

Build a Rights-Based, Anti-Racist Narrative on Migration

The Issue

- Some States, media and other actors demonize migrants and asylum seekers and build a narrative that favours welcoming “deserving refugees” while criminalising, jailing and deporting “undeserving” migrants and asylum seekers—demarcating between “good migrants” and “bad migrants”. This dichotomy, driven by economic demand, racism and prejudices about country of origin, has been deployed to rally public support for punitive immigration policies and to win elections.
- These poisonous messages contribute 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.
- 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. Such migration policies must be reversed if the perception of migrants is to change.
- Differential reception to different groups of migrants is highly racialized and discussions of xenophobia should explicitly reference racism. At the same time, building common cause will require education and evidence-based dialogue.
- New social media platforms and technologies are being used to manipulate public opinion and election outcomes through a framing of “us vs. them”.
- 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’s fears of foreigners who are portrayed as the cause of their plight—a perception fed by politicians and media. Efforts to reframe the narrative will fail if not grounded in policies that address structural inequalities and build solidarity across differences through joint struggles to reclaim rights.
- Xenophobia has a long history in both global North and South. In the 1980s anti-immigrant sentiment in Nigeria culminated in the expulsion of Ghanaians. In the 1990s, Nigerians were expelled from Equatorial Guinea amid tales of violence and intimidation. Today, Zimbabweans face xenophobia in South Africa. In Latin America, Afro-descendants and indigenous migrants face greater exclusion. Dominicans and Haitians are excluded in Argentina and Brazil, while Central Americans are being expelled from Mexico. The same language of ‘stranger-ism’ is utilised to the same effect as in Australia, Europe, Japan and the US.

Gender Dimensions

Attacks on women's rights, choice and autonomy are part of the discourse in creating enemies. Today, attacks on "gender ideology" and women's human rights defenders have intensified. Migrant women face backlash, demonization and criminalization *as migrants* while also facing the assault on their autonomy *as women*. Migrant women face new constraints while also being limited by the social and cultural constraints of their countries of origin.

Distribution of any benefits that globalisation may have are skewed towards male bias and supported by existing structural inequities like race, caste, class, age, religion, ableism. These are often narrowly measured according to the ability to be productive or useful to the economy, with a historical blindness to women's unpaid labour in the home and community. At every stage of the value chain of globalisation, women's situations are more precarious and fraught with layers of complexity than their male counterparts. Women who migrate independently become economic providers and primary household decision-makers, present in public and social roles and reconfiguring gender relations and power equations in these new spaces. This also makes migrant women subject to racist and xenophobic attacks as they demonstrate agency, autonomy and leadership.

Recommendations – States should:

- Challenge the racial and ethnic dimensions of migration inclusion and exclusion and treatment of migrants in destination countries. This can be done through education and constructive dialogue.
- Affirm "hope-based" communications efforts that focus on common concerns and collective responses. <https://www.openglobalrights.org/hope-guide/>
- In law and practice, work to end racial discrimination, taking effective measures to condemn all acts, manifestations and expressions of racism.
- Build campaigns around common challenges faced by all workers. These might focus on labour rights, social protection floors, housing, healthcare, clean water and sanitation, and economic security for all, including migrants regardless of migratory status.
- Challenge, regulate and hold legally accountable tech giants that have enabled the manipulation of social media.
- Affirm women's human rights, including migrant women's rights, in policy, including women's freedom from violence, access to healthcare, including reproductive and sexual healthcare, access to education and decision-making positions in all spheres of society.

Relevant International Policy

Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: (16) full inclusion and social cohesion; (17) Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration; (19) Create conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development.

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), General recommendation No. 30 on discrimination against non-citizens, CERD/C/64/Misc.11/rev.3.