



Reflections on the Listening Sessions on Migration, Covid-19 and Gender

(held on the 19 June 2020) Catherine Tactaquin, Women in Migration Network

The two sessions were both rich in information and perspective, largely coming from presenters embedded in a variety of regions and countries and with direct experience and exposure. Very troubling was the consistency of the reports from the global regions: migrant women are facing increased risks, abuse and exploitation during this pandemic, with immediate and long term consequences for themselves and for their families. While as a member of the Women in Migration Network (WIMN), which helped to convene these sessions, I am kept fairly well informed of situations on the ground and at policy levels for migrant women, I was really struck by the intensity of the current situation that in just a few months, has dramatically impacted migrant women – and unfortunately, not for the better.

A few of the themes lifted from these sessions:

- The problems experienced during this global pandemic by migrant and refugee women, including those internally displaced, **predate the pandemic**, but have been intensified by the nature of the health crisis, lockdowns, and government policies.
- **Lack of immigration documentation – being irregular** – has compounded these problems in ways that go well beyond the “normal” if also critical, experiences of other population sectors, especially for those in vulnerable economic situations. The marginalization of irregular migrants has deepened, with little or no governmental action for remedies or even humanitarian aid.
- **Serving in “essential” roles during the pandemic has exacerbated health risks and rights for migrant women.** Perhaps ironically, migrant women have shown that they are “essential” workers in many populations – providing medical care, working in home care, especially with children and the elderly, working throughout the food supply chain, cleaning industries, and more – all areas strongly affected by the virus and/or by the consequences of population lockdowns and mobility limits. Yet, those engaged in such work have traditionally been undervalued, underpaid and exploited and this has not changed, by and large, during this pandemic.
- **The danger of rising racism and xenophobia:** whether in the U.S. or elsewhere, migrants and refugees – particularly from Asia – have been targets of racist abuse and attacks, accused of spreading the virus. The spread of Covid-19 has also been cited as the basis for stricter border controls, despite health experts’ admonishments that this has little impact on containing the pandemic.

We heard how the pandemic has worsened – dramatically, in many instances – access to labor rights and social protections for migrant women with even more dire conditions for health and safety, especially for those working on temporary visas or who are undocumented. Country lockdowns have severely limited the ability to work and earn wages -- and even when there is work, it comes with health risks and labor exploitation. In some countries, domestic workers have been locked in with families, may not be paid, are caring for people with Covid, have no masks or protective gear, nor access to cell phones to report abuses or seek assistance. Others have been forced to work, for example, in the



garment and other industries during the lockdown, risking travel to and from work and in the workplace, and spreading contagion to their households.

Still others were released from their jobs – sometimes without pay – but have been stranded, unable to home countries due to lack of transportation and resources, and without status, unable to access relief supports, even if available at all.

Similarly, women farmworkers may have lost their jobs – or if they had work, given the “essential” agricultural production, they work at risk to exposure and are in positions of even greater exploitation.

School closures have affected migrant women workers with school-age children, while young girls risk dropping out of school altogether to help their families.

Many migrant women have been the primary breadwinners for their families, whether their families are with them, or whether they would send remittances to their home countries. These incomes have been lost with an immediate impact. In many families these lost remittances were a lifeline -- income that saved families from impoverishment. That support has been removed and may not be re-established for some time.

Across the regions, we also heard that domestic and workplace violence has increased as women have been trapped in more stressful situations. In one area, calls to hotlines on domestic abuse increased by 162%! Increased child abuse has also been reported.

Not surprising, irregular status continues to undermine access to protection, services and rights. Migrant women not getting tested for Covid-19 for fear of detection and deportation, a fear not unfounded in some countries as migration status is registered for testing. Even beyond access to Covid-related testing and health care, the breakdown in health care access also includes support for mental health, for reproductive and maternal health care; in some areas migrant women are even risking home deliveries to avoid contact with public health institutions and risk detention and deportation.

And of course, the global pandemic has occurred in an environment where we have experienced increased racism and xenophobia, the expansion of repressive immigration measures, and now, more border closures. In the U.S., this has a wholesale lockdown against asylum seekers, all the while deporting migrants, including many who are Covid-positive.

The situation has not been without resilience, by migrant and refugee women and allies. We did hear that some countries, there is a growing recognition of the vital roles that migrants, and women in particular, have played in societies – roles that have sometimes been demeaned and often exploited. Care givers, house cleaners, gardeners, farmworkers, health care workers. Foreign-born nurses – over 15% of nurses in the US – work on the frontlines caring for Covid-positive patients in hospitals and in nursing homes. Relief funds, sometimes supported by foundations but more often tapping individual

donations, have sprung up to provide much-needed financial support. Food kitchens and free meals have been offered where public sentiment acknowledges that “we are all in this together.” There has been talk of a public “narrative shift” – towards a more positive view of migrants and their roles in the workforce and as members of communities.

In a handful of countries, work permits have been extended, or specific funds have been extended to support irregular migrants as well, during the pandemic. But as the pandemic continues to take hold around the world, disrupting economies, stretching public support systems – where they even exist – a long term economic crisis looms, including national and regional food crises (and we already have food insecurity for many), supply chain upheavals, a severe decline in remittances, and of course, a global climate emergency that has also affected by the pandemic and its consequences. (And no, the temporary clearing of the air with lower carbon emissions hasn’t fixed our climate crisis.)

Despite the troubling and consistent reports during these valuable listening sessions, our knowledge of Covid-19’s impact, with a migration and gender lens, may only be known down the road, and if we now also ramp up reporting access and data collection. This is something that UN Women and many other institutions are urging.

These valuable listening sessions reaffirmed for me the recommendations that have emerged not just now, but over the past years, especially in the process towards the Global Compact for Migration. It will not be enough to include a gender lens in addressing the complex issues of global migration. With the challenge to find and make widely available a vaccine against Covid-19, and continued limits to mobility and a long economic recovery, we are all fearful of the devastating impacts on women in migration. All the more motivation to ramp up our attention to both immediate remedies and long-term solutions. Migrant and refugee women, including LGBTQ women, must be included as stakeholders and change agents. Their experience, vital roles in broad societies and in migrant communities, are critical to ensuring that “recovery” drives us to create a better world without the structural inequalities and injustices that only became more glaring in this global crisis.