

## Feminist Fridays: Conversations about Labour Migration from a Feminist Lens

**Feminist Fridays: Conversations about Labour Migration from a Feminist Lens** is a collaborative initiative of [Association for Women's Rights in Development \(AWID\)](#), [Focus on Labour Exploitation \(FLEX\)](#), [Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women \(GAATW\)](#), [Solidarity Center](#), and [Women in Migration Network \(WIMN\)](#).

During the course of six sessions, we will think through complex issues and build/share knowledge and learn from each other. We will start with a discussion on 'what is a feminist lens on labour migration' and will move on to feminist research, advocacy, organising and media. The final session will be on imagining feminist futures on labour migration. Panellists will come from academia, NGOs including migrant worker led organisations, trade unions and media.

### Rationale

Labour migration, within and across national borders, is part of the lived experience of many women and men in today's world. In 2017, ILO estimated that there were 164 million international migrant workers: 96 million men and 68 million women. According to UN/DESA, prior to the onset of COVID-19, the number of international migrants had reached 281 million. This was in line with the upward trend in international migration for over two decades. While most countries do not document labour migration within their national borders, there is enough evidence to conclude that the number of workers who migrate from rural to urban and industrialised areas within their own countries has also been growing over the last few decades. And despite the disruptions created by COVID-19, people continue to move within and across borders.

Alongside the rise in scale, complexity and diversity of migration, it has also been the subject of increased policy interest. The international community has recognised linkages between international migration and development in recent UN instruments, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

The reality of labour migration, however, tells us that states' commitments are yet to be realised. A large number of internal and cross-border migrants work in the informal economy and earn very low wages. Many migrant workers are on short or fixed-term contracts and do not have adequate rights protection. It needs to be noted that the steady rise in labour migration is taking place alongside global trends of falling labour force participation, decent work deficits and rising unemployment that has been exacerbated in the last year due to the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic. Indeed, the precarity of migrant workers is integrally linked to the pattern of capitalist development, and social-structural conditions in which the production and social reproduction of labour take place. More than a year into the pandemic, the crisis in the world of work is a stark reminder that the current models of development have failed a large number of people, depleted natural resources and caused harm to the eco-system. If the current economic regime and development paradigm continue, exploitative labour schemes will also continue, despite the promises made in the international instruments.

The exacerbation of inequalities has particularly impacted women, who are overrepresented in the informal sector. Women migrant workers typically face gender-specific barriers to formal employment with full access to social protection and other labour rights. Most work opportunities for female migrants are in stereotypically female jobs. As such, they are typically employed in low-level service jobs, such as domestic work, or low-level industrial or agricultural jobs.

Low-paid and precarious jobs have meant that women are bearing the brunt of unemployment and have lower rates in employment reengagement due to enhanced care responsibilities and increased discrimination. Due to the layoffs, there is a risk that their work permits will not be renewed, resulting in risk of deportation. There has also been an increased risk of abuse and exploitation by employers aware of the precarity of migrant women's situation. At the same time, many migrant and refugee women have been working as 'essential workers' (for example, in hospitality, care, and agriculture) with increased risks to their health due to a lack of protective equipment and their inability to fully access social protection and other human and labour rights.

How then should we engage with the issue of labour migration? How can we stand in solidarity with migrant workers, work with state and non-state actors for realisation of their rights but also critique the economic and development paradigms that increase precarious migration? How can we celebrate the agency and strength of migrant workers while also highlighting the abuse and exploitation they face? Does intersectional feminism enable us to understand and analyse the complex realities around labour migration? Would feminist politics help us in reimagining our futures? What would an intersectional feminist model of labour migration look like? Do we have colleagues based within migrant worker-led organisations, migrant-support groups, academia, media and trade unions in various regions of the world who are critically engaging with the issue of labour migration and working towards realisation of rights at home, abroad and on the way?

As we grapple with these questions in our work and share our dreams and dilemmas with each other, planning a series of structured conversations with a larger group of colleagues seems like a good idea.

## **The Sessions**

### **Session 1: Our starting point: What exactly is a feminist approach to labour migration?**

23 April 2021, 1 pm GMT

Migration scholars have talked about 'feminisation of labour migration', and there is a consensus that migration is a gendered phenomenon. What is an intersectional feminist lens on labour migration? **How** and **why** does it differ from the 'traditional' understanding of labour migration?

**Moderators:** Marianne Mesfin Asfaw (Logistics and Administrative Coordinator, AWID) and Bandana Pattanaik (International Coordinator, GAATW)

**Panellists:** Dr Nicola Piper (Professor of International Migration and Founding Director of the Sydney Asia Pacific Migration Centre at the University of Sydney); Dr Priya Deshingkar (Professor of Migration and Development, University of Sussex); Dr Tanja Bastia (Reader in International Development, University of Manchester) and Dr Mary Boatemaa Setrana, Senior Lecturer, Centre for Migration Studies (CMS), University of Ghana

### **Session 2: Feminist research on labour migration**

14 May 2021, 1 pm GMT

Feminist research seeks to address unequal power structures, challenge dominant patriarchal discourses, and centre the lived experiences of women. What are the implications of carrying out feminist research, especially during a pandemic? Using examples from feminist participatory action research, this session focuses on building knowledge on labour migration from the ground up.

### **Session 3: Writing about labour migration from an intersectional feminist lens**

4 June 2021, 1 pm GMT

Women migrant workers often feature in the media as victims of abuse. As low-wage workers in sectors that have limited rights protections, women migrant workers do experience abuse and gender-based violence. However, migration is also an opportunity for women to *escape* violence, enrich their life experience, acquire new skills, and support themselves and their families. How can we document women's lived experiences without denying them agency? Is it possible to show that vulnerability and agency can co-exist in the same life story? What examples of self-representation do we have by women migrant workers themselves?

### **Session 4: How does a feminist lens inform our advocacy?**

25 June 2021, 1 pm GMT

As 2020 and 2021 have demonstrated, [women are leading resistance movements](#) globally. Women workers have always played a strong role in grassroots activism, yet in the corridors of power they remain invisible. How do we leverage our feminist strengths to systematically create gender-responsive policy mechanisms? What advocacy strategies targeted at improving labour migration policies have succeeded and failed? What does the Global Compact for Migration offer women migrant workers and how do we build a grassroots advocacy movement towards an intersectional feminist agenda for the 2022 International Migration Review Forum (IMRF)?

### **Session 5: Labour migration and intersectional feminist organising**

16 July 2021, 1 pm GMT

Migrating for work takes women (and men) across borders of various kinds. What examples of solidarities across various borders and boundaries do we see in practice? Can feminism help us build solidarities across class, caste, race, ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation and occupation? If so, how? How do we influence union structures to be more inclusive and intersectional to support migrant organising? How do we support women migrant workers' agency to exercise their labour rights? What are alternative forms of workplace organising to support women migrant workers? How do we link migrant worker labor organising efforts with other forms of grassroots organising?

### **Session 6: Envisioning a feminist future in labour migration**

6 August 2021, 1 pm GMT

As the pandemic has shown, the world depends on the work of women, whether in healthcare, elderly and child care or agriculture. As the world shifts its focus to post-pandemic recovery, social justice advocates are calling for structural changes. We ask: If the world of work is changing, what are the chances of producing a feminist world? And how do we get there? As feminists, what changes do we want to see in the arena of labour migration? Do we have examples of where this is already happening? What can we do to make our vision a reality? What power do we have and what gives us hope?

**To register for the whole series, or only some sessions, please fill out [this form](#).**