below are some of the guiding FPAR principles that were followed:



Process and timeline of the research

Following FPAR principles, we tried to make the research process as participatory, democratic, and inclusive as possible. A preliminary discussion with groups and individuals working on women’s rights and migrant rights with GAATW’s members, partners and like-minded organisations took place in August 2017 where we were able to refine collectively the research theme to safe and fair migration.

As we called for expressions of interest among the participants in our first discussion, we also made a careful choice to reach out to partners with a few criteria in mind: grassroots organisations which are women-led or women-focused or at least work very closely with women

migrant workers, that represent different work sectors in which women predominantly work, and that apply a human rights based approach in their work.

After forming our research group with ten partner organisations and one independent researcher, we convened an FPAR methodology workshop with conceptual clarity sessions on safe migration and fair migration in **February 2018**. While allowing each group to contextualise the research topic and questions according to their own constituencies and focus of work, we also decided on our main research questions during this first convening.

Most of the data collection took place between **March and September 2018**. During this period, our partners reached out to women migrant workers to introduce the research project and initiate discussions with the research participants.

In **October 2018**, partners gathered again to share their findings and preliminary analysis and discuss possible advocacy initiatives that research participants could act upon to demand change based on their research findings and discussions.

Between **November 2018 and April 2019**, researchers finalised their data collection and met with women migrants to verify the findings, collectively analyse the data and discuss further actions. Preparing and writing the reports was also carried out during this period while organising advocacy initiatives, which are described in more detail below.

Research participants

Our research community is located across South, Southeast, and West Asia offering views from both countries of origin and destination, as well as adding the perspective of internal migration from rural to urban areas. Three distinct sectors of work are covered in this study including domestic work, garment, and entertainment. The lead researcher groups who facilitated discussions with women migrants were: Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), and an independent researcher based in Jordan.

Fieldwork

Most of the fieldwork used qualitative methodology including focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, participant observation through community immersion, and reflective discussions. Prior informed consent was provided by the research participants at the beginning of the research and for some partners, before every meeting that took place throughout the research period.

Challenges and limitations

While we believe the FPAR framework is a journey and did our best to keep the method as participatory, inclusive and reflective as possible throughout the process, we faced a number of

challenges in fully applying FPAR principles at every stage. Some practical challenges included the short time span to internalise feminist values and approaches for some communities and organisations, a tendency to depend on the lead researchers, which resulted in weakening of community ownership, and a struggle to write reports in English, which was not our partners' first language.

As most of the women migrant workers we worked with had limited mobility and time to spend outside their workplace, it was hard to gather and follow up with them. At times, our lead researchers had to make do with limited interactions with the migrant women. In terms of thematic issues, we encouraged participating NGOs and researchers to choose research focus area in respect of their own context and autonomy. However, the diversity of contexts and sectors made it difficult to consolidate the findings and draw key messages.



Photo credit: Arthur Ancion

SUMMARY OF ISSUE-BASED REGIONAL FINDINGS

Section 1. Women migrant workers and gendered labour markets

Shifting economic burdens and the feminisation of migration

The interviews and discussions found that while economic factors were key in pushing women to migrate, they intersect with shifting societal expectations and labour market dynamics that are resulting in the increasing feminisation of migration. Throughout the research across nine countries, poverty, un- and underemployment were the first and foremost factors for women's labour migration that was almost uniformly cited. While it should be noted that men also face shrinking opportunities for education and decent work, the gendered division of unpaid labour and the demand for women's care work globally have resulted in this feminisation of migration.

While poverty might be the root cause, it was the view of researchers that **women are increasingly expected to take up the main breadwinner role in families, and to migrate for work in order to fulfil this role**. In many cases, women were expected to pay family debts, take care of the household expenses, including health costs, and support the education of children. Researchers observed patterns whereby women are expected to make sacrifices for the family which over the years have extended to migrating overseas and providing financial support remotely through remittances.

One reason for the apparent onus of financial support shifting to women in rural communities was the **increasing financial unsustainability of small-scale farming**. This has coincided with the opening up of new opportunities for women's labour migration into the care and domestic work sectors. While it used to be the men – the traditional breadwinners – who would migrate for work, as women were “left behind” to look after children, international migration has opened up a market for low-wage work, which does not require high education or “high” skills. For prospective women migrant domestic workers, earning a comparatively high wage for work they do for free at home is an attractive income opportunity.

In Curut village, Central Java, **Indonesia**, high poverty was one of the most cited push factors for women to seek work abroad. In the village, where farming is the only source of livelihood and no other work is available, Curut villagers, especially women, are forced to look for work further afield. Although both men and women in the village struggle with poverty and lack of job opportunities, **higher numbers of women were found to be migrating compared to men**. The reasons for this included that:

- Men could find part-time jobs on a neighbour's land or work in construction sites in nearby cities.
- For women, the migration process was easier and cheaper. The minimum education requirement is lower – even those without an elementary school certificate could migrate abroad for domestic work, whereas for men, the minimum education requirement is junior high school if they work in the plantation sector, or vocational school if they work in factories.

- For women, the costs needed to pay the recruitment agency tended to be smaller than for men, ranging around IDR 500,000-2,000,000 (USD 35-140).

Oftentimes an agent would front this money to a prospective migrant worker, to be paid back from their salary within their first year of work.

The trend for female labour migration was also said to be due to societal expectations that a female child or relative will bear the burden of financially supporting younger siblings and older parents, including by foregoing their own marriage, and in some cases, throughout their marriage. Women migrant workers from **Myanmar** frequently reported becoming responsible for their families' well-being, when the main male breadwinner in their families could no longer work or got married. If the daughter is the eldest, she is typically expected to support her parents as well as younger siblings. According to the married women participants, they continued to support their parents financially even after they got married and had children.

“Before my brother got married, he was the one who supported us by sending money. But now that he is married, he can no longer send money. We sold our farm to get money. We also had a debt. As the eldest daughter, I feel responsible for my family’s condition. I have to work and earn money to support them. So, I decided to migrate and work here to earn money and support my family.”

- Safe and fair migration means that migration must be a choice. Most of the women we spoke to would have preferred to find decent work in their communities. Safe and Fair Migration should be a second choice policy option to providing decent, quality work and sustainable livelihoods in communities of origin.
- The remittances that women migrants send home are used to feed, clothe, educate and care for children and extended families. The underpayment and non-payment of wages to women migrants risks the welfare of millions who depend on them.
- Migration must be more than a coping mechanism. At present women’s migration is used to compensate for the failures of neoliberalism and the absence of decent work for both men and women.
- The shift of breadwinner role to women has societal and psychological impacts for both men and women. It is increasing the burden on women, who are often now responsible for money, as well as looking after children in countries of destination, and countries of origin. However, the social stigma and patriarchal limitations on women’s freedoms are not keeping pace with this change.
- Many women spoke of the failure of men to take up childcare responsibilities seriously or adapt to their partners’ new role.

Women migrant workers in the “global care chain”

The gendered division of labour in a patriarchal system sees unpaid work, often in the domestic sphere, undervalued and unrecognised, falling for the most part onto women. Globally, women do a greater proportion of unpaid work compared to men, and in Asia, on average four times the work done by men.¹

Much of the paid and unpaid work that women do is not even seen as work, or as requiring skills. In many countries, domestic work is not legally recognised as work under the law, and is excluded from the protection provided by labour laws. A significant aspect of why migrant domestic workers are not seen as workers is because their work takes place in what is considered the personal/private “domestic sphere”, while *work* is usually assigned to what is seen as the directly profit-generating sphere. These notions have been historically reinforced by gendered norms, which tend to assign women to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere.

As the need for, but undervaluing of, care work is a global phenomenon, **global care chains** have emerged. This concept describes the phenomenon in which women, often from developing countries, from historically marginalised and ethnic minority groups, are employed to fill gaps in care created by population dynamics, labour market dynamics, employment and social care in other countries, in many cases to care for the children of women who have entered paid employment outside the home.

In contrast to the shifting gender expectations for women, it was rarely suggested in our research that men had stepped into care-taking roles at home, leaving migrant domestic workers with a double or triple burden of providing financially and emotionally for families at home, and at work.



Photo credit: Karmojibi Nari

¹ ILO: Women do 4 times more unpaid care work than men in Asia and the Pacific, ILO, 27 June 2018, https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm

- Safe migration is meaningless unless that migration is into work that is recognised, respected, and valued at home and abroad.
- The lack of safety and fairness that women experience in their migration into domestic work is directly related to the non- and undervaluing of the social reproductive labour of women in society more broadly. We cannot expect to achieve full recognition, respect and reward for women's work in the domestic and care work sectors unless we address underlying burdens on women at home and the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work.
- The shift and increasing burden on women has not been mirrored by a change in the roles and norms around men's roles in the home.

Gendered labour markets

Within the labour market, this gendered division is reflected by sectors made up exclusively or mostly by women. These sectors are almost uniformly on average lower paid than the sectors dominated by men, and even within sectors, women take up a greater proportion of lower-paid, temporary and part-time positions compared to men. Labour markets are further segregated along racial lines, with a disproportionate burden of poorly paid and undervalued work falling to women of colour. The result of this is that women have been relegated to particular labour sectors in which they now make up a vast majority of workers. In addition, the sectors in which women work have been so systemically undervalued and unrewarded, that they become dominated by historically marginalised and ethnic minority groups, including migrants. Researchers from across our research communities reported the existence of informality in work, particularly in domestic and entertainment work, wage differentials between men and women, and between nationals and migrants.

In the garment industry in **Bangladesh**, where the workforce is 80 per cent women, only 0.5 per cent of managerial positions were taken by women. They reported being systematically excluded from leadership positions within their factories, and their unions. Similarly, researchers who spoke to women working in Gurgaon, near Delhi, **India** said that the vast majority of women concentrated in the production department in subordinate roles as machine operator, checkers, and helpers. The research among Bangladeshi women garment workers in **Jordan** also showed that there are sharp gender hierarchies in the factories there – 80 per cent of all middle and top management positions are held by men, where women in management positions can only be seen in line supervisor positions, and rarely progress beyond that level. Similarly, in **Cambodia**, where 85 per cent of workers in garment factories were women, the majority of them were in lower-ranking positions while men dominate upper-level positions.

Gendered wage and workload inequalities

The research conducted by MAP Foundation (**Thailand**) showed that apart from receiving low wages, migrant women garment workers are also subject to gendered wage and workload

discrimination. Despite working in the same position with the same duties and putting in the same amount of effort and time, where female workers received THB 160 (USD 5) per day, male workers made up to THB 200 (USD 6.5) per day. This meant that all workers received less than minimum wage and women in some cases received only half of the legal minimum of THB 310 per day.

Unequal workloads between men and women were also common. Employers were said to extract more work from women workers, because they feel they can put more pressure on them without resistance.

“In the factory, even if I am a woman, I always have to carry a pile of garments and move them from place to place. It requires strength. Still, we, as women, can do it. But, the employers think only male workers can do things that require strength and pay them higher”. (Research participant from MAP Foundation’s study)

According to the workers, the logic of employers in paying higher wage to male workers is the common belief that men are more physically capable than women, although the women reported carrying the same weight as the men. In Cambodia, even when the wages between men and women were the same, a local union leader said, *“the work is different. Women work more than men. The Chinese supervisors are afraid to ask male workers to do (the hard) jobs. Always pushing female workers to do more.”*

- Making migration safe and fair means addressing poverty wages and ending discrimination based on gender, race, caste, class and other intersecting lines.
- Migration will never be fair unless it is into sectors where women can be treated equally and do not face systemic barriers to career progression.
- Safe migration means migration into work that guarantees equal pay for work of equal value, and eradicates the gender and racial wage gaps. However, the struggle cannot be limited only to equality between women and men – men in the garment sector receive poverty wages too. The aim must be for a Living Wage and decent work for all!

Risks of migration into informal work

Workers’ experiences reflected trends towards informal work, including in what have been traditionally formal sectors. In the garment sector in India, there has been a trend towards informality – including home-based work, daily wage work, and contract labour in small production units.

Entertainment workers in Nepal also found the informality of their work to be the primary cause of their precariousness. Women in the entertainment sector are largely informal workers. They face long working hours from early morning to late evening, very low wages, physical and

psychological abuse, and sexual harassment. Some of these women face extreme economic hardship, despite working long hours, and some are forced to sell sex to make ends meet. The informality and uncertainty of their work has made it more challenging to file any complaints against violence in the workplace, which has led to development of culture of silence on the part of employees, and the culture of impunity on the part of most customers and employers.

Entertainment workers also face violations from the police, and situate their vulnerability to police abuse in their informal status. These abuses include arbitrary arrest while at work, or being picked up on the street, for the supposed offence of “creating social disorder”. They then have to pay bail to leave. Often unable to afford it, the money is fronted by an employer, to whom the woman has to repay through her work. In this way, women are bonded to work at the same place for a long time to pay back the money.



Photo credit: SEWA

Push factors for migration

In many countries, migrant workers spoke of feeling trapped in a cycle of indebtedness created by their migration. In Curut Village of Central Java (**Indonesia**), many families reported household debt as a major factor in the decision to migrate. Landlessness and unemployment were cited as the reasons why people go into debt, when they are forced to borrow money from neighbours and family, or have to forego food and education for their children.

In **Cambodia**, women cited the rising healthcare costs, which have made it more and more difficult for ordinary people to access healthcare and medical treatment, as a push factor for internal migration to work in the garment and footwear factories.

Sometimes, employment does not improve the situation – although garment workers have been entitled to health insurance since legal changes in 2016, their families are not covered. From interviews and FGDs conducted by the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions, internal migrants who work at the garment factories said that their salary is only enough to cover basic necessities. If a family member becomes sick or suffers an accident, they have to take out a loan or sell any valuables or property. Those without property are excluded from borrowing money from microfinance institutions, meaning that they were forced to borrow money from moneylenders at extremely high interest rates – up to ten times more than those offered by microfinance institutions. With salaries as low as they are, garment workers and their families are kept in constant debt in an effort to meet their human rights to health and life.

Section 2. Migration and employment policies

Emigration policies and migrants as managers of risk

Based on the idea that a lack of information leads to unsafe migration, many NGOs and government bodies have started gearing their programmes and advocacy efforts towards raising awareness and sharing information about migration and rights.

Among research participants who migrated from Bangladesh, many spoke of the efforts to better prepare women migrant workers through pre-departure orientation programmes, organised by the state-owned Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL). They said that the sessions were very short, only 15-30 minutes in length, in which only basic information about their salary was given. They were also offered some pieces of paternalistic advice such as, “be nice in the factory.” All of them said they were too stressed to concentrate on the information shared, because the orientation was given at the last moment, and in a great hurry, and also because they were concerned about leaving behind their families and going to a new place.

However, even if appropriate, human rights-oriented pre-departure information can be given in a relaxed environment, and in sufficient detail, the belief that information will “save” the women, or prevent their exploitation and abuse, contains some unfounded assumptions. While it is evident that access to information about recruitment processes can shape workers’ migration experiences, there are fundamental concerns to be highlighted, including the facts that:

- a. Some migrants, regardless of how well informed they might be, do not have the luxury of a choice to take a regular migration route.
- b. Regular and “informed” labour migration still happens within a system of extreme exploitation.

- c. The idea that a migrant must inform herself in order to better protect herself shifts the burden of safety to the individual women who choose to migrate rather than the States of origin and destination who bear primary responsibility for safe migration and decent work.

- Safe migration may be facilitated by adequate, timely, relevant information provided on a non-obligatory basis, free of charge, which should also be pre-decision, and not only pre-departure.
- Information given about migration opportunities is not value-free – while it should ideally neither promote nor discourage migration but offer neutral and objective information, this may be an unrealistic goal.
- Pre-departure orientation sessions should never be used to reinforce patriarchal norms about migrants' roles as women or as workers.
- The provision of this information in no way absolves governments of origin, transit and destination to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of people, in the event that something goes wrong. Safe migration initiatives should not make migrants themselves the managers of risk.

Immigration policies and risks created for women workers

Gender-based discrimination and violence throughout the migration journey

Many research participants shared that the gendered discrimination and violence they faced started before their departure, where women migrant workers are frequently discriminated against because of their migration decision and the associated social stigma within their communities. In **Jordan**, research participants explained how their society views migrant women:

“If a woman comes back without money, she must have done something bad, otherwise why didn't she get paid? If she comes back with money, she must have done something bad, otherwise how did she get all that money?”

Research participants felt that women who migrate are discriminated against when compared to their male counterparts and have to answer derogatory questions from their communities upon their return. Even those who had secured the support of their families were often not exempt from the criticism of neighbours and acquaintances, which may adversely affect the family in their absence, as well as the women themselves after their return.

Women migrant garment workers were also in some instances forced to migrate because of **gender-based violence in their homes and communities**. For some, sexual harassment started prior to departure, from middlemen. For women migrant workers from Bangladesh, there is a

widespread social presumption that those who migrate are morally questionable, marking them as “prostitutes” in the eyes of their community. Several women reported having to deal with such stereotypes and having to overcome strong objections from their families and community:

“We migrate at the cost of everything. We lose our husbands or their love, we are labelled as prostitutes, our children do not get enough care. Even family members do not trust us when we can’t send the required amount of money. What do we get in return? Not even an adequate salary.”

Migration policies that discriminate against women and migrants exacerbate vulnerabilities faced by women migrant workers, and create opportunities for migrants to be targeted by third parties. This happens before migration, where in some countries of origin, an industry of informal recruitment agencies has grown, benefiting from the barriers created for migrant workers, such as those banning women of a particular age or maternity status from migrating. Benefitting from prospective migrants’ lack of access to contacts and information about opportunities in destination countries, they can easily deceive women from rural areas, who may not be (computer) literate, or who lack access to information about migration processes.

Migrant workers are also often subject to discriminatory legal provisions in countries of destination, which are designed to deny their rights and access to social protection and public services. In Lebanon, for example, this discrimination is created by the *kafala*, or sponsorship system. Under *kafala*, a migrant domestic worker’s legal status is tied to her employer. This gives the employer (*kafeel*) power and authority over the migrant worker. This system has often been criticised for facilitating the exploitation and abuse of workers. Moreover, Lebanon’s approximately 250,000 migrant domestic workers are currently excluded from the country’s labour legislation. Hence, they are denied the protections and rights stipulated in the labour law and are generally not regarded as “workers” by the Lebanese government.

- In order for migration to be safe and fair, it cannot happen under laws and policies that discriminate on the basis of gender, age, maternity status, work sector, or any other area.
- Safe and Fair migration requires the abolition or reform of the *kafala* system.
- Economic dependence on the remittances of underpaid and exploited workers is not a viable development strategy. The so-called “triple-win” of migration for work produces vastly uneven “victories”.
- Women are increasingly feeling a push to migrate due to the absence or underfunding of basic public services, such as healthcare and affordable education.
- Many women are pushed to migrate because of debt from micro-finance schemes.
- Women who migrate for low-paid work come from rural and marginalised communities and are accustomed a high degree of self-reliance and may not have experience of support from institutions of the state. It may be unrealistic for Governments, UN agencies or NGOs to expect that a level of trust can be established between a prospective or current migrant in the context of recruitment, pre-departure orientation and training, or consular support in the country of destination.



Photo credit: GAATW-IS

Working conditions for migrant workers

Rights violations

Poverty wages

Poverty wages were a critical issue for garment workers across our findings in Jordan, Cambodia, India, Bangladesh and Thailand. Migrant workers in Thailand reported being paid less than the legal minimum wage of THB 310 (10 USD) per day, with some being paid as little as THB 160 (USD 5) per day.

Some employers implement a piece-rate pay structure, which puts workers in competition with each other. Managers were also reported to invent mistakes on garments to justifying paying workers less:

“As piece-rate paid workers, we work really hard to finish more products.... but, the manager will try to find mistakes on the products so that he can pay less. So whether we do more or less work, we are treated unfairly.”

Across the garment workers interviewed, the picture of working conditions which emerged was one of extreme workloads and harsh working conditions that tax them to the maximum of their capacities, resulting in exhaustion, frequent and chronic illnesses, anxiety and depression.

Wage discrimination also happens along tribal and caste lines in India, where it was reported that migrant, women, child, *Dalit*, *Adivasi* and Muslim workers are at severe risk of exploitation and

exclusion from decent work. While India's *Equal Remuneration Act 1973* requires an employer to pay workers doing same work or work of similar nature equally, this provision is not enforced to protect workers from wage discrimination along gender, caste, tribal or communal lines. As such, the labour market in India works to consolidate rather than reduce social processes of exclusion and social stratification.

Verbal and physical abuse

Working conditions and associated pressure were made worse by the widespread verbal and physical abuse from line supervisor and managers. Across all groups, women workers reported that supervisors shout at them and push them if targets are not met, or for minor mistakes.

The reprimands often had sexist and racist overtones:

"They told me, 'You can eat, you can sleep, but you can't work?! Have you come here to show your pretty face?'"

"They say, 'Fuck your mother, have you come here to fuck? You slut!'"

Bangladeshi workers in Jordan reported specific and very harsh verbal abuse, which included insulting comments about them as women and as Bangladeshis. Combined with threats of dismissal and deportation, this reinforced a sense of being treated as a disposable commodity.

"If we try to complain about anything, they tell us, 'Bangladeshis are beggars, we can easily bring more.'"

"Bangladeshis are cheap! If I send back one, I can get back ten!"

Workers across all research sites reported physical assault including pushing around, beating, slapping, kicking and punches to the face, including for failing to reach exacting production targets. It was reported that this violence is often targeted in particular at union members, both women and men.

Sexual violence and harassment

Women migrant garment workers are also subject to sexual violence and harassment. Incidences of sexual harassment ranged from inappropriate remarks by male supervisors and managers to physical assaults.

In **Cambodia**, women workers reported sexual harassment from male sewing machine mechanics who try to touch female workers' bodies in return for the "favour" of fixing their machine. Because of the pressure to meet their production targets, workers are afraid that if their machine is not fixed they would not reach their target and face termination, so they are forced to keep quiet about the abuse.

Workers in **Jordan** reported that supervisors and managers at times attempt to abuse their position of power to blackmail women into relationships or providing sexual favours. Researchers reported that with a culture of impunity, such practices seem to have become entrenched throughout the industry.

Women migrant garment workers are also subject to sexual harassment and SGBV outside of their workplaces, in the areas where they live, shop and commute.

Women garment workers in **Cambodia** reported sexual harassment and intimidation on the way to and from work, saying that groups of men have followed them, and used vulgar language and gestures towards them.

In **Jordan**, several women reported verbal and physical attacks by local men. In one Industrial Zone, one case of rape and murder of a garment worker was recorded in 2018.

Women in **India** reported having to work overtime late into the night to reach production targets. Without safe transportation options, they face harassment, robbery, and other crimes on their way home. One woman described the walk home:

“After 10 pm at night it’s really scary to come alone on that road. It is not well lit. There are some streetlights, but they are placed far apart. Theft and purse snatching is common. Last week, one of my friends was robbed.”

Physical health

Participants of the research in **Jordan** said that their overall health condition had suffered as a result of the work. Frequent complaints included headaches, back pain, and fatigue. These symptoms can be traced back to the pace and intensity of the work itself, which often leaves insufficient time for breaks and is physically demanding. Any treatment is superficial – for example, when several workers reported suffering from serious back pain caused by long hours standing, the response of the employer was to administer strong painkillers and send the workers back to work immediately.

If there was an injury requiring off-site treatment, a portion of the wages was deducted. In such an environment, many migrant workers felt discouraged from seeking medical attention.

Mass fainting is a concern for Cambodian garment factory workers, especially during the hot season in which hundreds of women workers faint while working at the factory.

Women’s health issues are compounded by poverty wages. According to our research with Cambodian garment trade union leaders, workers are left with USD 2 per day to spend on food. Often times, workers cannot afford to eat.

Reproductive health

Workers from Bangladesh in **Jordan** and **Mauritius**, as well as Myanmar workers in **Thailand** reported a range of gender-based violence and discrimination related to reproductive rights. There was a trend of punishing women for becoming pregnant and having a child:

- In **Jordan**, despite the labour law having clear references to the right to maternity leave for all workers, women reported that there is a practice of sending pregnant workers back home. In order to avoid this, some had to have secret abortions.
- Bangladeshi migrant garment workers reported that if a worker becomes pregnant there, she would be fired and sent home, and banned from migrating again.
- Myanmar workers in **Thailand** reported that pregnant workers' right to take maternal leave and sick leave are completely ignored. They have to be at work unless they are giving birth and if the employers insist, they must return to work directly after giving birth.

Mental health and psychological well-being

"I don't want to get up in the morning and go to work. I wish I would never have to get up again."

Workers reported demanding workloads under difficult and abusive conditions, long hours of repetitive, physically demanding work, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, including frequent threats of dismissal, often linked to allegations of underperformance. The psychological impact of this continuum of gender-based violence is immense and takes its toll on the mental health of the workers.

"I feel worthless"

Virtually all research participants in **Jordan** reported stress, depression and insomnia, constant headaches, heart palpitations, and intense feelings of fear. Contributing to their stress are financial insecurity (low salaries and loans), and worries about their families back home. Two-thirds of individual interviewees reported feeling constantly stressed and anxious about reaching production targets and being the object of verbal and physical abuse from supervisors. Three out of 15 female participants in individual interviews mentioned that they had experienced suicidal thoughts because of different kinds of abuse and work pressure.

Several mentioned recent cases of co-workers' suicides. According to participants, one of them was directly related to verbal abuse by managers, whereas the others were triggered by a combination of factors, such as problems in personal relationships, anxiety about the situation back home, financial worries and work pressure.

Denial of rights at work

The manufacturing sector has long been a site of potential collectivisation and resistance to labour exploitation. Employers, seeing the potential for organising and bargaining as a threat to profitability, go to great lengths to limit the ability of garment workers to associate, bargain for

higher wages and better conditions, through divide and rule strategies of surveillance, denial, physical violence and intimidation.

“They are always watching us over CCTV or something.” – worker in Jordan.

Denying freedom of association and collective bargaining also forecloses important pathways for redress for gender-based violence. Barriers to freedom of association and collective bargaining prevent workers from responding collectively to violence, furthering cultures of impunity around gender-based violence.

Threats, retaliation and blacklisting

Where grievance mechanisms exist, women expressed scepticism whether complaints about this kind of harassment would be believed, and effective action would ever be taken. As one participant said,

“We are afraid of losing our jobs. We are also afraid of being stigmatised by our managers and other fellow workers as ‘bad women’. We can’t trust anybody.”

What can workers do in the face of such violence and discrimination?

Options are severely limited by the economic pressure women are under to send money home; by the threats of retaliation through physical, sexual violence, and the practice of blacklisting workers who report workplace violence. Across all countries, women discussed how routine threats of employment termination discourage them from resisting abuse and overwork. One woman said:

“You have no choice but to smile and talk sweetly to the in-charge. If you reply back when they abuse you, you may be removed from the factory”

Threats of employment termination mean that women put themselves under serious physical and mental pressure to reach production targets. Women in Cambodia reported trying not to drink water so that they could skip toilet breaks, in order to reach their target and avoid the threat of employment termination.

- Safety and fairness are still very far from the work that women migrants, both internal and cross-border, do.



Photo credit: MAP Foundation

Safe and fair migration in the long term

Many of the migrant women that made up our research community had or planned to migrate for a relatively short period of time. Some intended to save up money to pay off a family debt, to accrue a certain amount of capital with which to buy a piece of land or a home, to set up a small business or to educate their children, or simply to make ends meet for their families.

In none of the contexts did the migrants expect to migrate permanently, nor was this even an option for them. Migration schemes are often set up with the idea that they are a temporary, short-term, and circular. Work contracts are often for a two-year period, and migrants do not have a right to bring any dependent family members or spouses, and are expected to return home after their period of employment, and to return permanently after the period in which they are deemed to be economically productive, and retire in their countries of origin.

Life on hold

In a number of ways, short-term, temporary and circular migration regimes are failing migrants and their communities. Often times, given poverty wages and the extortionate recruitment fees, the migrant worker has no chance of saving money. In some cases, money sent home was squandered by husbands on alcohol, drugs, gambling and sex. Thus, along with sometimes an

inability to reintegrate into home communities, women migrants find their only option is to re-migrate a short time afterwards, and postpone plans for permanent return and reintegration.

Becoming “permanently temporary”

For some migrant women we spoke to, permanent, albeit precarious migration has become their best option for prosperity. Among the first groups of migrants to come to work as domestic workers in Lebanon were women from Sri Lanka, who first started migrating in the 1970s. Our study in **Lebanon** found that ageing Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers who have lived and worked in Lebanon for as long as thirty or forty years are effectively excluded from social protection policies in both Sri Lanka and in Lebanon. In this scenario, the women opted to continue working in Lebanon into older age, even though their status there is “permanently temporary”, rather than retire and return to Sri Lanka, where they can no longer access social services. Having lost contact with their communities and networks, they also face the overwhelming burden of survival with no options for livelihood.

Sri Lankan domestic workers shared a major fear of not being able to sustain themselves if they decide to return. The lack of savings schemes and financial planning puts them in a vulnerable position when they retire.

“Yes, we worked all our lives here, we didn’t think about our own future. We only thought about our families and children. We don’t know what will happen to us when we go back to Sri Lanka since we don’t have bank accounts or insurance. In fact, most domestic workers are mothers; they don’t think about themselves and only want to raise their children. That’s why we don’t have a lot of savings.”

According to the participants, being financially dependent on their children or on their families in the future is not really an option. They have been financially autonomous and independent and they were the main breadwinners in their families, and feel that they would not fit easily back into a scenario where they are being taken care of by relatives who may not be able to afford it. Their savings are not much, which affects their ability to make plans for the future. Most of them need to work until old age to be able to retire and be financially independent.

“I know I am old but I chose to stay in Lebanon and keep working because I don’t want to wait for my children to give me money and to feed me. I have never been in that situation and I definitely won’t start being this way at this phase of my life. Plus, if I go back to Sri Lanka, I won’t be able to work in house cleaning/keeping so I wouldn’t be able to work. No, habibi, I decide to stay here and work until I can’t anymore. At least, I am independent.”

- “Safe migration” and “fair migration” cannot be short-term solutions to systemic, long-term issues, such as the absence of decent work and livelihoods in countries of origin.
- Safe migration is a long-term, and not a short-term phenomenon. States must think long-term about migration, in terms of the provision of care, the portability of social security benefits, and pensions.
- When migration is not a choice, but a survival option, and there is no option for family reunification, it deprives migrants of the right to family life, and can sever long-term family and community ties, making eventual return impossible.

Section 3. Power in women’s migration and work

Agency and autonomy, overcoming patriarchal norms:

Despite an overarching system of abuse, exploitation and violence, it was clear from a number of exchanges throughout this research that migration provided for some women an opportunity to exercise more autonomy over their lives. Often coming from rural conservative communities which sharply delineated their roles according to patriarchal norms that significantly restricted their choices around career, family, reproduction, use of resources, access to formal education and other types of knowledge, living and working abroad on their own represented a big change, and with it came a sense of liberation.

One migrant woman in Delhi-NCR shared her satisfaction with the increased personal freedom and mobility in the NCR compared to the restriction posed in the village.

“Here in the city, I can move freely and go out at my own wish. There are no restrictions from relatives. I can work here. I have a sense of responsibility and independence.”

Another also expressed her comparative freedom in the city where she had migrated.

“In the village, you live according to the wishes of your family members – according to their directions. If you do not obey and there are problems, you may have to live separately. Then the neighbours talk. We do not have to worry about any of this in Delhi.”

Financial independence

Earning money and being responsible for managing their own resources was seen as a positive experience by many, as it gave them a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which they felt they could not have had if they had stayed at home. Nevertheless, that independence came with important constraints.

Firstly, the financial responsibility for families back home, both for everyday expenses, and to repay loans (either for their own migration, or for that of family members) brought them under serious pressure and limited the sense of financial independence. These responsibilities meant living extremely modestly and enduring significant hardships in places of destination. Secondly, all felt the wages were too low to meet their expenses, including necessities for themselves, such as adequate food and medical care.

For Bangladeshi garment workers in Jordan, after accounting for their own expenses, most were left with between USD 49 (without overtime) and USD 141 (with overtime) per month to save or send home. As such, the potential to save and plan for their own and their families' welfare as many of them had intended, was severely limited.

Skills acquisition

Many of the women interviewed appreciated the opportunity to acquire new skills. These included some skills immediately related to their jobs, though the prevailing view was that these skills were self-taught and forced upon them in an environment of extreme workload pressure. Other skills included learning other languages and exposure to a multi-cultural environment.

Social autonomy

The conservative social background of many of the Bangladeshi migrant women in Jordan had restricted them from making independent decisions at home. This also included their ability to establish social ties without the approval of their families. In Jordan, many of them depended on such ties to help them cope with their often-difficult situations. Some of the women also used this new-found autonomy to engage in relationships with male co-workers, which some of them experienced as a significant help in dealing with the pressures of their situation (although experiences varied and were not always viewed positively by their peers).

Raised expectations

When given the space to talk about their dreams, the women started making plans for their future in their home country. Some mentioned wanting to open their own restaurants or start their catering projects, because they enjoy cooking and they believe it can be their retirement plan. One talked about being a supermarket owner and sustaining her life through her shop. One participant discussed her passion for flowers and her fascination with flower shops in Lebanon. Her dream was to import this work to Sri Lanka.

“Our dreams did not come true yet, but we are living a good life.”



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ACTION

A critical component of a Feminist Participatory Action Research is Action – the way in which the research community acts upon the research findings, and shares them. The Action portion of FPAR aims to imbue participants with the sense of a possibility of change to positively impact the situation identified through the research. Much of the action the women take is already underway – this research project cannot take credit for it. However, the discussion groups sought to provide a space where collective aspirations could be voiced and considered for action, and where existing action and mitigation strategies could be reflected on and enhanced.

Some of the actions included: a public film screening of “Shouting Without a Listener” – a documentary film about Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon, to: raise awareness about the experiences that migrant domestic workers go through in Lebanon across a Lebanese audience; a documentary film on Indonesian returnee migrant women “*Mencari Matahari* (Searching for the sun)”; a film about women’s migration in India; and a stakeholders’ meeting, with media present, to share the results of the findings in Bangladesh.

Some of the action undertaken was to bring about moments of collective joy – counteracting the drudgery and oppression that many women migrant workers face in their everyday lives. Misery, even though it may be experienced at the individual level, has deep roots in social context and structures – some of which have been explored through this research. The antidote to this individualised oppression and unhappiness is what is called happiness created through the joy of collective action.

A number of our research partners engage and seek to create spaces and moments of collective action and joy to relieve the pressure and burden of their lives – these include, for WOFOWON, the practice of Dance Movement Therapy. For the migrant domestic worker community in Lebanon, this happens once a year every year on International Workers Day, when migrant domestic take to the streets of Beirut, to dance, sing and protest against the *kafala* system.

Self-organising for change

For a number of women in the study, contrary to their expectations, gaining economic independence through labour migration did not automatically ensure their social and political autonomy once they returned home. Some women, who enjoyed newfound freedom and autonomy in their migration, felt again the presence of gender norms, limiting their political power and independence. Frustrated that their voice and experience are not considered as ‘legitimate’ by various entities from policy-making bodies to village and community-level institutions, returnee migrant women in some communities are self-organising for change.

For example, in Indonesia, a group of women returnee migrants formed a support network in Central Java in 2009 (as an outcome of another FPAR process) which has successfully raised their collective voice. Now the group participates in local development planning meetings. Seeing this as a win for women’s political participation and a way of improving women’s empowerment, another group in Grobogan district was formed as part of our FPAR in 2018-2019.

While they know that transforming attitudes, behaviours, gendered norms and policies – whether at the district or national level – is undoubtedly a slow and long-term process, they continue to see the existence of the support network as a source of hope and motivation for change within their communities.

Organising around working conditions and to cope with stress

Though in most cases, migrant workers' freedom of mobility and association is restricted, informal organising actions in a number of research locations is providing women migrant workers with protection, and a sense of power and solidarity.

Through the research of the Anti-Racism Movement (**Lebanon**), we learnt that a migrant workers activist group called Mesewat is organising to make demands for safer and more just labour conditions. Mesewat activists, along with other migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, are often not considered as rights bearers by agents of the State – ignored, beaten, detained and deported.

A group of Ethiopian migrant workers who face violence, abuse and conflict, helps them with provision of safe houses and shelters, financial and medical support, helping with repatriation and also offers a space of social and cultural belonging that help them cope with stress.

While abolishing the *kafala* system remains a dream, they have been successfully compiling the knowledge and the networks needed to advocate for safe and fair migration.

- Informal organising helps to achieve safe and fair migration by providing institutional protection as well as a space for mutual emotional support and cultural belonging.
- Community networks can provide critical social support in contexts where workers are excluded from rights protections. NGOs looking to support migrants' rights have much to learn from their experiences.
- Groups organising within a particular community or sector would benefit from collaboration with activists from other movements. This would enhance visibility, awareness and build cross-movement activism and solidarity, and strengthen the calls for justice across causes.
- Community organisations supporting marginalised women migrant workers should have access to formal registration and funding opportunities to strengthen their work.

Creating safe spaces for women migrant workers at risk

Across different studies, we have found that when migrant workers face challenges in the destination country, a gathering space provided by NGOs can greatly help them as a support mechanism. These spaces were felt to be much more effective than embassies.

- The Migrant Community Center (MCC) run by Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon is also a safe space where Ethiopian domestic worker activists gather and support each other.
- The Al Hassan Workers Centre in Jordan provides a safe and supportive space for workers to socialise and learn new skills, creates a network for peer learning and supports workers in dispute resolution with employers. The trust built between the Workers Centre staff and garment workers meant that the support provided was particularly effective.
- Many women also stressed the positive impact of being able to pass on skills to other migrants at worker's centres, which made them feel valued and appreciated by their peers, and thus had a positive impact not only on their own learning and development, but also contributed to their self-worth and feeling of autonomy.
- The Centre also offers skills and language training that could help migrant workers to increase their potential and confidence in both the destination countries and to apply when they go back home. Another important role that these spaces had was providing knowledge about migrant workers' rights in the destination country and mutual support for any challenges they had with their employers.

➤ Having access to such safe spaces has enhanced women migrant workers' sense of safety during their stay in the destination countries and helped them gain knowledge and information in accessing to justice.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARDS A FEMINIST AGENDA FOR SAFE AND FAIR MIGRATION

Our research into the structural issues determining the safety and fairness experienced by women migrant workers leads us to some reflections on what changes are needed to make migration safe and fair.

They also bring up a number of challenging issues – how to have conversations about and raise expectations of women for safety and fairness in migration, who are subject to such discrimination and inequality, that safety and fairness are all but abstract concepts?

As an attempt to start to articulate a Feminist Agenda for Safe and Fair Migration, which reflects the diversity of experience of migrants across different work sectors, countries and at the intersections of multiple forms of discrimination, this research offers some key observations.

Migration as a choice

- 'Safe' and 'fair' migration means that migration must be a choice. Most of the women we spoke to would have preferred to find decent work in their communities. Safe and Fair Migration should be a second choice policy option to providing decent, quality work and sustainable livelihoods in communities of origin.
- Safe Migration must be more than a coping mechanism. At present, women's migration is used to compensate for the failures of neoliberalism and the absence of decent work for both men and women.
- Women are increasingly feeling a push to migrate due to the absence and/or underfunding of basic public services, such as healthcare and education.
- Women are increasingly pushed into migration through debt accumulated through micro-finance schemes.
- Safe migration is a long-term, and not a short-term phenomenon. States must think long-term about migration, in terms of the provision of care, the portability of social security benefits, and pensions.
- When migration is not a choice, but a survival option, and there is no option for family reunification, it deprives migrants of the right to family life, and can sever long-term family and community ties, making eventual return impossible.

Migration and gendered social norms

- Domestic violence pushes women into precarious work and migration, and acts as a compounding factor for GBV at work itself – the threat of violence at home compels women to accept poor working conditions and normalises violence at work.
- The remittances that women migrants send home are used to feed, clothe, educate and care for children and extended families. The underpayment and non-payment of wages to women migrants risks the welfare of millions who depend on them.

- The shift of breadwinner role to women has impacts for social norms and psychological impacts for both men and women. It is increasing the burden on women, who are often now responsible for money, as well as looking after children in countries of destination, and countries of origin.
- At the same time, the social stigma and patriarchal limitations on women's freedoms are not keeping pace with this change. Many women spoke of the failure of men to take up childcare responsibilities seriously or adapt to their partners' new role.

Migration and decent work

- Safe migration is undermined when that migration is for work that is not recognised, respected or valued at home or abroad.
- The lack of safety and fairness that women experience in their migration into domestic work is directly related to the non- and undervaluation of the social reproductive labour of women in society more broadly. We cannot expect to achieve full recognition, respect and reward for women's work in the domestic and care work sectors unless we address underlying burdens on women at home and the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work.
- Making migration safe and fair means addressing poverty wages and ending discrimination on the basis of gender, race, caste, class and other intersecting lines.
- Migration will never be fair unless it is into labour sectors where women can be treated equally and do not face systemic barriers to career progression.
- Safe migration would mean migration is into work that guarantees equal pay for work of equal value, and eradicates the gender and racial wage gaps. However, the struggle cannot be only limited to equality between women and men – men in the garment sector receive poverty wages too. The aim must be for a living wage and decent work for all.

Awareness-raising efforts

- Safe migration may be facilitated by adequate, timely and relevant information provided on a non-obligatory basis, free of charge, which should also be provided at the pre-decision, and not only pre-departure stage.
- Information given about migration opportunities is not value-free – while it should ideally neither promote nor discourage migration but offer neutral and objective information, this may be an unrealistic aim.
- Pre-departure orientation sessions should never reinforce patriarchal norms about migrants' roles as women or as workers.
- The provision of pre-departure information in no way absolves governments of origin, transit and destination to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of people, in the event that something goes wrong. Safe migration initiatives should not make migrants themselves the managers of risk.

Limitations to the applications of a Safe and Fair approach:

- Women who migrate for low-paid work come from rural and marginalised communities and are accustomed to a high degree of self-reliance and may not have experience of support from institutions of the state. It may be unrealistic for Governments, UN agencies or NGOs to expect that a level of trust can be established between a prospective or current migrant in the context of recruitment, pre-departure orientation and training, and consular support in the country of destination.
- Safety and fairness are still very far from the work that women migrants, both internal and cross border, do.

Making migration safe and fair:

- Safe and fair migration requires the abolition or reform of the *kafala* system.
- Informal organising helps to achieve safe and fair migration: Having access to safe spaces enhances women migrant workers' sense of safety during their stay in the destination countries and helps them gain knowledge and information in accessing justice.
- Employers and Governments must respond to and act on the existence of physical and verbal abuse at work by establishing effective grievance redress mechanisms, building trust with workers and providing spaces where workers can share their issues without fear.
- Governments must improve monitoring of employers, including through labour inspections, and in the case of garment factories to hold factories accountable for their sub-contractors.
- Many of the research participants were working in the informal sector. All people should be covered by the protection of labour laws, regardless of the sector, and regardless of their migration status. This must include work in places that are not formally recognised, including women's provisioning labour, where it is criminalised and in the private sphere.
- End gender and age discriminatory government bans on migration, which have been shown to push migration underground making migrant workers even more vulnerable to abuse.
- Informal organising helps to achieve safe and fair migration by providing institutional protection as well as a space for mutual emotional support and cultural belonging.
- Community networks can provide critical social support in contexts where workers are excluded from rights protections. NGOs supporting migrants' rights have much to learn from their experiences.
- Groups organising within a particular community or sector would benefit from collaboration with activists from other movements. This would enhance visibility, awareness and build cross-movement activism and solidarity, and strengthen the calls for justice across causes.

- Community organisations supporting marginalised women migrant workers should have access to formal registration and funding opportunities to strengthen their work.



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REFLECTIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

"We need to have workers' collectives"

Safe and Fair migration cannot happen in a silo – the factors that produce gender segregated labour markets, industries dependent on flexible, underpaid and overworked migrant labour require a systemic change. This change can happen at the grassroots level, through self-organised groups of women (migrant) workers.

Overall there is a need for critical conversations about serious limitations of safe migration policies and governance mechanisms in the context of a labour market scenario in which capital and power are increasingly being taken away from workers and placed into the hands of a few, under the thumb of repressive regimes.

Given the indications we have about the nature of the future of the work, such as increasing automation, technological advances that enable greater atomisation, monitoring and (remote) control of workers, it is likely that “safe and fair” migration and work will be transformed in the coming years and decades in unpredictable ways. It is necessary to continue researching the issue and adapting our advocacy strategies.

The increasing reliance on migrants in certain labour sectors risks further dividing societies and fostering xenophobia, racism and anti-migrant sentiments and causing Western governments to place more restrictions on migration. The safety and fairness of migration risk being even more constrained under such pressures. It is necessary not only to highlight the positive impact of migrants on the economies of destination countries, and to counter false claims about migrants as perpetrating crime and draining the social system, but also more generally, to promote the human rights framework and the fact that all human beings are equal and deserve to be treated fairly.

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