

Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia

There is a poisonous rhetoric on migration and asylum wherein States, media and other actors demonize migrants and asylum seekers and build a narrative that favours welcoming some “deserving refugees” while criminalising, jailing and deporting “undeserving” migrants and asylum seekers—demarcating between “good migrants” and “bad migrants”.

This dichotomy is too often driven by economic demand, race, and country of origin and has been deployed to rally public support behind restrictive and punitive immigration policies and harsh enforcement. Beyond the rhetoric, these poisonous messages have contributed to public hostilities, various forms of harassment and racial profiling, vigilantism and overt violence—sometimes fatal—against migrants and those who “appear” to be migrants.

In addition, austerity programs in destination countries have put the squeeze on workers who have experienced stagnant wages, shrinking public services and job loss. These economic policies contribute to citizen fears of foreigners who are seen as the cause of their plight—a perception fed by some politicians and media.

The growing criminalisation of migrants on the basis of their immigration status alone has also fed perceptions that migrants are dangerous and to be feared. Thus, migration policies themselves are feeding xenophobia, and must be reversed if the perception of migrants is to change. It will require concerted policy changes at the national levels, not simply broad global calls to end racism and xenophobia, to safeguard the economic and social human rights of both citizens and migrants and hence, combat rampant xenophobia.

Explicit reference to racism, which is often excluded, should not be omitted from discussions on xenophobia. The global movement of people, as well as, differential reception to different groups of migrants is highly racialized. In addition, responses become more complex when race and gender are intertwined. Efforts to impose punitive policies on a whole group of migrant men of color in the name of “protecting” white women are wrong. This reflects misconceptions about gender-based violence, projecting violence on others while ignoring the same reality within one’s own group.

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The Global Compact should:

- Challenge the racial and ethnic dimensions of migration inclusion and exclusion and the treatment of migrants in destination countries.
- “Pursue...a policy of eliminating racial discrimination, taking effective measures to condemn all acts, manifestations and expressions of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against women in migration”¹

¹ UN Women: recommendations for addressing the human rights of women in the Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, Outcome of expert meeting, Recommendation 1.2, November 2016