

We Are All In This Together

*Ensuring No One
is Left Behind in
a Pandemic*

The MFA Story



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SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed from a health crisis to a phenomenon which threatens global human and economic progress, including the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is affecting the health, livelihood, income and security of people across the globe.

This period has seen the largest lockdown in history affecting the employment and livelihood of millions of people, especially workers in the informal sector and marginalized communities.

Migrants are among the most vulnerable categories during the crisis, especially migrant workers. Now, every country in the world has implemented border closures, travel restrictions, prohibitions on arrivals from certain areas, and heightened screening. Many migrants have experienced discriminatory policies, racism and xenophobia. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected millions of migrants working or studying abroad stranded away from home, with unequal or uncertain access to health and other critical services.

In societies across Asia civil society organizations (CSOs) become first responders, stepping up to fill the gaps left by governments and business. This report by Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) provides an account of the extraordinary response and mobilization of civil society to this crisis. It seeks to capture a moment in history when the values of solidarity were expressed in multiple acts of kindness, generosity and advocacy, overcoming fear.

It draws on first hand reports and accounts of individuals and organizations who have been on the frontline in countries of origin and destination. Many have in effect been first responders. At a time when many governments were slow to act, or acted in ways that excluded, civil society led the way, responding from a commitment to shared human dignity.



BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 Crisis Spreads, The World Locks Down

As of May 18th 2020, 4.71 million people have tested positive for the virus and 315,850 human beings have lost their precious lives. More than 4.5 billion people – almost half of the world population has been under quarantine or social distancing policies for months.

The fast spread of the virus, and the absence of a vaccine has required containment strategies based on efficient testing regimes, and enforcement of social distancing policies. Strict lockdown measures and bans on land, air and sea travel have hit the poor hardest, particularly women.

Governments have had to deal with a twin crisis: the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the economic impacts of containment policies. Most governments have put the emphasis on containment, concerned about the potential collapse in health systems and wider institutional collapse. Yet, the impacts of these containment policies have been felt hardest by the common people – workers and their families depending on their labour, without social protection or financial resources to fall back on. Government policies to mitigate containment's impacts have often favored nationals and excluded migrants. In a terrible irony, these migrant workers most at risk, and hit hardest, were also often blamed and stigmatized as vectors for the virus.

Migrant communities in Asia are the worst affected due to the lockdown strategies. The region witnesses large-scale temporary movement of people for work from country to country and within countries. Since the Philippines is a major country of origin for migrant workers in Asia, and Malaysia experiences large scale immigration, seasonal emigration and refugee movements, the lockdown affected all kind of migrants. A legitimate panic spread to migrant workers in the Gulf countries as South Asia and the Gulf region saw a proliferation in the number of infections.

Undocumented workers, especially women domestic workers are the most vulnerable. The absence of information *firewalls* between health and immigration/labour departments means they do not access health facilities for fear of getting caught, detained and deported.



Countries of origin (CoO) and destination (CoD) have been criticized for the situation of migrants during the pandemic for not repatriating the workers and not providing welfare services and basic needs. COVID-19 has exposed already existing structural problems and policy gaps in migration governance. Poor, delayed and discriminatory responses from governments have violated the fundamental human rights of migrant workers, to be treated with dignity.

Civil Society Rises to the Challenge

Most CoOs and CoDs in Asia were little prepared to manage such an extreme health crisis and the immediate socio-economic impacts. Civil society organisations (CSOs) across the world have risen to the COVID-19 challenge and filled the gaps left by governments and business. Even though the operational freedom in many countries in the region was limited, the CSOs responded in an effective and resilient manner. CSOs were able to quickly reach out to the migrant workers, refugees, undocumented workers, domestic workers and migrant families.

Civil society has acted to provide the basic needs for the marginalised and vulnerable populations. It has acted with governments to ensure the effective delivery of vital public health messages. It has challenged governments when they have failed to act, or when they acted in a discriminatory way. Sometimes it has acted as a bridge between the government and migrant communities. Sometimes it has acted to hold government accountable and to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers.

CSOs have provided information about the pandemic to migrant workers and delivered health and economic support in association with government and other actors. Relationships of trust built over years of advocacy have enabled migrant communities to engage with containment strategies. CSOs have been instrumental in advocating for effective and rights-based responses from governments at different levels to ensure the rights of migrant workers in both destination and origin.

Working with governments, individual philanthropists and international agencies and actors, CSOs have demonstrated the importance of a dynamic civil society in effective government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a network of CSOs which believe that migrant rights are human rights, MFA members and partners have responded swiftly to the crisis in many ways and countries.



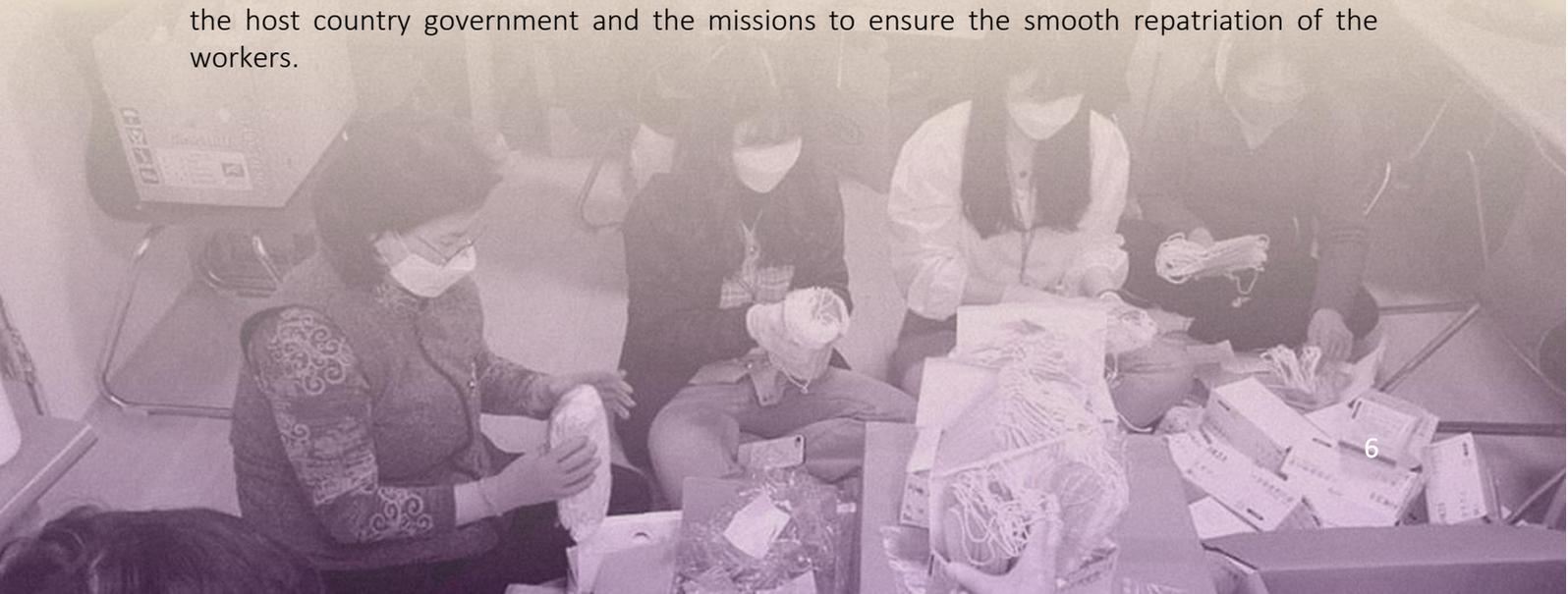
The Response of MFA Members and Partners

Overall, MFA has worked as a focal point linking up all our partners based in both COOs and CODs to ensure the rights and welfare of all migrant workers across the continent. MFA partners in the Asia-Pacific region were active from February when the first COVID-19 cases started being reported in East Asia, with a more sustained response from the second week of March when countries first started announcing lockdowns.

MFA's members and partners have reached out to people in crisis regardless of the migrant status and delivered necessary services. CSOs and trade unions in both CODs and COOs shifted their focus from long-term objectives to immediate relief activities for stranded, jobless migrants. They either work in tandem with the local or national government or fill up the gaps left by the governments. They have come up with new advocacy strategies with the government to support migrants.

Partners in countries such as Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan have delivered, and continue to deliver support services for migrant workers and refugees in the form of food, shelter and other basic amenities. Information dissemination among migrants helped to create awareness about the health crisis and provided advice on preventive measures. Distribution of protective gear was also carried out.

The partners in the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia and Indonesia assisted and advocated for the migrant workers who were either stranded in destination countries or who had returned home during the crisis. As the seriousness of the situation escalated in other parts of Asia, including South Asia and West Asia, all our partners engaged fully in the relief and advocacy activities. There are many migration corridors in the region and all are interconnected. The members and partners of MFA were able to use the MFA platform to network and offer support to each other. The partners in the Gulf countries supported the migrants who lost jobs in the crisis, the undocumented workers who could not access any services and the migrant workers who were stranded due to lock down in poor working and living conditions. With the support of the MFA network in the home countries, the partners in the destination country identified the people in real need of humanitarian assistance and acted as a bridge between the host country government and the missions to ensure the smooth repatriation of the workers.



From the beginning of March, our partners in the Gulf countries distributed reliable online and offline information, in the language of different migrant communities, about the pandemic and the precautions needed to protect the workers from infections. This was also important to counter disinformation and false narratives about the pandemic which were spreading in the Gulf countries.

MFA partners in major countries of origin have also operated in a three-dimensional manner. Initially, they have coordinated with their partners in the destination country to ensure the well-being of the workers, especially the unskilled workers and women, through helpline services and social media. Secondly, they have advocated with the government and missions abroad to ensure the well-being of workers in the destination country by submitting memorandum, releasing statements and by influencing the policy-makers. These interventions from the beginning of lockdown had forced many CoOs to develop comprehensive repatriation strategies.

Finally, MFA partners have supported the internal migrant workers who travel within national borders for work. In large countries such as India, millions of migrant workers have been stranded at their workplace due to sudden lockdown announcements. These migrant workers were in dire need of basic amenities due to lack of income and work. Our partners supported those internally stranded workers in several countries by providing food packets, shelter, protective gear, health check-ups etc.

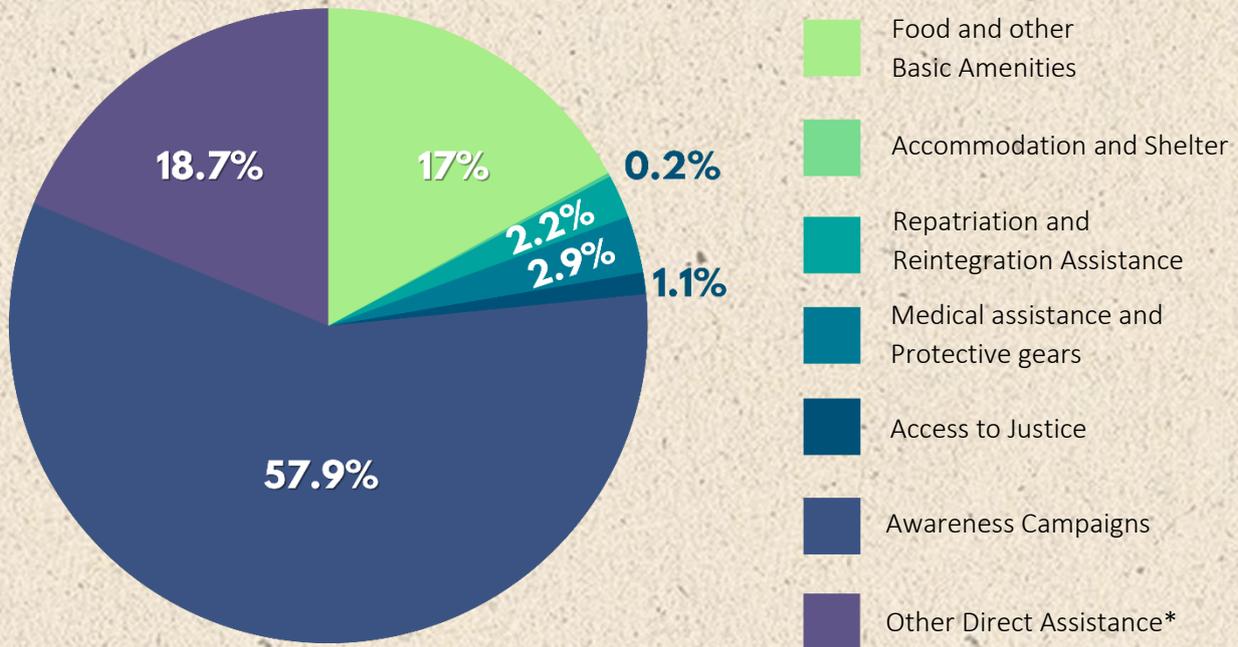
A number of partners have prepared situational analysis reports which have included policy suggestions for governments. The short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies for return, repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers have been prepared and submitted to the governments and partnering networks.



Major ongoing activities of MFA partners during COVID-19:

- Provision of food and essentials for stranded migrants and families in country of origin, destination and also for internal migrants.
- Medical assistance and distribution of protective gear.
- Strengthening advocacy to ensure basic human rights of migrant workers.
- Online and offline awareness campaigns on the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Helpline services for migrants in distress.
- Ensuring access to justice including case/complaints filing.
- Coordinating efforts with government and other stakeholders.
- Conducting basic situational analysis about the conditions of the migrant workers at destination countries and upon return.
- Strengthening networks regionally and globally to fight the human rights violations.
- Developing strategies for post- COVID-19 world of work.
- Assisting repatriation and amnesty in destination countries.
- Assistance for quarantine and post-repatriation life.
- Welfare support for return migrants and their families.
- Ensuring health service access to documented and undocumented workers including basic protective gear.

Percentage-wise Distribution of Direct Assistance by MFA members and partners during the COVID-19 Crisis



** Other direct assistance initiatives include mobile top-up recharge for the workers, financial assistance and so on. These numbers are provided by the members and partners of MFA.*

The next section details the specific activities carried out by MFA members and partners in various countries in Asia from the beginning of nationwide lockdown announcements by the governments in the region.



The Way Forward

Responding to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will go on for weeks and months. Governments will have to prevent a second wave of the virus and protect the health and well-being of its peoples. Governments have to push the economy forward by mobilizing resources and initiating productive activities. The lockdowns will be lifted in every country to prevent further deterioration in economies.

Governments alone cannot manage these responsibilities. CSOs have to fill the gap left by the state, at the same time as demanding the state – and businesses – fulfil their responsibilities to all people, citizens, migrants and refugees. CSOs must advance alternate narratives for human rights-based governance that addresses the structural issues that have made migrants so vulnerable to the worst impacts of the COVID-19. CSOs need to hold Governments accountable and demand improved performance from governments.

Due to the sudden economic collapse, many thousands of migrants have been jobless and some of these have become undocumented. The removal of travel restrictions will enable migrants to return home and the world will witness large-scale repatriation and reverse migration.

A key focus for MFA going forward will be the repatriation and amnesty procedures in destination countries. The partners in the destination countries can develop plans to support those migrants in distress by assisting them to reach out to embassies and by providing food and other basic necessities. MFA partners in the CoO need to focus on the reintegration of workers. Most of the CoOs do not have reintegration programs. The partners could advocate for reintegration programs from governments and develop replicable models of reintegration with the support of grassroots level organizations such as agricultural co-operatives, community and faith-based organizations, local-self-governments and other CSOs.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis it has brought have made clear the need for improved migration governance.

MFA and its partners play a proactive role in the world of migration governance, ensuring the voices of migrant workers and civil society will be heard in policy circles. The short-term and immediate interventions by our members in the form of welfare services, advocacy and partnership with governments and other regional-global networks at both CODs and COOs have already had a significant impact. Now it is time for rebuilding and redefining the world of work and the livelihoods of migrants, ensuring the safe repatriation of migrants who have lost jobs and the reintegration of workers to their home communities.



The lockdown and health crisis show us that 3D workers (Dirty, dangerous and demeaning) are essential workers. They will have a crucial role to play in the 'New Social Contract' along with the care and health workers globally. Many of the international migrant workers from the region are blue collar workers and will remain vulnerable. Thus, ensuring the safety and economic well-being of the blue-collar workers should be the top priority for MFA partners in the coming months. Most importantly, the partners should make attempts to understand the changes in the world of work and prepare new strategies which protect the rights of migrant workers.

Regarding advocacy, there will definitely be new avenues of engagement at the local, national, regional and global level since governments have acknowledged the immediate and effective responses by CSOs. The voices of the CSOs need to be heard in the coming months and years. Everyone needs to try and foster new partnerships and strengthen advocacy activities of MFA members. This document will be updated regularly by incorporating initiatives from our partners and we hope that at least some of their efforts will be replicable. We shall continue this fight against the pandemic and the world will definitely be a better place.





**COUNTRY
REPORTS**



Bangladesh



Bangladesh

As one of the major countries of origin in the region, Bangladesh has experienced a difficult time during the crisis. The ongoing lockdown from March 29th and the stoppage of airline operations made life extremely difficult and often dire for Bangladeshi workers abroad, the immigrants and refugees in Bangladesh, and internal migrant workers in the country. Many migrant workers lost their jobs and livelihoods, some have been stranded due to the travel bans imposed in many countries globally, and many experience discrimination due to the possibility, or mistaken belief, that they are possible carriers of the COVID-19 virus. All our partners are working to capacity to support migrant workers in the region.

For many years Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) has been at the forefront of the efforts to protect the rights of migrant workers not only in Bangladesh, but also in the region. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, RMMRU has been working tirelessly with the migrants at home and abroad to ensure the protection and wellbeing of the migrants and members of their families. “I am well aware of the hard time that everyone is going through at this difficult time. All of our staff members at RMMRU are working almost eighteen hours a day to provide services to migrant households,” reports Dr. Chowdhury Abrar of RMMRU.

The pandemic exposed the current situation of migrants in diaspora and RMMRU is very much alarmed by the increasing number of migrants being stranded and experiencing severe anxiety, starvation, harassment, and physical assaults due to discrimination, as well as exclusion from health care services. The implications of the pandemic are reflected in the emerging global economic crisis which may result in massive job losses, shrinking of the labour market opportunities, as well as reduction of remittance flow. These factors, according to RMMRU, will not only affect the national economy of Bangladesh but will also create transient poverty among remittance dependent households.

Initiatives of the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU)

Through the RMMRU’s hotline and telephone conversations with field staff members, the migrant community was able to express their most urgent needs. To inform the national and global authorities of the hardship of those migrants, RMMRU prepared a Situation Analysis report. RMMRU has proposed short and long term measures to address the challenges faced by the migration sector.

Short term measures proposed by RMMRU for government adoption included: showing respect to those who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 virus. A minute of silence was held on 12 April 2020, at 9 am observed by migrants and migrant rights activists and organizations in Bangladesh and abroad acknowledging the 200 Bangladeshis who had lost their lives at home and abroad due to COVID-19.

RMMRU as the Secretariat of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) mobilized 16 member organizations of the network. BCSM and RMMRU with endorsement of MFA undertook observance of a minute of silence mourning the death of those who died as a result of the pandemic on 12 April. It also sent an Open Letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh demanding creation of a special fund for migrants. BCSM also submitted a Memorandum to the Secretary General of the United Nations urging his intervention to protect migrants in destination countries.



Photos from RMMRU and BCSM's observance of one minute of silence to mourn those who died due to COVID-19



Other short term measures suggested by RMMRU are: the creation of a fund for the affected migrant workers and their families, protection of Bangladesh migrant workers in destination countries, Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) creation of emergency funds to be used as humanitarian cash grants to migrant families who are in distress, convincing governments of destination countries to help stabilize remittance flow, provision of a more gender-sensitive approach in addressing the virus, and to harness the experience of returnee migrants.

Long term measures, on the other hand, include: provision of a database of returnee migrants, as well as the provision of guidelines for the treatment of serving migrants during emergency situations, securitization of due wages and other benefits for migrant workers being deported, awareness creation against irregular migration, changing the education and human resources policy, and the fostering of responsibility of regional groups, especially in the post-COVID-19 phase.

RMMRU believes that if there is any positive side to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the opportunity for policymakers to creatively address a massive health emergency. RMMRU has high hopes that the different ministries of the government, civil society, media, and the private sector will give due consideration to their suggestions.

Women Migrant Workers in Bangladesh are already experiencing intersectional struggles from discrimination and inequalities, gender-specific restrictions in migration policies, insecure forms of labour, racism, and xenophobia. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the condition of migrant women. Women migrant workers are losing their jobs and livelihoods, experiencing a lack of social protection and health care as well as increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence at all stages of migration because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK), is an organization promoting the rights of women migrant workers in Bangladesh and abroad, it has stepped up its efforts to help migrants in need, especially the women migrant domestic workers.

Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK) **Short term, Mid-term, and Long-term Intervention**

As short-term intervention, BNSK conducts Rapid Response through the provision of emergency food and essentials to approximately 500 migrant women. BNSK is also trying to raise awareness among the family and community of migrant workers on how they can protect themselves and their families from the virus, especially to those migrant women living in slums (Dhaka and Manikganj district).



As mid-term intervention, BNSK conducts livelihood capacity building that seeks to address rehabilitation of livelihoods for the women migrant workers facing loss of income and livelihoods amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.



Lastly, as long-term intervention, BNSK is conducting advocacy with the ministry of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment for support and services to the migrant workers and for the sustainable reintegration of women migrant workers. Advocacy is also being pursued with the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Youth, and the Parliamentary standing committee to ensure a special fund for women migrant workers to rescue, repatriate and reintegrate the migrant workers into the mainstream economy. There are also hotlines provided for emergency support to Bangladeshi migrant workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. BNSK strive to commit on all of their initiatives even while facing challenges such as the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to conduct emergency support for migrant workers, and the lack of Institutional Financial support to attend the Rapid Response program and to document the service delivery during the emergency period.

The restrictions on mobility have been a big challenge to deliver support to the migrants. All our partners across the region found the mobility restriction one of the biggest challenges in delivering services. Our third partner in Bangladesh WARBE Development Foundation (WARBE DF) delivers essentials to the vulnerable migrants and actively engages in advocacy during the crisis.

Food and Relief Services by WARBE Development Foundation (WARBE-DF)

WARBE-DF has been working with the 5 sub-district level committees and 20 Union Parishad COVID-19 prevention committees of the government to help identify families in rural areas who need food and other relief services and to generate awareness of COVID-19. Upon identifying migrant workers in need, WARBE has helped 320 migrant families with food support and also assisted the government in the continuous monitoring of the conditions of 38 families who are in quarantine.

Awareness campaigns and over-the-phone consultations

There are also awareness campaigns organized by WARBE-DF (i.e. the distribution of leaflets) and they also provide assistance to returnee migrants and their families through over-the-phone consultations (i.e. referring callers to hospitals and responding to their queries concerning migration). WARBE-DF has helped 50 migrants and their family members with health support and referrals to different hospitals. In total, WARBE-DF has managed to reach 3,000 families through their over-the-phone consultations, campaigns, and distribution of leaflets.



Lobbying with government and coordination with other CSOs

WARBE-DF also works in lobbying the government to prepare a midterm & long term strategy to support the migrants and their families following the impact of COVID-19. They collaborate with other organizations including Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) in drafting a memorandum calling for financial assistance for migrant workers and they have sent an open letter to the Honorable Prime Minister of Bangladesh and cooperated with a campaign to commemorate the lives of Bangladeshis lost due to COVID-19 called the "One minute of silence," campaign observed on 12 April 2020 in Bangladesh and abroad. Information has also been shared with/via the electronic & print media about the safety & security & emergency support of migrants and their family members during the COVID-19 crisis.

Health and food support provided by WARBE-DF

The return and immediate rehabilitation of migrants during the crisis is another area of concern. The returnee migrants, especially the women and low-skilled workers, are particularly vulnerable in situations where the virus is spreading together with an absence of economic activities. According to our partner in Bangladesh, the Association for Community Development (ACD) 4,249 women, including women migrant returnees, faced different forms of domestic violence in April this year during the nationwide shutdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a staggering 1,672 women admitted they faced violent incidents for the first time in their lives. The men and women who have returned from a country of destination during March/April are in a more vulnerable situation as most of them were not paid off by their employers. They may have no work/job

in their locality due to lock down. They may have food insecurity and increased domestic violence due to tensions within the family to meet daily needs. Potential migrants (who were about to leave for a job abroad) were prevented from travelling although they had paid a big amount of money to local brokers/recruiting agencies. They are not able to repay their debt and the debt amount, together with interest, is increasing day by day. In this context ACD made crucial intervention in Bangladesh, especially among return migrants and their families.

Association for Community Development (ACD) Initiatives

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) is MFA's partner in Bangladesh which focusses on access to justice and the human rights of migrants and refugees. They have made key interventions during the crisis.

ASK is a human rights and legal aid organisation. In view of such, ASK has opened 3 additional helplines along with its one regular helpline and disseminated information widely in order to assist and support as many people as required assistance. ASK has also prepared two Human Rights situation reports whereby the overall human rights situation amid COVID-19 was documented monthly since March 2020, when the virus first hit Bangladesh. The issues relating to Migrants rights were highlighted in the reports.

ASK is also one of the active members of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration (BCSM), which comprises 16 national organisations. On 20 April, BCSM shared an open letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh appealing for creating a fund for distressed migrants and their families in Bangladesh affected by the global COVID-19 crisis and urged for the creation of a much larger fund than the Tk200 core that the government had announced that it would create. ASK along with BCSM shared a memorandum with the United Nations General Secretary informing him, amongst others, about the grave consequences that the Bangladeshi migrants were facing in other countries. It mentioned how these countries laid off workers, even those with a valid work permit, and were forcefully deporting and repatriating them back to Bangladesh. It further specified how many of the workers have lost their jobs due to their contracts being terminated and how this is having a huge impact in Bangladesh.

ASK is involved actively with other networks in advocacy to ensure the rights of migrants are protected. ASK is a human rights and legal aid organisation. It does not provide any sort of humanitarian assistance in any circumstance. During this time, ASK collected information about 10 returnee migrant workers. Additionally, ASK is conducting situation analysis [still at its drafting stage] of 10 families.

The challenge gets bigger for our partners in Bangladesh since the repatriation of Bangladeshi workers have begun from Gulf countries and other major destination countries. Efforts are ongoing to provide health support and post-repatriation assistance to migrant workers in distress, along with the constant support for the immigrant and internal migrants within the country.



India





India

India announced a nationwide lockdown and travel ban from March 22, 2020. Reflecting the global reaction to the developing health crisis there was panic and uncertainty among the international and internal migrant workers in India about the future. The unexpected lockdown announcement, loss of employment and inability to return to the homeland continues to cause concern. Due to the lack of access to health services, absence of proper quarantine facilities and provision of COVID-19 test kits, there are major concerns for the Indian migrants in destination countries.

Another concern is the panic experienced among the Indian workers in the Gulf due to the delay in response by the missions and the unexpected lockdown. The massive demand for repatriation remains the single most important issue. However, the increase in the rate of Indian return migrants among the COVID-19 affected persons in India has caused anti-migrant feeling among the general public in the country. The next set of concerns are meeting the demand for immediate repatriation, dealing with the anti-migrant sentiments among the people and the reintegration of workers. As the largest receiver of remittance, India is expecting a steep fall in the remittance and it will definitely have an impact on the economy and the families of migrants. Since most of the migrant workers are unskilled or semi-skilled workers, reintegration of those workers should be assisted by government and civil society organizations. MFA's network in India provides various welfare supports for migrants in destination country and support for migrants upon return to the homeland.

India experiences the largest internal movement for work from less-developed, poorer Indian states to more affluent states. Restricted mobility for internal migrant workers and provision of welfare services in the destination states are major concerns. The sudden announcement of lockdown coupled with the closure of income sources put these workers in difficulty. Migrant workers do not receive enough support from the Indian government as it focuses more on the prevention of the spread of disease than provision of support and livelihood for affected migrant workers. The CSOs in the country are providing them with food and shelter using their vast network, and assisting the governments as well.

Among the partners, Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) with its network in the Gulf countries has supported the Indian migrant workers in distress due to the containment measures and financial crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. CIMS has assisted migrant workers to lobby authorities for repatriation. They have coordinated efforts to return internal migrants to Kerala where the organization is based.

Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) Initiatives

Once COVID-19 hit the major destination countries of Indian migrant workers, especially Keralites, CIMS effectively used its network of individuals and organizations in the Gulf countries to understand the situation. Even before India announced its lockdown, CIMS had provided guidelines for the team member to provide awareness among the workers through local social network groups. It helped a certain section of workers in all Gulf countries either to come back to India or to start practicing social distancing.

CIMS has informed Norka-roots about the situation in labour camps and the condition of undocumented and documented domestic workers in the Gulf. All calls for clarification and support were directed to Norka and the National government for further assistance.

The panic created by the slow reaction of Indian embassies to the queries of workers was duly relayed to the Indian missions by our volunteers. As a result, Indian missions in Saudi Arabia and Oman have conducted online meetings with the community volunteers, including CIMS's diaspora actors, to understand the grassroot level situation.

The distribution of pamphlets and announcements through radio and other online platforms were conducted by networks of CIMS's partners and later the embassies joined forces with them. CIMS attended to the cases of stranded Indian students in the Philippines and Malaysia with the support of MFA and provided support for the students and their families. CIMS intervened in the concerns of internal migrants as well and coordinated efforts to support the Keralites in other Indian states in terms of medical assistance.

In the next stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the virus spread increased, the CIM's network focused on providing food and shelter for the stranded workers in all Middle East countries. Since most of the Indian workers use medicines from India, due to the high cost of medicines in the CODs, CIMS's volunteers alerted the government and Indian mission about the issue and coordinated efforts to bring in medicines through cargo flights. All our diaspora actors organized online awareness campaigns and shared the news of solidarity from the governments and society in Kerala to counter misinformation that was creating panic among expats. The next focus was on the undocumented workers and the workers who lost their jobs. CIMS networks publicized the situation of those workers in the social media and local newspapers and received immediate responses from local authorities and Indian missions. They further assisted seven people with highly vulnerable conditions and provided government support for them with support from MFA. Since Kuwait had already started processing the amnesty, CIMS decided to support a few domestic workers when other diaspora organizations and philanthropists were going through difficult times in CODs.

In India, CIMS has coordinated around 35 academicians, CSOs and trade unions to submit a statement on the current situation of international migrants in CODs along with a set of short-term and long-term suggestions. The statement was submitted to the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of External Affairs on April 19th. Now CIMS and its network are focusing on the collection of data about the situation of people in labour camps, the details of Indian COVID-19 patients in the CODs, and migrants' access to health services. CIMS has plans to focus on the health conditions of health workers and care workers as well. CIMS has also begun discussions with government and other agencies in India on the feasibility of various reintegration programs for return migrants.

Another partner in India, Emigrant Welfare Forum (EWF) also effectively coordinated initiatives to support the internal and international migrant workers and advocated for improved government interventions.

Coordination: Key Action for Supporting Migrants in times of COVID-19 — Emigrant Welfare Forum (EWF) Experience

Coordination is at the center of the initiatives undertaken by EWF during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is through coordination that they are largely able to carry out support to migrants in need. A number of unscrupulous and opportunistic recruiters have been taking advantage of the vulnerable migrant workers that lose their jobs, by trying to engage them in illegal procedures for migration as well as unfair and exploitative agreements to secure employment.

To address this, EWF has coordinated with the police department in providing awareness camp of these issues and has undertaken information dissemination using pamphlets to promote legal procedures with recruitment agencies.

EWF also coordinated with the judicial department of India for the conduct of financial and legal awareness camps as well as human rights and migrants' rights programs to broaden awareness of the vulnerable migrants and their families of their rights. Through their volunteer, Mr. Swadesh Parkipandla, EWF initiated a project to help seasonal migrant workers, specifically construction workers, who came from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Odisha and Delhi through the distribution of food items like rice, pulses and oil with the help of donors and district labour officers in Karimnagar city. Mr. Swadesh also organized the collection and submission of data about migrant workers in need, to aid a more rapid response from government agencies. Through this, EWF



has helped rescue 13 migrants in need including children and elders and provided support and shelter through the government. Seasonal migrant workers are amongst the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they dominate the low-paying, hazardous and informal market with jobs in key sectors in urban destinations, today they are facing unemployment and some are being stranded and unable to provide for themselves and their families due to lockdowns.

The difficulties in getting food and shelter, maintaining jobs and livelihoods, (those working on crops cannot go back to their work), the issues of lack of health care, the shutting down of malls and other infrastructures as well as the suspension of public transportation due to the lockdown has affected the internal migrants who are mostly seasonal workers. They are still walking from the north to the south of India wishing to go back to their communities and enduring fatigue and hunger while police brutality towards them continues to increase and worsen their burden. Violence can even be perpetrated against the staff of different NGOs and CSOs as well as activists. Most people have no idea who to contact for help or to report abuse, maltreatment and racism.

Our partner National Workers Welfare Trust (NWWT) liaises with people in need and shares contact numbers or helplines to them, with the help of national networks. It also addresses increasing racism.

National Workers Welfare Trust (NWWT) Initiatives

Mobilization from the Congregation

Because of the complex struggles, especially of migrants in India, NWWT has acted in various ways to help. They have mobilized materials and distributed goods and helped people in AP and Hyderabad contact distribution officials. NWWT was able to mobilize help in the early days from its congregation. The congregation was also able to mobilize groceries for 1000 people and has also provided clothes, bed sheets, and soap for 200 people.



NWWT's goods and materials distribution to communities in Andra Pradesh and Hyderabad

Women Migrant Workers

NWWT is trying to get in touch with women domestic workers, to find out if they are being provided with proper shelters, or if they are being paid or getting their appropriate salaries. A Joint action committee of women and transgender individuals helps link migrants to available services. There is also a women's group that cooks and distributes food for those that are in most need.

Coordination

In terms of coordination, NWWT is involved with the district authorities to find out the names of arriving or returning people, checking with the authorities who are the people in quarantine and helping to monitor their conditions as well as asking people to comply with quarantine policies. NWWT are also conducting over the phone coordination, dealing with many calls from migrants asking for help and assistance. Lastly, NWWT lobby state government to extend welfare to migrants to help them go home or provide them with basic necessities.

NWWT in collaboration with the St. Francis School Secunderabad have distributed 800 dry ration packets to families of domestic workers, waste pickers, vendors, cleaners and daily wage workers at Buggalabasti. There are also food distributions done for daily wage earners and construction workers with the cooperation of the diocese of Kadapa as well as distribution, with the collaboration of municipal corporators, of sanitizers and masks to Kadapa town, an area where there has been many COVID-19 positive cases.

Awareness Campaigns

NWWT staff have increased people's awareness about the deadly disease. They have collaborated with the government medical team. The organization informed people about the risks associated with the COVID-19 infection especially for those who have migrated. The organisation urged migrants to follow advice given by the government and to stay at home for at least 20 days to avoid virus contamination. Information sessions on prevention measures for COVID-19 are also conducted by NWWT.

Other assistance provided by the organization include: distribution of 1000 masks to people, distribution of cooked food to daily wage earners as well as providing cooked food for 60 families that depends on daily wage earners alone. After collaborating with Christu Jyoti Congregation sisters, NWWT was able to extend support to these families for 10 days with dry rations such as rice, dal, oil, salt and wheat powder.



Pakistan



Pakistan

The Pakistan government announced lockdown on April 1st in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and this lockdown was extended twice. However, the number of cases are increasing gradually. Many of the repatriated migrant workers, especially from Gulf countries, have tested positive upon return. Civil society organizations in the country have tried to take care of the well-being of the migrants in the destination country and organize effective repatriation and reintegration to the home country.

Our only partner in Pakistan 'Pakistan Rural Workers Social Welfare Organization' (PRWSWO) has been in the forefront of welfare and advocacy activities for the migrants during the crisis.

Initiatives of Pakistan Rural Workers Social Welfare Organization' (PRWSWO)

PRWSWO is involved in activities such as COVID-19 awareness raising, distribution of hygiene kits and ration materials to needy and poor rural families, including migrant workers, during the crisis. PRWSWO volunteers are working hard to counter the spread of misinformation. PRWSWO in collaboration with Civil Society Network and district administration engages in relief activities. PRWSWO attempts to use online platforms to co-ordinate efforts. In addition, PRWSWO strongly advocates for financial support for return migrants who are in dire need of livelihood support.



Nepal



Nepal

The situation in Nepal is relatively better compared to its neighboring countries. However, the country also relies on lockdown to contain the virus as well as other mobility restrictions. However, the Nepalese government is more concerned about the increasing number of cases being reported among the Nepali workers in destination countries. Apart from the increasing mortality rate among the Nepali workers, discrimination in treatment, inadequate quarantine facilities, non-payment of salaries, wage cuts, layoffs, loss of jobs are other major concerns. The Nepali government are yet to decide on the possibility of repatriating migrants in distress from destination countries. In this regard, MFA's partners in Nepal have a lot to offer. Among them Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum (People Forum) has provided various support services for migrants.

Initiatives of Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum (People Forum)

People Forum has supported migrant workers during the COVID-19 in the following ways:

- Filing a successful case (with interim order) to repatriate and reintegrate migrant workers.
- Organizing central level and provincial level online interaction and consultation for the repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers. (participants 280)
- Preparing (completed within 7 days) a Civil society policy paper on repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers
- Initiating advocacy for repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers. Sending letters to political parties and parliamentarians and media mobilization, which generated huge media coverage, on the Supreme Court order.
- Sharing/ discussing with the international arena the achievement of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) cases
- Providing legal counselling service to 300 migrant workers
- Providing input as a member of the multi-stakeholders Task Force on COVID-19 and Migration
- Pursuing a dialogue with local government for reintegration programs for this fiscal year through its network.

People Forum's activities during the crisis was affected by the lack of funds, restrictions in mobility, lack of experience with digital technology and poor access to digital technology in the interior parts of Nepal.

The dependents of the Nepali migrant workers face a tough time due to the absence of remittances. The restricted mobility of workers has even affected the repatriation of mortal remains. It shows that the issues and concerns need to be advocated effectively.

Our partner Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC) dealt with such cases with utmost care in both Nepal and destination countries.

Initiatives of Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC)

The organization works to facilitate the cases of migrant workers amidst COVID-19. The cases of migrant workers were referred to related embassies in the destination country. Likewise, coordination with Non-Resident Nepali Association was done to provide basic services –food and accommodation to stranded migrants. PNCC assists the migrant workers to complete the various forms provided by embassies for the purposes of rescue and repatriation. In collaboration with NHRC in Qatar, PNCC is working on the cases involving ‘pending salary’ of migrant workers. Through an online platform they are also disseminating important information issued by the destination country related to COVID-19. ‘Outreach coordinators’ in Qatar, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia regularly follow up the cases of migrant workers in close coordination with relevant embassies and other Nepalese diaspora organizations. The lack of accommodation for workers during the crisis was conveyed to the respective embassies by PNCC representatives. PNCC were able to reach out to 1049 workers including 424 distressed migrants.

The migrant workers are desperate to return home due to fear, losing jobs, irregular situations and family pressure. The government of Nepal did not act promptly to respond to their well-being and prioritise their return. The missions abroad have limited human and financial resources to cater to the large migrant population desiring to return and the coordination and cooperation among and between the different government and nongovernment agencies was lacking.

One of our members in Nepal, Asian Forum for Migrant’s Centre prepares for the reintegration of workers to the country.

Initiatives of Asian Forum for Migrant’s Centre (Asian Forum)

Asian Forum has initiated a platform to facilitate the reintegration of the returning migrant workers through a dedicated email and office telephone where an individual can put their queries, concerns and suggestions and the organization can refer them to the relevant agencies or respond to them at the organization’s capacity. Asian Forum has been contacting the migrant workers at the destination countries through its network at the destination country and helping these workers to reach out to the relevant missions or supporting agencies. According to Asian Forum, the lack of guidelines for the response system in destination countries, by the Nepali mission, along with the absence of long term reintegration strategies are the biggest challenges for the workers and CSOs in Nepal. Among the migrants, women migrants are the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 situation.

Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS) Nepal is an organization run by returnee women migrant workers who are working for the rights of women migrant workers and their families to make migration a safe and dignified work for women migrant workers. They do this through advocacy, capacity building, information dissemination, networking, and reintegration programs. AMKAS works closely with MFA to protect the rights of women migrants.

Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS) Nepal' Activities to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Women Migrant Workers

To address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, AMKAS Nepal has been actively working to reach out to its vulnerable members in Nepal as well as women migrant workers in CODs. It has been pursuing activities to help them through the process of documenting evidence based stories of women domestic workers from countries of destination, and using social media to spread awareness on COVID-19. AMKAS answers calls from distressed migrant workers through the mobile application 'Shuvayatra'.

AMKAS initiated an economic empowerment program to 30-35 jobless returnee women migrants in Kathmandu which has continued during the lock down situation (Earn from home). Over a three month period the organization mobilized returnee migrants to reach out to at least 80 migrants abroad and use their stories for evidence based advocacy to develop relevant reintegration programs for returnee migrants.

According to an AMKAS' informant in UAE, there are around 2500 women waiting to be sent home out of which 135 are either pregnant, or with babies. They are either migrants who have lost their jobs, are undocumented migrants, or migrants who have left their job for fear of COVID-19. An organization informant (Non-Resident Nepali Association Member) from Kuwait has informed us that there are about 3500 migrants, out of which 50% are women, who for a month have been desperately waiting in shelters to return home. They are either migrants who have lost their jobs, or they are undocumented migrants, or they have left their jobs due to the fear of COVID-19.

AMKAS Nepal has a shelter with 20 beds which can currently accommodate 10 workers by following social distancing norms. AMKAS Nepal urges the Government of Nepal to understand the severity of the condition of distressed women migrant workers as soon as possible and prepare for future quarantine and isolation activities.

Like AMKAS, our partner in Nepal, Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) also advocates for the rights of women migrant workers, especially during the time of COVID-19.

Women's Rehabilitation Centre's (WOREC) Interventions During the Crisis

WOREC is conducting a survey on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrant women workers in Nepal with the purpose of:

- Identifying the choices that returnee migrant women workers have while the country tries to engage in battling COVID-19 with limited resources.
- This survey, in particular, will look into government policy and decision making around COVID-19 and how it has affected the returnee women migrant workers, including psychological stress that families of women migrant workers suffer when these women have been denied the opportunity to return to Nepal.
- The impacts on their livelihood and status in society due to assumptions by the community that migrant workers are transmitters of COVID-19.

WOREC has developed a report to highlight the rights and issues facing women's migrant workers and returnees, and WOREC have submitted this report to the working municipalities in 4 districts i.e. Kailali, Morang, Udaypur and Dang, in coordination with Returnee Women's Migrant Workers (RMW) network to pressurize the federal government to take action immediately.

At the same time, WOREC has been providing Psychosocial counselling over the phone via its 28 counsellors. The organization is running 8 Safe Shelters which are open to the victims of gender based violence including returnee women from India as well as other countries of destination. WOREC has also been supporting local government to collect the data of returnees as well as migrant workers in the countries of destination. WOREC is also monitoring quarantine situations and has recommended local government make quarantine gender friendly/responsive. Three cases reported to the organization concerning migrant domestic workers have been submitted to the UN National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

Initiatives of POURAKHI Nepal

The efforts by civil societies to support the migrants in distress during the crisis have been invaluable but the Nepali government is yet to develop a comprehensive strategy to specifically address the needs of migrants. Our partner 'POURAKHI' is in frequent communications with the UN agencies and other International organizations for support for the vulnerable migrants from Nepal. The announcement of possible repatriation by the Nepali government in the coming days and months poses more challenges for the civil society and the government of Nepal. It requires tremendous co-ordination and determination to handle the massive repatriation process with limited resources.

Sri Lanka





Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's response to the virus is recognized as one of the best in the world, at least among South Asian countries. Sri Lanka is the only country in the South Asian region which did not adopt lockdown strategies to mitigate the virus. However, the country's response to the request for repatriation from Sri Lankan workers abroad was criticized.

Sri Lanka has a large number of migrant workers overseas as a proportion of its overall population. Our partners in Sri Lanka assisted government initiatives such as 'Contact Sri Lanka' and spread awareness campaigns among workers in the initial stages of infection. Later on they became involved in advocacy and networking to ensure the well-being of Sri Lankans living in destination countries.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, return and reintegration of affected migrant workers has been one of the biggest challenges today and of a large concern for organizations dealing with the welfare of migrants and migrant workers, like Migrant Services

Center (MSC). Migrant workers being properly paid and provided with support such as the purchase of air-tickets. Measures to be undertaken upon migrant workers return need to be secured and monitored.

Initiatives of Migrant Services Center

The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment of migrant workers means that MSC has already started providing training to returnee migrant workers and their families on Entrepreneurship to help them establish their own income stream. However, lots of intervention is required from all levels of government and authorities.

MSC has improved its communication channels for migrant workers needing help. They can communicate with MSC at any time through WhatsApp, Viber or any other communication mode when urgent intervention is required. There is an unofficial hotline that uses a mobile phone from a council member of MSC of NWC. MSC also intervenes on small cases. One of its interventions resulted in the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) directly communicating with the mission offices in the destination country and them asking to be regularly kept in touch with the mission office to be updated on health conditions. MSC has provided educational awareness through digital modes on how to take precautionary measures to stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic and MSC has helped to share contact details of Sri Lankan mission offices in countries of destination.

Another partner in Sri Lanka, Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM) not only focused on the repatriation and reintegration of migrants, but also on the welfare of migrant families in the country. Migrant families who solely depend on the money sent from abroad by their family member employed abroad have been denied government relief packages because of 'being a migrant family'. There are so many migrant families who, prior to the respective family member secures employment abroad, had been considered below poverty line and therefore was entitled for government's social welfare facility called 'Samurdhi' under which the family received a monthly food ration. However, with the departure of the family member for employment abroad the Social Welfare benefit is withdrawn from these families. These families have been seriously affected due to deprivation of such entitlement by the government. In this context, ACTFORM assisted the families by providing direct and indirect assistance and advocated for the welfare of migrants at the Ministry of Labour.

Initiatives of ACTFORM

As a network of community-based organizations working in 13 districts out of 25, they have been in touch with the migrant families through our network members for their welfare. The major concern was the poor access to remote areas in the country due to lockdown and curfew. Even though they have managed to contact many families over phone, providing direct assistance was not possible. However, ACTFORM made efforts through the relevant government officials (Development Officers) to make sure these families are looked after with whatever support they could offer.

Based on the information provided by the network leaders, ACTFORM advocated with relevant government authorities including the Minister of Labour for immediate intervention for the welfare of migrant workers and their families. ACTFORM has participated in a number of meetings with the minister of Labour in this regard and submitted a policy document for the minister to make decisions for immediate implementation as well as for long term implementation for the welfare, reintegration and reemployment abroad these returnees. ACTFORM raised approximately USD 3000 for any kind of intervention. Through 18 community-based organizations, ACTFORM were able to support 170 individuals and family members during the crisis. The major support was in the form of food rations. Apart from that, their network members were supported with mobile communication top-ups to maintain communication with affected migrant workers and families.

Our partner Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB) Sri Lanka Chapter has advocated for the rights of migrant workers through online platforms and advocacy meetings.

Maldives





Maldives

The situation in the Maldives worsened from March. The highly populated island nation with limited resources found it difficult to deal with the spread of the COVID-19 virus especially in the dormitories of migrant workers. By the discretionary powers vested in the Minister of Health by Section 33 of the 7/2012 Public Health Act the Minister declared a State of Public Health Emergency for a period of 30 days from 12th March 2020 this was later extended.

Since all government offices have been closed since 19th March 2020 there is difficulty in obtaining services from these offices. Though there are ways to submit letters and documents online, this is difficult for many migrant workers who may not be aware or may not have access to the internet.

Our partner in the Maldives, Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB), is an organization with its main focus on providing free legal aid to vulnerable and marginalized communities, including migrant workers. The organization is lobbying the government to take the necessary actions to safeguard the rights of these communities. They are also bringing issues faced by migrant workers to the attention of the authorities.

Initiatives by Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB)

LBB's call center operates for 24 hours a day supporting people, including migrant workers, with legal advice and legal aid during this pandemic. They have received many calls about employment issues. They have given legal advice on how to proceed with claims and how to register with the job center (a government initiative to provide relief to workers who lose their jobs).

Although the organization was running solely on donations and didn't have proper funding during this difficult time, they provided online services to support people in need.



Malaysia



Malaysia

The pandemic reached Malaysia in January. Even though the number of cases remained low, the massive population of immigrants, and Malay seasonal workers in Singapore, was a concern in the country. In response to migrants losing their source of income, due to the Movement Confinement Order, (MCO) which was enforced from 18 Mar 2020, MFA's partner in Malaysia, 'Our Journey' took the initiative to reinvent itself from an advocacy organization to that of a humanitarian aid provider. They initiated a program called #Makan4Migrants (which translates to Food for Migrants) on 26 March 2020. The program was essentially to address the immediate concerns of the migrants i.e. access to food (geographically and financially). Bar Council Migrants, Refugees and Immigration Affairs Committee was a supporting partner who were available to provide any legal advice if it was needed.

To begin the program, Our Journey raised funds through WeLoveWeCareWeShare and received donations from the public for the 1st month. As #Makan4Migrants program began receiving good support, private entities approached Our Journey to financially support the program on an ongoing basis. Thereafter a request for public donations was discontinued.

Initiatives by Makan4Migrants Program

Initially, Makan4Migrants identified the migrants who are in dire need of assistance with of help of a few migrant associations such as PERTIM - an Indonesian migrant community organization, AMMPO – a Filipino migrant community organization and Bhalobashi Bangladesh - a Bangladesh migrant Community and a few community leaders. They assisted in compiling a list of migrant communities. The program also works closely with embassies to identify communities that require assistance. The program funds individuals and organizations in Ipoh, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak to serve the migrant communities in their locations and also funds individuals in Klang Valley who provide help for the migrants in their localities.

The initiative provides dry provisions because frequently the migrants being supported do not have refrigerators to keep cooked food or fresh food (most buy vegetable and meat on a daily basis). The program takes into account the cultural preference of the migrants and distributes 6 items to each person (costing between RM55 - 60 per person). Provisions are carefully divided to ensure the migrants and their families receive equal and adequate provisions for a month from the date of delivery.

The initiative channels most of the monetary resources into purchasing the provisions for the migrant workers. The delivery volunteers are paid a small stipend for their petrol cost to cover their 15 – 20 daily deliveries. To ensure that the MCO is not violated a total of 10 persons work on the ground at any one time. People were mobilized to ensure the 10 km local MCO restriction was adhered to. A team of five people collate and finalize the list for distribution. The initiative has engaged a wholesaler to facilitate bulk purchases and delivery to the migrants. When there was no volunteer to deliver the food aid in a particular locality, migrants were asked to find a shop that would agree to online payments and delivery of items to the migrants. Makan4Migrant also provides milk for children below the age of 6, upon request from parents and it has allocated a 3-months milk program for each migrant child identified.



Difficulties in paying the accommodation for rentals remains an important concern for the migrants. The project allocated a budget to pay for the rental of high needs migrants for the months of March, April and May. Rentals were paid directly to the house owners with proof of bank-ins and receipts. Migrants were asked to negotiate with the following suggestions prior to paying the rental:

- (a) To defer payment for a reasonable time.
- (b) Reduction/partial payment of rental to be paid.
- (c) Sharing of house with other migrants to share the rental cost.



From 27 March 2020 to date, the initiative has provided 1-month supply of provisions to about 5500 South East Asians (Indonesians, Filipinos, Burmese, Vietnamese, Cambodians) and South Asian (Nepalis, Sri Lankans, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Pahang, Ipoh, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak; the initiative has provided milk for 80 Indonesian and Filipino children; and April and May rental payments for 9 migrants.

Currently, the program is scheduled to end by 30 June 2020 with the option to extend depending on the needs of migrants and funding.



A graphic of the Singapore flag is positioned on the right side of the page. It consists of two horizontal stripes: a red stripe on top and a white stripe on the bottom. The stripes are slightly offset to the right, creating a layered effect. A green circle with a halftone dot pattern is overlaid on the left side of the red stripe, containing the word 'Singapore' in white serif font.

Singapore



Singapore

After successfully containing COVID-19 cases in February and March, the situation in Singapore took a dramatic turn for the worse in April. Huge numbers of migrant workers living in high-density dormitories became infected. The city state was locked down starting on 7 April, and many dormitories with infection clusters were put under quarantine. By 17 May 2020, Singapore had recorded 28,038 infections, of which over 90% were migrant workers from the dormitories.

Out of about 999,000 Work Permit holders in Singapore (which we treat as synonymous with low-wage migrant workers) about 262,000 are domestic workers. Of the remaining 737,000 non-domestic workers, about 323,000 (44%) live in dormitories. The infections are concentrated amongst these 323,000 dormitory residents. Foreign domestic workers and low-wage migrant workers outside of dormitories have low infection rates similar to the general Singaporean population.

Our partner in Singapore Transient Workers Count Too, (TWC2) which promotes equitable treatment for migrant workers in Singapore was in the forefront of relief activities for the immigrant workers.

Responses from Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2)

When the lockdown was ordered and the dormitories began to be quarantined, TWC2 swiftly changed their mode of operations and shifted their focus. Operationally, they moved to online consulting, and their focus shifted to ensuring that workers stuck in dormitories had the mobile data to remain in contact with TWC2 and their families, as well as providing other forms of support to those no longer able to leave their places of residence. Simultaneously, TWC2 remained attentive to the needs of Special Pass holders – i.e. those workers who had lost their jobs and filed salary or injury claims and were now awaiting resolution of their claims. Many of them had been evicted from their dormitories with their previous employers effectively abandoning them. Pre-COVID-19, these were TWC2's main clients. With the lockdown, claims resolution processes were suspended, and these workers were left in limbo with neither income, accommodation nor any form of support. TWC2 focusses on various service provision and advocacy during the period of crisis.

Services and Assistance

TWC2 launched a publicity campaign to disseminate information about their WhatsApp consultation channels. They also organized a team of volunteers to man the hotlines during the weekends when there was a surge of enquiries coming in. By mid-May however, the number of enquiries was petering out and TWC2 may soon discontinue the weekend service. Many workers had questions regarding what their salary entitlements were under quarantine situations. Other workers requested help in getting essential items they could no longer get for themselves after being quarantined.

To cope with the number of enquiries, TWC2 made audio clips in Tamil and Bengali of the standard advisories that were being given out, to avoid having to repeat the same answers to several workers. These audio advisories were well received and often shared among the workers. The phone top-up program benefitted about 36,800 workers. As of 17 May 2020, TWC2 has spent nearly \$380,000 (approx. US\$268,000). They are about to embark on the second wave of top-ups and are expecting to spend another \$300,000 (US\$211,000) to benefit 30,000 workers, some of which may overlap with the first wave.



Migrants receiving top-up cards as part of TWC2's phone top-up program during COVID-19

In the second week of May 2020, TWC2 gave rent money to about 280 workers, spending about \$85,000 (US\$60,000). The beneficiaries were the Special Pass workers who did not have employer-paid housing. This exercise may be repeated in June with another \$85,000 (US\$60,000) being budgeted. TWC2's free meals program continues even during the lockdown, under an exemption order. Every day volunteers serve about 100 – 150 breakfasts and 200 – 300 dinners. Each worker gets a choice of meat, a vegetable dish, dahl and rice. It is often supplemented with fruits, for which TWC2 has more than enough donors. This continuing program costs about \$30,000 a month (US\$21,000)



TWC2 has a Small Essential Needs team (SEN) with a budget of \$50,000 (US\$35,000) which takes in requests from workers for essential items which, workers quarantined in dorms or hospitals can no longer go out to get. TWC2 has been distributing phone chargers, toiletries, clothing (especially to men taken to hospital when they are prohibited from wearing their contaminated clothing) and food items. This team has also been getting prescription refills for men who were injured in workplace accidents pre-COVID-19, and are still recovering. TWC2 continues to ensure medical

treatment for workers, helping them negotiate with hospitals for early appointment dates despite the focus now being on COVID-19 needs. They recently arranged two surgery dates for a worker suffering from kidney stones; TWC2 also had to strongly advocate to the authorities not to repatriate him before he has recovered from the surgery. TWC2 will be paying for the surgery which is expected to amount to about \$14,000 (US\$9,900).

Advocacy

Throughout this period, TWC2 media efforts have been intense. On average there are 2 to 4 media enquiries a day needing someone to give either background interviews or on-record Skype and Zoom interviews. TWC2 has worked with Al Jazeera, Asahi TV, New York Times, AP, AFP, Thomson Reuters, Los Angeles Times, DW.com, Swiss Radio, Hindustan Times, Rappler, China Global, BBC, South China Morning Post, Huffington Post etc. Journalists have been introduced to workers confined to dorms to enable the journalists to conduct further interviews. TWC2 has also been regularly interviewed by local media and has participated in several webinars. One paper that they published on their website after one of the webinars garnered 65,000 views in two weeks -- for an advocacy-type article 65,000 is considered an exceptionally high readership. As intended, it broadened the conversation from just COVID-19 and dormitories to the larger issue of the way Singapore treats foreign workers and why policies need to change.

TWC2 has benefitted from a surge of donations above the usual funding streams. As of mid-May 2020, COVID-19-related donations now amount to about S\$1.59 million (US\$ 1.12 million) with more money pledged but not yet received. This is in addition to donations in kind, such as regular 3-times-a-week delivery of fruits to supplement the meal program, desserts for Ramadan and Eid, truckloads of toiletries, extra value added by Telcos to the phone card top-up program (e.g. TCW2 add \$10 value and the Telco gives the worker \$12 value).

TWC2 believes that the major challenge in Singapore is the increasing rate of infections among the workers who live in the dormitories. More than 90 percent of infections in the country are found there. Workers have reported limited access to health care and underpayment, or no payment of salaries, as a result of lack of employment. Safe distancing in the rooms where workers reside is also not adhered to, resulting in many workers getting infections. Only limited efforts are being made to reduce the density of dormitories. The government is not concerned about infections spreading in the dormitories as long as the workers are kept within its premises. Domestic workers have been instructed by the government not to leave the house unless they are performing essential tasks for their employers. Rest days for them have been compromised and many have reported overwork, and increase in verbal abuse.

Another partner in Singapore, Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), launched widespread support services for the migrant workers in distress.

Initiatives of Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME)

HOME has stepped up outreach efforts to workers outside of dormitories and provided assistance such as phone top ups, food, case work and legal advice. Financial assistance has also been given for workers without a place to stay. They provide casework support and counselling to domestic workers. So far, HOME has assisted almost 1000 workers affected by the pandemic.

HOME is committed to serving the migrant worker community in Singapore by doing the following:

Humanitarian Assistance

HOME is providing financial emergency assistance to migrant workers for immediate basic needs like food, shelter, medical or transport expenses and phone top-up. The organization also provides additional medical and counselling assistance to shelter residents as well as outreach to workers living in smaller accommodations found on the open market and providing them supplies such as masks and sanitizers.



Case Management

HOME is extending its existing essential telephone hotline to any migrant worker that reaches out for help and advice and providing complex case management to migrant workers (to both MDWs and non-domestic workers). They also help in providing mediation services to MDWs for issues faced with their employers or agents.

Advocacy

For advocacy, HOME is responding to government and media requests for statements and information on migrant workers, HOME is also proactively engaging in advocacy work with relevant authorities using our case work experience and data to strengthen legal systems and advocating for the rights of 1.2 million migrant workers in Singapore.

Administration

HOME is coordinating in-kind donations of masks, soap and sanitizers. They are also running fundraising campaigns to help migrant workers in need.



Philippines





Philippines

The Philippines government was one of the earliest reactors to the COVID-19 pandemic by announcing lockdown from 16th March, 2020. As a major country of origin in Asia, the announcement of lockdown created concern among the migrants in destination countries and also among the families left behind in the Philippines. The migrant families are deeply affected by the crisis. They depend largely on the monthly remittances, sent by their OFW loved ones, for their day to day needs for food, school allowance, tuition for private schools, monthly bills for utilities (water, electricity, telephone, and internet), house rent/ amortization, medicines etc. The lockdown affected the flow of income and survival after two months of lockdown, especially in National Capital region and Luzon, is extremely difficult for these families. The families of low-income migrant workers, domestic workers and sea-based workers are affected by the lack of remittance.

Our partner in the Philippines, Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) has been supporting the migrants and their families since the virus outbreak.

Center for Migrant Advocacy's (CMA) Response to COVID-19

Under a work-from-home mode of operation, since March 15, 2020, CMA has made sure that they are available and accessible, online and via phone, to migrants and their families for their queries, request for information and assistance.

Major Initiatives

- Facilitating assistance to both land-based and sea-based distressed migrants.
- Assisting migrants and groups of workers who are stranded during the crisis with various concerns such as long hours of work, non-payment of wages, refusal to issue exit visas, maltreatment (physical, verbal, psychological/emotional), denial of food, confiscation of mobile phone etc.
- Facilitating issuance of food packs and assistance to migrant families in the communities in Metro Manila.
- CMA partners with partner migrant organizations and LGUs in attending to cases of distressed migrants.
- Psychosocial interventions and teleconsultations by linking up with partner groups like Medical Action Group and through facilitation of CMA's social worker intern.
- Engaging and communicating with migrants and their families through social media through CMA Facebook page.



CMA's Executive Director, Ellene Sana, speaking in various webinars as part of the organization's policy advocacy during COVID-19



- Policy advocacy and public information dissemination through a series of webinars.
- CMA participated in UNFPA's rapid gender assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in various sectors in the Philippines and they were in charge of migrant worker respondents (both returned and onsite).
- Assisting partner and local government units in developing an action plan in response to the pandemic. One of the proposals that CMA pioneered is the creation of an online platform to easily identify where the migrants are, their needs and immediate intervention necessary.

For CMA, the transition from offline to online was difficult, at least in the initial days of lockdown. Responding to cases of distressed migrants has been delayed because of lockdowns in countries of destination and people at the missions have prioritized 'COVID-19-related' cases. They believe that there are limits to what online responses can achieve especially in ensuring that real support gets to the target beneficiaries. CMA has helped around 1000 cases and among those cases 700 cases have been sea-based cases and 129 have been COVID-19 related. Apart from that CMA has provided direct benefits such as food packets and shelter for stranded OFWs.

Our members in the Philippines have had to deal with the impact of lockdown among migrant families and migrants and the troubles faced by workers in the destination countries, especially in the Gulf countries due to mobility restrictions. A survey conducted by KANLUNGAN reports that migrant communities in Aringay (70) and Sudipen (40) and the families left behind are facing various challenges for their livelihood and income during the crisis. Moreover, the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) sent text messages to the volunteers about the difficulties they face in destination countries and expressed their desire to return home.

Based on these insights, KANLUNGAN, one of our partners in the Philippines made crucial interventions among the migrant communities in the Philippines.

Initiatives of KANLUNGAN Foundation, Inc.

Kanlungan has provided information dissemination regarding government services and assistance to migrant workers affected by COVID-19. Most of their intervention is done online. They are monitoring complaints of returned migrants and are currently handling cases (2 repatriation cases in Qatar, 1 repatriation case in Oman, 8 requests for assistance in Mali, 1 Seafarer for assistance quarantine, 1 case of overwork in Hong Kong, 5 cases of repatriation in Qatar, 3 are still with the Philippines Overseas Labour Office (POLO) Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and two are now back home undergoing 14 day mandatory quarantine in Makati). Despite challenges such as lack of mobility and lack of funds to provide the necessary assistance, Kanlungan is determined to provide help and assistance to those that are in need.

Like Kanlungan, Batis Center is another partner of MFA in the Philippines which provides services for the migrants, especially returnees. A significant number of Batis Center for Women's clients/partners (as member of Batis AWARE) belong to the low-income group. Though some of them may have a source of income, (mostly backyard enterprises,) or were precariously employed before the enhanced community quarantine, many of them now find themselves without a regular source of income. At the same time, they are not guaranteed recipients of the government's social amelioration program. Thus, many of the returned women migrants and their families are in need of assistance.

Initiatives of Batis Center for Women

At present, Batis Center for Women through the resource mobilization initiative of Batis - AWARE is distributing cash assistance to women migrants and their families. This is to augment whatever small savings, or reduced income, they may have as well as the assistance from the government, if and when it is provided for them. Batis has had similar initiatives in the past during times of natural calamities such as Super Typhoon Haiyan, (even providing scholarships to women who are vulnerable to trafficking in hard-hit areas,) and Ondoy. They have reached out to approximately 20 returned women migrants (or around 80 individuals, including members of their families). And the cost, or fund of, the organization used to deliver our initiatives are within the range of US\$3,000 - US\$4,000.

Due to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Batis Center for Women has had to adopt a work from home arrangement. This means the assistance extended needs to be in cash so it can be sent to the women and their families via local money transfer agencies to enable them to purchase the goods necessary for their everyday needs. Batis Center also coordinates repatriation assistance with relevant government agencies to returning clients from Japan within the work from home arrangement.

The COVID-19 pandemic places all migrant workers, particularly women, in precarious situations. They are either locked down abroad, displaced, or left unemployed due to the pandemic. On the other hand, some are left stranded in the Philippines due to the lockdown. Online information is seen as an important tool in helping OFWs navigate through this new context.

Our partner in the Philippines 'KAKAMMPI', an organization of Overseas Filipino workers, migrant returnees, and their families made crucial intervention through its media and advocacy campaigns. They relied on online media and radio stations to run worldwide campaigns for the workers.

Interventions by KAKAMMPI

KAKAMMPI used radio stations to disseminate information. The organization was interviewed by a radio based in Saudi Arabia, (Ofwaah TeleRadio/Hello Philippines, Hello World,) to discuss and share the activities by KAKAMMPI for OFW women workers in Saudi Arabia. They aired the campaign 'Babaeng Migrante, May Kakampi Ka!' The organization was also invited to the DZRJ station to discuss the plight of OFWs. KAKAMMPI did on-air counselling and interviewed different personalities from the government sector during the program (PhilHealth, Pag-IBIG, SSS, NAPC). Using the immense possibilities of media, KAKAMMPI provides counselling to women OFWs locally and abroad. The organization has also done solicitation for distribution of relief food packages and medicines to some OFW returnees not listed as beneficiaries of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), in Southville4, Sta. Rosa City, Laguna. KAKAMMPI distributed vitamins and milk products for children and adults in six poor barangays of Manila and dispensed condoms for Sexual Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR).

Regarding advocacy, KAKAMMPI was involved in the review process of various House Bills before being passed, in coordination and partnership with the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) for the Formal Labor Migrant Workers Sector, KAKAMMPI and NAPC submitted the suggestions and proposals on recruitment, working condition and social protection of migrants during the COVID-19 crisis to Malacañang and other government institutions.

Unlad Kabayan is another crucial partner in the country who made notable and effective interventions as a civil society organization. They have supported the containment activities of the government and provided relief for the migrant worker's families and returnee migrants.

Initiatives by UNLAD Kabayan



Unlad Kabayan donates Coir Mat Footbaths in different checkpoints, city social welfare and development offices, hospitals, and clinics in the Philippines. Coir mat replaces a cloth rag in a plastic basin for a footbath.

In this way, Unlad Kabayan is not only providing footbaths to be used in different check points, hospitals and clinics but this also makes way to provide jobs to women and men weaving mats and making wooden casing for footbaths. It reflects the social responsibility of the organization in the fight against the global pandemic.

Earning a living while in a lockdown is a difficulty that must be endured. Amid the struggles to earn income in times of COVID-19 pandemic, Unlad Kabayan through Brace Women's livelihood supports home gardening, backyard livestock growing and livelihood activities done by women in Davao. Large number of OFWs have lost jobs and are unable to send remittances to their families in the past months.



The activities by Unlad Kabayan provide food for the affected household of migrant workers and contribute to the food supply chain. They also provide financial aid to support the workers in the coir factory, which is run by migrants, that has been affected badly by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses further difficulties for domestic workers because they do not have a day off and they are more vulnerable because they are the ones who need to go out for basic needs and some are not provided with protection i.e. masks etc. There are many stranded OFWs. They are stranded in destination countries and stranded in the Philippines due to cancelled flights and COVID-19 related restrictions. OFWs abroad are subject to 'No Work, No Pay' especially those engaged in project-based work.

A significant number of migrant domestic workers lost their jobs as their employers lost theirs too. There were large numbers laid off in the tourism industry, hotels, restaurants, and other service-oriented jobs. The families left-behind, who are highly dependent on remittance, are in a challenging situation as the migrant workers could no longer send financial support. Government agencies particularly OWWA are overwhelmed by the task of responding to the needs of OFWs, while local government units are challenged in addressing the OFWs concerns. The present crisis exposed the vulnerability of OFW families who have been too dependent on remittances and lack the basic knowledge of financial management and planned reintegration. OFW owned individual or group businesses were affected by the lockdown and since most are micro or small enterprises, they are unable to survive prolonged lockdown and the long-term impact of the pandemic.

Initiatives of ATIKHA

In response to the pandemic and embracing the new normal, the organization extended their programs and services to migrants and their families through Virtual and Online Education through PinoyWISE iTV. Once a week, a 30- 45-minute program, in talk show format, via zoom conference is broadcast. It features videos of OFWs, families, and partners in different areas. It premieres every Sunday at PinoyWISE FB Fan Page and is posted at the PinoyWISE iTV YouTube channel.

Atikha through PinoyWISE iTV responds to relevant issues and concerns of OFWs. It helps bridge the information gap of government agencies involved in migration and features OWWA, DOLE, local government, and other relevant agencies programs and services. It features inspiring OFW stories, initiatives on the ground, OFW and families' coping strategies, best practices, and stories of OFWs, families, or OFW organizations and individuals creating an impact during the pandemic.

There are also information drives done through PinoyWISE FB Fan Page: an open page that can be accessed by OFWs and families. It publishes PinoyWISE iTV episodes, updates from Atikha, national government, local government, banks, cooperatives, and other migration and development partners. There is also Virtual organizing of OFWs and families through PinoyWISE regional and country Closed Group Facebook Page.

Web-based and mobile-based training on Family and Income Management is also done through the PinoyWISE Mobile App. Atikha also mobilizes technical and financial resources to assist the repatriated OFWs by leading the convening of the Committee on Migration and Development at the regional level, the database of repatriated OFWs and OFW enterprises.

Atikha initiated the Balikbayanihan Campaign, a resource mobilization campaign via “Adopt an OFW,” or “Adopt an OFW Cooperative,” in partnership with CFO, NEDA, OWWA-NRCO, and TESDA. Atikha has also been in close coordination with the national government agencies and local government units in assisting stranded migrants. The organization initiated the protocol for Local Government Units in Region 4a in responding to repatriated OFWs. In some regions and partner provinces, Atikha is working with the Committee on Migration and Development in implementing reintegration programs and services.

Atikha mentors OFW cooperative and promotes OFW and family enterprises to be able to re-strategize in the time of the pandemic. Through the internet TV, Facebook pages and YouTube channel, Atikha educates the migrants on the relevant issues, makes available the necessary information, and links migrants and their families to the other partners that can provide programs and services. Atikha also mobilized donations for goods packs from private sector partners.

The organization was able to reach out to about 20,000 OFW and families in a month through PinoyWISE iTV reaches and they coordinated with around 1,500 stranded OFWs.

All our partners in the Philippines actively engage with the OFWs in the destination country and the families in the Philippines. They provide welfare assistance and advocate for better management of the situation from a human rights perspective.



Thailand





Thailand

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming situation in Thailand was the shortage of food and personal protective equipment. However, now that the pandemic has come somewhat under control, leading to some relaxation of the containment measures, the persistence of unemployment and economic stagnation has brought a range of new challenges to migrant workers.

Generally, the need for food is no longer prioritized as there are more people and groups giving away food. In Chiang Mai, Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) noticed that at the start of the outbreak, migrant workers would try to buy cheap masks and reuse them, but more recently masks have been considered luxury items given their situation of income shortage. Our partner in Thailand, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) received deliveries of masks and hand sanitizers around the beginning of May and that was when they started to give them to the workers. Another concern for migrant workers is the difficulty in paying rent. Those who are single have often moved to share one room with more people. It was found that up to six people, (not from the same family,) were living in one room to reduce costs. Some of them asked for support to pay the rent instead of receiving food.

Recently, with the relaxation of the emergency decree, it is reported that workers in Chiang Mai have started to go back to work, but not regularly, and they do not earn as much as they used to. Those who are still unemployed have to go out and search for donated food. There was no report of migrant workers with COVID-19 symptoms from HRDF's outreach when distributing food parcels. It was observed that the migrant workers sustained stress and sleep deprivation due to uncertainty about the future. Many women expressed their desire to go back to Myanmar. However, in Chiang Mai, only a small percentage of the workers wanted to leave as they had been living in Chiang Mai for such a long time.

Initiatives of HRDF

Access to Social Security entitlements

Not all partners who engaged in this distribution checked whether the workers were entitled to social security benefits. MAP and HRDF did what they do in their normal operation. In Mae Sot, most workers are workers under Section 64, so most of them were not registered under the Social security system. However, recently, HRDF sent a letter to the Social Security Office in Tak to inquire about Section 64 and social security entitlements. They confirmed that those with border employment can be registered for social security. HRDF will explore how it can help the workers to make claims.

In Chiang Mai, it is estimated by the team that only 10 percent of migrant workers who are entitled to social security are actually registered to the fund by their employers. HRDF have helped some workers to claim their benefits of unemployment and for job suspension and found a number of challenges that hindered the workers' access. Firstly, online registration was not possible for migrant workers as it was only available in Thai. To track

their applications, they were required to go in person to the office and to queue for hours. Now it is possible to track the application online. However, if the result shows that they are not eligible, they are still required to go to the office to examine the reasons and how to proceed to appeal. There has been a case concerning workers who are employed by the same employer where only a small number have received the benefits whilst the rest have been rejected without clear reasons. There was also a synchronization issue between banks and the social security office, which resulted in further delay of disbursement of benefits.

Stranded migrants and repatriation

The persistent unemployment situation among migrant workers has led to many attempting to return to their country of origin. HRDF has found several cases, particularly of Myanmar migrant workers, who were left stranded enroute by their buses which were hired to the Myawaddy- Mae Sot border.

HRDF worked with the Tak Governor's team to safely repatriate these stranded workers. With this collaboration, HRDF has helped up to 150 stranded migrant workers to cross the border to Myanmar safely. The assistance HRDF provided included covering their temporary lodging and coordinating with CTUM in Myawaddy to lobby their local authorities to unofficially receive the workers. Not until 23 May 2020, did the first set of Myanmar migrant workers, who registered online with the embassy to show their intention to go back, get transportation to the border. The new system remains very exclusive and can only accommodate a small number of workers per day. It does not include undocumented migrant workers. Those who cannot register online are required to go to the embassy in Bangkok.

Direct Assistance

HRDF helps provide masks, hand sanitizers, and food to many migrants. Food is subject to each local team deciding what they consider suitable for distribution for the communities. For example, MAP decided to distribute sacks of rice only following their quick survey on what the workers and their family would need most. HRDF, Mae Sot office, gave drinking water to some communities which do not have access to clean water. Others gave canned food and some fresh food as well. Along with those items, HRDF also distributes information briefs about COVID-19 and other existing brochures relevant to migrant workers' rights.

Cross provincial assistance

HRDF have targeted the following provinces: In the North, Chiang Mai and Lum Phun provinces. Workers there are mainly in tourism and hospitality, construction, agriculture and domestic work. In the West, HRDF have targetted Tak and Kanchanaburi provinces. Workers there are mainly in factories and agriculture. In the central areas, HRDF has targeted the Ratchathewi district in Bangkok, Samut Sakorn, Samut Prakarn, and Pathum Thani. Migrants here are mostly in manufacturing and the services sectors. In the South HRDF has targeted Pang-nga, Surat Thani and Pattani. Workers there are mainly in hospitality and tourism, working in small shops, fisheries and seafood-processing factories.

HRDF's Mae Sot team has joined together with other grassroots organizations including FAR and Myanmar Migrant Network in Bangkok (MMNB) which also provide legal aid for case referral during the pandemic time. HRDF pooled resources and referred cases to the government-run Migrant Workers Assistance Center (MWAC) when possible. Examples of those in need were cases of hundreds of garment workers in Nonthaburi who were suddenly terminated and workers in Samut Prakarn who were cheated by their brokers who promised to complete their work permit extension process.

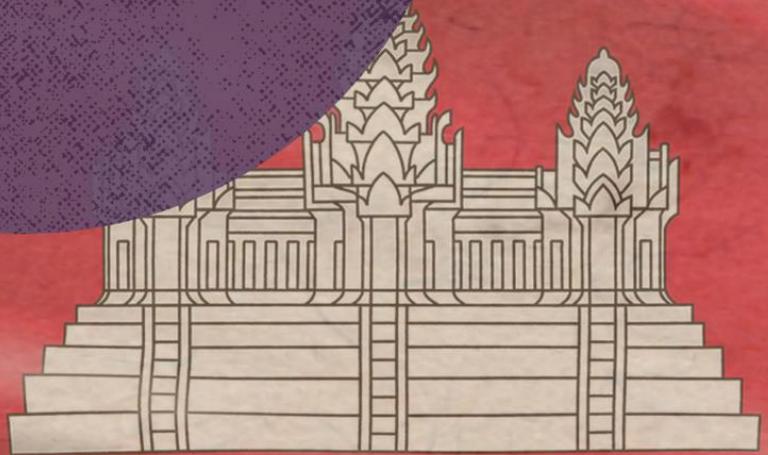


Photos from HRDF's Direct Assistance Initiatives during the COVID-19 Pandemic

HRDF estimates that each organization helped around 1,200 individual migrant workers and their family members. It was later on confirmed that the number that HRDF alone (not including HRDF partners) supported is 1,976 migrant workers and their family members. MAP distributed goods to around 400 households with an average of 2-3 members in each household. MWG has estimated the number of people receiving support parcels to be 1,400. In total, HRDF have reached out to at least 3,600 people.



Cambodia





Cambodia

Unlike many other countries in the region Cambodia is one of the least affected countries in terms of the cases reported. However, the country and the citizens are experiencing repercussions of the global lockdown and the absence of mobility. Since the country did not impose strong lockdowns as a measure of containment, the economic impact may not be as severe as other countries. However, migrants are the most vulnerable category in the country. The pandemic has caused loss of jobs and income for many, including migrant workers, and they are forced to return to their home country. Cambodian migrant returnees from Thailand, mostly irregular migrants, were required to undergo mandatory 14-days quarantine in their communities. Most of the returnees were in dire need of food, masks, and sanitizer for prevention of COVID-19. The returnee migrant workers also face discrimination and stigmatization as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our partner in Cambodia, Cambodian Women for Peace and Development, (CWPD,) made timely interventions and helped the people and the government to manage the crisis.

Initiatives of Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD)

In 2020, Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD) has three projects that focus on garment factories workers and women entertainment workers in 11 provinces, most of them are internal migrants. In February the royal government issued a letter from the Ministry of Tourism in Cambodia to close down the entertainment service. Some garment factories also closed down due to the lack of material and orders from buyers. These policies are still in force until the COVID-19 crisis improves. All of the entertainment services are under the strict control of the authorities and sanitization measures and social distancing was practiced by the whole country. Most of the garment workers and entertainment workers returned to their homeland. CWPD services and programs are not solely focused on migrants. However, they face lack of budget and available staff for implementation of migration programs due to COVID-19. To help reduce infections by COVID-19, CWPD has provided virtual online outreach (through telephone, and Facebook providing key prevention messages from the Ministry of Health and WHO to prevent COVID-19).



CWPD's Virtual Outreach via information materials and information dissemination via Facebook Live



In Cambodia, the family of migrant workers largely rely on remittances sent by the migrants and these people were deeply affected by the crisis. The CSOs in Cambodia observed that food shortage, lost income generation, loss of job and debt remains the critical issues among Cambodian returnees and their family members. While migrants who were stranded at destination countries such as Malaysia and Thailand also faced food shortage, unfair dismissal and loss of income. Another partner in Cambodia, Legal Support for Women and Children (LSWC) attempted to tackle these issues in various capacities.

Initiatives of Legal Support for Women and Children (LSWC)

LSCW set up a referral system for migrant workers to familiarize them with various services, monitor the situation of migrants, share information on policies in Cambodia and destination countries and to distribute emergency relief. So far, LSCW has been able to reach out to 20 individuals for emergency relief support and 100 workers have been guided to other available support services.

LSWC has focused on short term service provision during the COVID-19 crisis due to the shortage of financial support. They are also trying to plan programs and budget, with the support of donors, to deal with the long-term issues such as livelihood support and reintegration.



Now, the virus outbreak is somewhat under control in Cambodia. CWPD and LSCW, with their vast experience in working among the migrants, can advocate for better reintegration and more availability for immediate assistance schemes for the migrant workers.



Indonesia



Indonesia

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Indonesia implemented a social distancing policy, which affects many small businesses (including Indonesian migrant workers businesses) managed by family members which has led to many bankruptcies.

Prospective migrant workers who have temporarily been in the recruitment agency's shelter cannot be dispatched. This is based on the Minister of Manpower Decree No. 151 of 2020 and BP2MI circular no 4 of 2020. Recruitment agencies have requested a 10 million or land certificate guarantee-deposit to ensure that the Indonesian migrant worker candidates will be sent home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and during which time they can wait for her / his placement.

Unemployment has also increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that not only has impacts on the economy, but it also causes higher vulnerability to situations of violence, exploitation, and trafficking (prostitution, drugs, etc.) because of people needing money to survive.

There was a wave of large-scale repatriation of migrant workers (from Arabs, Malaysians, and from sea workers/ships). To prevent transmission of the virus, these workers are all required to follow the COVID-19 health protocol. They must follow the quarantine period of 14 days. Reintegration that is not handled and supported well will increase the cycle of migration and poverty.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is very large; it includes psychological impacts of fear and panic, both in the community and in government circles. In Indonesia, the surge of the - COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a time when there was a residual division of society due to the presidential election. There was a battle of community groups, between supporters of Jokowi and supporters of Anies Baswedan, the Governor of DKI Jakarta again strengthened his position.

The Governor of DKI Jakarta first imposed a lockdown and then followed that measure with the enactment of a Large-Scale Social Restriction through the Government Regulation in lieu of Law. The policy has had a major impact on the economy in terms of a decline in economic growth because it limits mobility and limits gatherings of people who still use the method of buying and selling directly rather than online trading.

On March 20, 2020, the Ministry of Manpower imposed a temporary closure of the placement process for Indonesian migrant workers to all destination countries. Prospective migrant workers who have already been processed at the Placement Agency are forced to return home and bear the burden of additional costs in the form of a security deposit of IDR 10-20 million or land certificate. Our partner SBMI was vocal on the protection of migrant rights from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

Initiatives of Serikat Buruh Migrant Indonesia (SBMI)

Based on the government mitigation strategies, Serikat Buruh Migrant Indonesia (SBMI) initiated measures to help people in need. The organization has provided online tips on the prevention of COVID-19 infection. They have also helped in distributing masks, spraying disinfectants at home and abroad. This activity was carried out in Lampung, Sumatra, Jakarta, West Java (Cirebon and Indoramayu), Central Java (Wonosobo) and East Java (Malang, Bojonegoro, Tulung Agung). Overseas masking is carried out in Hong Kong, while for Singapore and Taiwan are constrained by a policy of prohibiting shipping by airlines, the mask is finally distributed to the people in Malang Regency.



Spraying of disinfectant at homes and in communities



Similar to SBMI, our other partner in Indonesia, Jarnas Pekabumi has also been delivering services for migrants and migrant's families during the crisis.

Initiatives of Jarnas Pekabumi

Jarnas Pekabumi is partnering with the Social Affairs Agency of Semarang Regency and the Getasan sub-district officials in activities such as: disinfection of villages, information dissemination to the community to better maintain cleanliness, awareness among people, spreading information on the importance of staying at home and sharing the important message of obeying Indonesian government policy on social and physical distancing to avoid and prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

The organization also urged the public to refrain from stigmatizing COVID-19 infected people or their families, they created a register, and supplied vulnerable people (migrant community, poor and people with disabilities) who needed food support during the period of limitation. The organization also helps through making non-medical masks and involves migrant families in this process. In addition, the organization provides an empowerment activity, in which they have invited migrant families to distribute masks; to help them contribute to the efforts against COVID-19.

We collaborate with the sub-district government and have received donations from Corporate Social Responsibility to help with the handling of the COVID-19 impact. The amount is approximately RP 155.000.000 (USD 9,687). Despite the challenges faced by the organization, including financial and human resource limitations, the difficulty of getting raw materials for making masks (because many stores are out of stock) and the difficulty of involving people as they are facing socio-economic struggles, the organization is determined to help people that are in need. Ratna, (Program co-ordinator, Jarnas Pekabumi) stated that; “Our organization does not have much money but we participate against COVID-19 by contributing through time, energy, ideas, and skills.”

The plight of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia caught the attention of many during this crisis time. Most of them are daily wage earners and running short of food and money due to lack of employment.

Our third partner is Indonesia ‘Migrant Care’ focussed on workers in the destination country apart from the services provided in Indonesia.

Initiatives of Migrant Care

Migrant Care acted as bridge between workers and government agencies and helped them to access government services. Migrant Care has collected the data of migrant workers in distress, especially from Malaysia. With the support of the Migrant Care Malaysian team, Migrant Care distributed food for the Indonesian workers in both Malaysia and Indonesia. Apart from food distribution, they distributed protective masks to the migrant communities both at the departure point and destination country. So far, Migrant Care has reached out to approximately 2000 migrant workers.

All MFA partners in Indonesia were keen on dealing with the increasing vulnerability among women migrants when the virus outbreak occurred. Solidaritas Perempuan, our partner from Indonesia analyzed the health, social, economic and political impact of the virus outbreak on women migrants using their network and experience from the grassroots. Their data shows that the incidence of domestic violence is frequent during the pandemic and identified that the voice and decision-making capacity of women is being curtailed like never before during the pandemic responses by government and civil society. Solidaritas Perempuan further observed that there are no protocols on the local level to govern the return migrant during the COVID 19 crisis. The organization responded to these concerns at various capacities.

Initiatives of Solidaritas Perempuan



Regardless of the current restrictions on operations, Solidaritas Perempuan, together with their 12 communities focus on strengthening grass root women, especially farmers/peasants, fisherfolks, and migrant workers, by developing and establishing networks to support women groups to deal with the crisis at the village and urban areas of Jakarta.

The major activities of the organization include strengthening women through various ways such as distributing materials containing information related to COVID-19, namely prevention of virus transmission, people's rights in emergency situation, and the rights in the situation of quarantine/social restrictions, complaint mechanisms, and contacts for case assistance. Another way is strengthening women's awareness to information related to their rights in facing COVID-19, through intensive communication and coordination (Telephone, text message and other social media platform). There is also logistic distribution done based on the needs of women at the grassroots and community (mask, soap, food, etc.). Lastly, Solidaritas Perempuan started to develop food security system in the village level, including building of rural-urban food networks/connections.



Taiwan



Taiwan

The Taiwanese government has been very strict in implementing safety measures to avoid spreading the virus and it has been commended by the international community for the efforts taken by the government. Most of the companies and brokers imposed strict restriction on the mobility of migrant workers. The CSOs in the country supported the government by following clearly defined safety measures and by disseminating information among the vulnerable population in the country.

Our partner Hsinchu Migrants and Immigrants Services Centre (HMISC) and Hope Workers Centre (HWC), both belong to Hsinchu Catholic Diocese, and have been active in assisting the immigrant workers in the country, especially the undocumented workers.

Initiatives of Hsinchu Migrants and Immigrants Services Centre (HMISC)

On March 6th, 2020 HMISC, together with Migrant Empowerment Network in Taiwan, (MENT) organized a press conference to address key issues. We demanded that the Ministry of Labour (MOL) and National Immigration Affairs (NIA) provide fair treatment for the migrant workers. We made demands to the government of Taiwan to repatriate the workers, not to impose penalties on them and requested that the government legalize their status from undocumented to legal worker. On March 20th, 2020 the National Immigration Affairs (NIA) published and announced the amnesty for undocumented migrant workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This became effective from April 1 to June 30, 2020 with the following clauses;

- a. Undocumented workers can only pay for NT\$ 2,000. (Before NT\$10,000)
- b. No detention.
- c. No ban in Taiwan means migrants can come back to Taiwan again to work. After the designated period if the migrant worker is arrested, they will receive the full penalty prescribed by the law

HMISC had a couple of meetings with the Ministry of Labour regarding the NIA announcement. We found out that the NIA announcement for the runaway workers Amnesty misleads the undocumented workers because the labor standard law is the same. The announcement that the undocumented migrant workers cannot return to Taiwan using their working visa is contradicted with the NIA announcement that they can return to work. HMISC has plans to conduct regular press conferences in the coming weeks to keep the government accountable on migrant issues.

Currently, HMISC are sheltering eight legal Vietnamese men whose labour contract is overdue due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to mobility restrictions, they cannot fly back to Vietnam. We provide refuge in our shelter, free food, counselling, training and a safe environment.

South Korea



South Korea

The first case of COVID-19 virus infection was reported in South Korea on January 20th. However, the country has responded well with a massive testing program and other mitigation strategies and it has largely controlled the threat of community spread. It is one of the few countries which did not announce lockdown to contain the virus. This was achieved through strong government policies along with the support of CSOs. The country hosts thousands of migrant workers and is known for its pro-immigrant worker policies. Since the migrants are most vulnerable during the health crisis, the active involvement of our partners was critical.

Inequality, discrimination, and exclusion are just a few of the deeply rooted issues in the plight of many migrants, these issues are aggravated with the presence of a pandemic. In the midst of a growing atmosphere of discrimination and institutionalized xenophobia against migrants, our partner Joint Committee with Migrants in Korea (JCMK) is one of those organizations which continued to appeal to the Korean government for fairer treatment for migrants and to work to increase migrant's visibility.

Initiatives of Joint Committee with Migrants in Korea (JCMK)

The government of South Korea introduced measures regarding the public purchase of facial masks for its citizens, (where 1 person can buy 2 masks per week,) however, for migrants, only those who have foreign registration card and national health insurance can purchase these masks. This instigated JCMK's appeal to the national human rights commission on the basis of discrimination against migrants.

"Always the challenge for us is how we can raise this issue of undocumented migrants because they are invisible in our society (still). Even though we previously experienced SARS or MERS, still the whole society doesn't look at the more vulnerable groups including migrants, undocumented migrants, or disabled people or the elderly, Migrants are always very vulnerable", reported Misun Kim, former chairperson of the steering committee of JCMK.



JCMK stands outside the National Human Rights Commission of Korea to appeal for non-discrimination of migrants



Voicing Demands

JCMK shows the importance of voicing the demands of vulnerable groups to the government with an uncompromising attitude towards policies that promote inequality. Some of the appeals made by JCMK include: the appeal to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea on the inclusion of Migrants (especially undocumented migrants) to purchase face masks and be included in the emergency relief fund of the Korean government, as well as the consideration to release the migrants and refugees in detention centers. JCMK also tried to push to have a migrant national assembly member for the advancement of migrant representation and visibility.

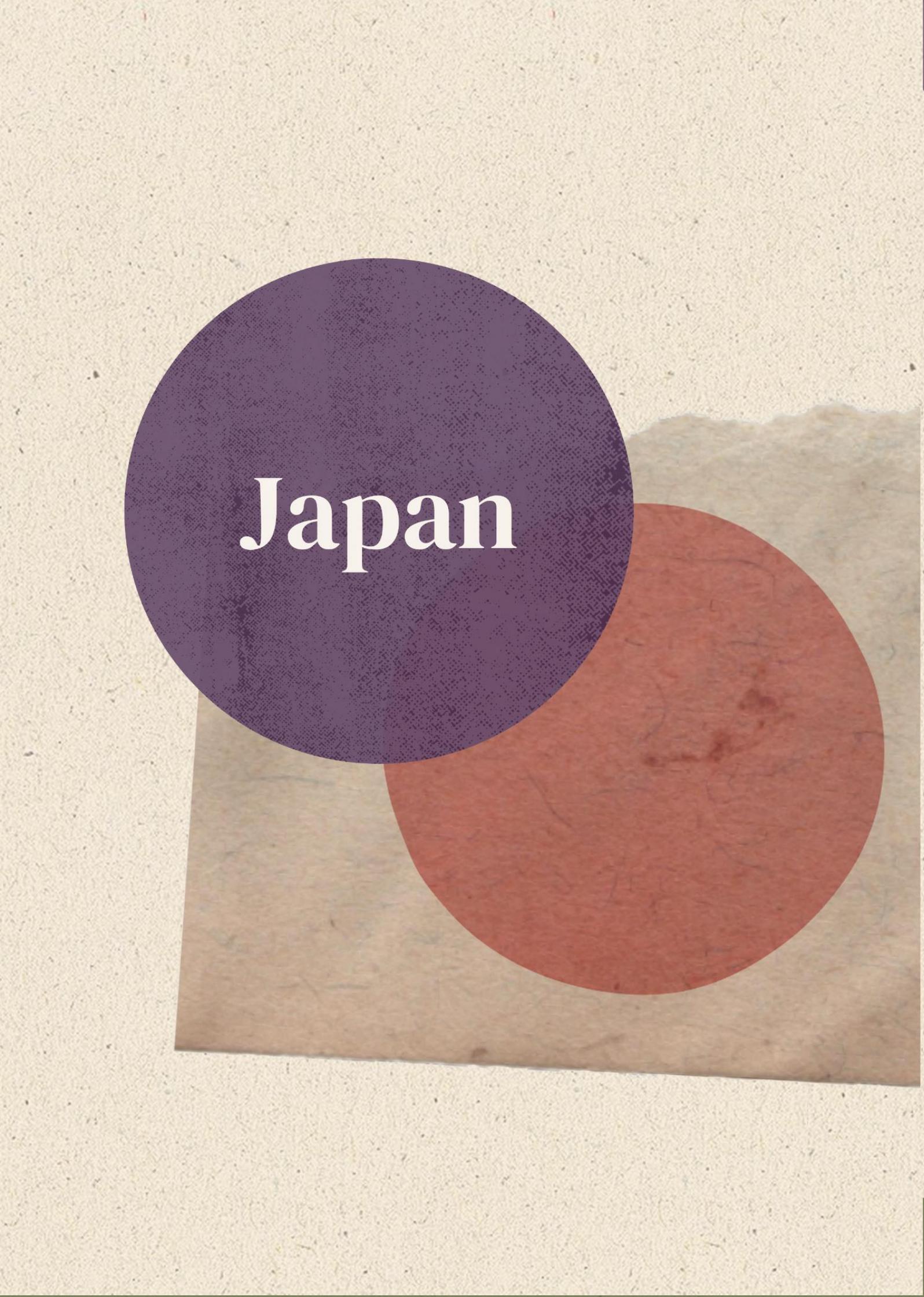
Understanding the vulnerability of migrants

JCMK understands the vulnerability of migrants at these times, so they have initiated a program to provide facial masks and hand sanitizers to the more vulnerable migrants and migrant workers. According to Misun; "Because undocumented workers are less able to buy masks or protect themselves, we have tried to provide facial masks and hand sanitizers. Luckily the Community Chest organization raised funds which they gave us to provide protective equipment for these vulnerable groups of migrants." Migrant Health Association in Korea WeFriends, a member of JCMK purchased masks and hand sanitizers with funding support from the Community Chest organization and distributed them through 36 migrant support organizations.



Information dissemination and awareness should also be targeted to migrants, this is why although the Korean government provided information in basic languages to its people, JCMK, together with other CSOs, provided factual information on how to prevent infectious disease in other languages. JCMK has also jointly conducted a public forum on how the COVID-19 pandemic situation discriminates against migrants.

According to Misun; "With this kind of systematic problem that we are currently facing, and in times of crisis, we need to adopt a 'whole-society' approach to how we can overcome this kind of situation together."



Japan



Japan

Like South Korea, Japan's efforts to contain the virus were commended by other international countries. Since the country reported its first COVID-19 case in January, the country managed to tackle the challenge without a lockdown. However, restricted mobility and reduced economic activities have had negative impacts on the economy. The migrants in the country are the worst affected due to these negative impacts of the virus in Japan.

Since the pandemic started, MFA's partner in Japan, Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ) found poverty and visa issues were the main problems among the migrants' community in Japan. The labour issues will be intensified in the next few months, though downsizing, involving laying off part time and temporary workers who are mostly Japanese descendants from South America, has already been happening. SMJ is involved in various advocacy activities to tackle the issues of migrants.

Initiatives of Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ)

Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ) are engaging in advocacy and lobbying by targeting Members of the Diet, national legislature of Japan, and other government bodies to tackle individual issues. For example, SMJ approached the Diet Members and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to expand the scope of some social welfare systems available to permanent residence to include other statuses of residence and this has been effective.

However, the range is still narrow because those welfare services are delivered based on the fact that the person is living and will continue to live in Japan, so most of the labour migrants coming with rotation systems are excluded from this welfare.

Although the Japanese government has decided to distribute 100,000 yen to people living in Japan, including migrants, it has only included migrants who have a visa which allows more than 3 months of stay. Because of this limitation, many migrants, such as asylum seeker, some trainees, (participants in the Technical Intern Trainee Program designed to transfer skills abroad,) and international students who are stuck due travel restrictions, have been excluded. So SMJ again approached the Diet Members and related ministries to expand the scope of the legislation and successfully achieved the target. Now, government has expanded the program for migrants who are excluded from the system, except for asylum seekers and undocumented workers.

SMJ has now launched a new foundation for directly supporting migrants, mainly the ones who cannot receive the public financial support, with actual money. It started on 8th May and supported 186 migrants and asylum seekers. SMJ are planning to continue this project until August 2020.

The government of Japan is yet to provide social welfare coverage to a large section student migrants. Another major concern in the country is the poor response from the local authorities even when the national government comes up with proactive responses. In the near future, SMJ, by increasing its capacity and outreach, has planned to set up hotline numbers and other helpline services to support migrant workers.

Hong Kong





Similar to other East Asian counterparts, Hong Kong is relatively unscathed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the closure of international borders, lockdown in other parts of the world and proximity to China have affected the economic activity in Hong Kong. The domestic workers in Hong Kong have had longer working hours than normal during the pandemic because most of the employers and families have been staying at home. The pandemic poses more risks to health to these workers as some employers have been asking workers to use more hazardous chemicals for cleaning. Most employers did not allow their workers to take their weekly rest days and have asked them to go to the wet markets, supermarkets and other errands for their employers. Termination of contracts was also the problem especially when there is lockdown in the country of origin. The terminated workers stay in Hong Kong with no income, but they still need to pay for their accommodation, daily needs and protective materials to prevent infection from the virus. Hong Kong immigration allows migrant domestic workers to extend visas but requires payment for the visa fee. Some employers are not providing masks, sanitizers and other protective materials to prevent the workers from being infected. There are policies such as social distancing and compulsory quarantine imposed on migrant workers entering Hong Kong.

Our partner in Hong Kong, the Coalition of Migrant Rights (CMR) network has extended support to the migrant workers, especially women domestic workers.

Initiatives of Coalition of Migrant Rights (CMR)



CMR distributes masks and sanitizers as part of their COVID-19 efforts for the migrant community

Progressive Labor Union (PLU-HK) as a member of Coalition for Migrants Rights network has extended its services through counselling and guidance on filing cases especially when related to unlawful termination. The union also finds alternative ways to support migrant domestic workers who live and work without supplies of protective materials like masks and sanitizers. On weekends, leaders distribute masks and sanitizers in central areas, in Kowloon and new territories. Fliers have been distributed on how to protect yourself from the virus. During weekdays, union leaders try to reach more workers who are in need of masks and sanitizers.

There is also a video shared largely on YouTube for workers and employers to better understand how to fight the virus which is a joint project with the Centre for Health and Protection (a government body). The union conducted a press conference to address issues affecting migrant domestic workers and arranged meetings with Hong Kong Government departments such as the Equal Opportunities Commission to lobby on disability and racial discrimination and the need to protect the rights of workers during the pandemic and to prosecute violators of these rights. The union usually reaches out to more than a hundred workers every weekend, however on weekdays they are only able to reach out to 20 workers as more individuals and workers stay at home because employers do not allow the workers to go out.



The network found there was a shortage of protective gear and a constrained budget to fund activities. CMR tries to collaborate with other NGOs, local trade unions and other worker organisations in order to support activities.



Kuwait

Kuwait

The presence of a pandemic poses a heavy impact on vulnerable groups of migrant workers in different sectors. Among those that are most affected are the undocumented migrant workers. In Kuwait, over 100,000 undocumented workers are stranded and have no work and income, they are experiencing lack of food and medical care, unpaid rents, and have no remittance to send back home for their dependent families. Domestic workers suffer from discrimination and some are even deported against their will.

Other concerns are related to 'free visa workers' who are paying their sponsors' an annual fee for a residency permit and then working with third parties. With the issues of job termination, they are being left with no income yet still being expected to pay their annual residency permit fees. Migrant workers working with small and medium businesses are also being significantly affected. Around 250,000 migrant workers currently have no work. But even those who are working in bigger companies are also facing challenges of unemployment, non-payment of salaries or deductions, voluntary or enforced unpaid vacations, etc.

Our partner in Kuwait, Sandigan has delivered significant support services for the workers.

Initiatives of Sandigan

Sandigan has been conducting an awareness campaign and has started providing three (3) helplines to cater to those that are in need in times of COVID-19. They have also been providing food, counselling, and medical services through telemedicine or online medical consultations.

Sandigan has also been helping in guiding and encouraging migrants to use government medical facilities for their regular medical follow up. Sandigan has also been supporting those undocumented migrants who are not eligible or capable of availing medical facilities due to various reasons. Sandigan has helped more than 601 people in terms of direct assistance, and thousands more have been reached through their awareness campaigns.

More than 3, 000 food packs have been distributed through the networks in addition to milk and diapers for the children of families unable to access these products. Since the government of Kuwait has issued amnesty, Sandigan has also assisted migrants with repatriation. Their team was divided into two parts, those involved in food pack distribution and those involved in pursuing amnesty issues. These initiatives have continued despite financial backing proving a huge challenge. Sandigan has remained committed to helping migrants in need.



Oman



Oman

Oman reported its first COVID-19 case on February 24th and since then the number of cases has been steadily increasing. As a major destination country for the blue collar workers from other Asian country, migrants are at serious risk. They face a two-fold threat in the form of the virus itself and the job-loss due to the lockdown. Unsurprisingly most of the virus affected people are migrant workers from other countries. The Muscat Governate is sealed off with no entry or exits permitted. This is essential to containing any community spread of the virus. But the commercial impact of these measures along with the already existing oil crisis are having a negative impact on migrants, business persons, corporates and the government. It is leading to massive job-cuts and the return of migrant workers, especially Indian migrant workers.

One of our partners in Oman, Charity Wing has keenly followed developments from the beginning and made timely interventions for the welfare of workers.

Initiatives of Charity Wing

The Charity Wing is actively involved with various initiatives under the guidance of the Indian Embassy to reach out and provide whatever assistance possible to those who are most affected and need support to tide over this difficult period.

Charity Wing as well as other social organizations are pro-active in providing food packs and other essentials to those in need and they try to extend help and provide food to those who have come in search of jobs on a Visit visa or a Tourist visa and who are then stuck and have no resources to pay for their accommodation, food, etc. However, the logistics of reaching these people is a challenge due to the lockdown conditions. The Embassy is trying to obtain permission from the authorities to be able to issue passes to some social workers who could then move around to distribute food items etc.

Responses from hospitals and nursing homes to patients with ailments other than COVID-19 infections has been disappointing and frequently these patients have often been refused medical care. The Embassy has sent out messages to all private hospitals and nursing homes to request that they accept those who need treatment. Many migrant workers who have been purchasing medicines from India for chronic problems such as heart ailments, cancer, etc have been unable to get their medicines as they are unable to afford the cost of buying them locally. The Charity Wing has approached a donor who has agreed to intervene and make provisions to address this issue.



Israel





Israel

Israel imposed restrictions on population mobility from mid-March in an effort to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Migrant populations in the country were the worst affected due to these restrictions, especially workers. There are three main sectors of work for migrants coming from different countries in the world to Israel. The construction industry employs approximately 14,000 migrants from European countries, China and Turkey. There are around 15,000 undocumented workers in the construction sector. The caregiving sector employs around 65,000 migrant workers who are predominantly from Asian countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova. Lastly, there is the Agricultural sector with most employees coming from Thailand under a bilateral agreement between Israel and Thailand. Approximately 23,000 Thai workers work in the agricultural sector. Additionally, there are volunteers, students and Palestinian workers who come from the west bank who are not usually treated as migrant workers.

Israel reacted to COVID-19 around the end of February and by mid-March there were more restrictions in the labour market. Early April, the official lockdown began and things started going 'back to normal' at the beginning of May. The pandemic has had different impacts on the various sectors. The agricultural sector was relatively unaffected by the lockdown and pandemic. Thai workers worked continuously, but they remained vulnerable. They come under the bilateral agreement that is supposed to protect them, and essentially minimize the cost of recruitment. But violation of labour rights and clauses in the bilateral agreement was a frequent occurrence during the lockdown. Some workers are working long hours, enduring poor living conditions, and they are experiencing non-payment of overtime work.

The conditions of all sectors of migrant workers in Israel remain increasingly uncertain during the crisis time and our partner in Israel Kav La Oved continues to monitor the statistics on how the economic situation is impacting the workers in terms of the payment they deserve for the work that they have supplied during the time of pandemic. Kav La Oved has assisted large number of migrant workers with food and other essentials.

Initiatives of Kav La Oved

Kav La Oved called for governments to pay the Palestinian workers a monthly fee for not working in this period of time. Kav La Oved appealed to the Government of Israel to provide Palestinians with health insurance, proper housing, and secure their documents. This appeal was passed. Health insurance will be given and housing from employers supplied to workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Since the organization cannot continue face-to-face assistance due to the restrictions, they have relied on phone, email and social media to disseminate information and assist workers. They have also provided online assistance for workers to help workers advocate for their own individual rights.

The caregivers sector has had particular issues to contend with. Kav La Oved appealed to the Government for them as they have been under lockdown longer than anybody else. Also, the organization assisted workers who returned home or those who were trapped in Countries of Origins (COO), Kav La Oved also assisted workers who wished to go back to their home country.

Kav La Oved has been working on the issue of the reduction in the social benefit deposit fund for workers if they overstay. Since the employers pay the money, a reduction from the deposit is a huge loss for workers. The organization has been advocating to ensure that even if the workers have overstayed their visa during the current crisis, their money in the deposit fund is protected. The organization continues to provide assistance by providing information to the agricultural sector. The organization has assisted, 350 caregiver workers, it has assisted 500 people through phone calls, 150 via Facebook and SMS, and 100 Palestinians.



Lebanon



Lebanon

Lebanon announced a national lockdown in mid-March when the country started to report COVID-19 virus cases. Even though the mortality rate in the country remains low, the authorities are yet to control the virus spread fully. The migrants, especially women domestic workers are the most affected group of population in the country

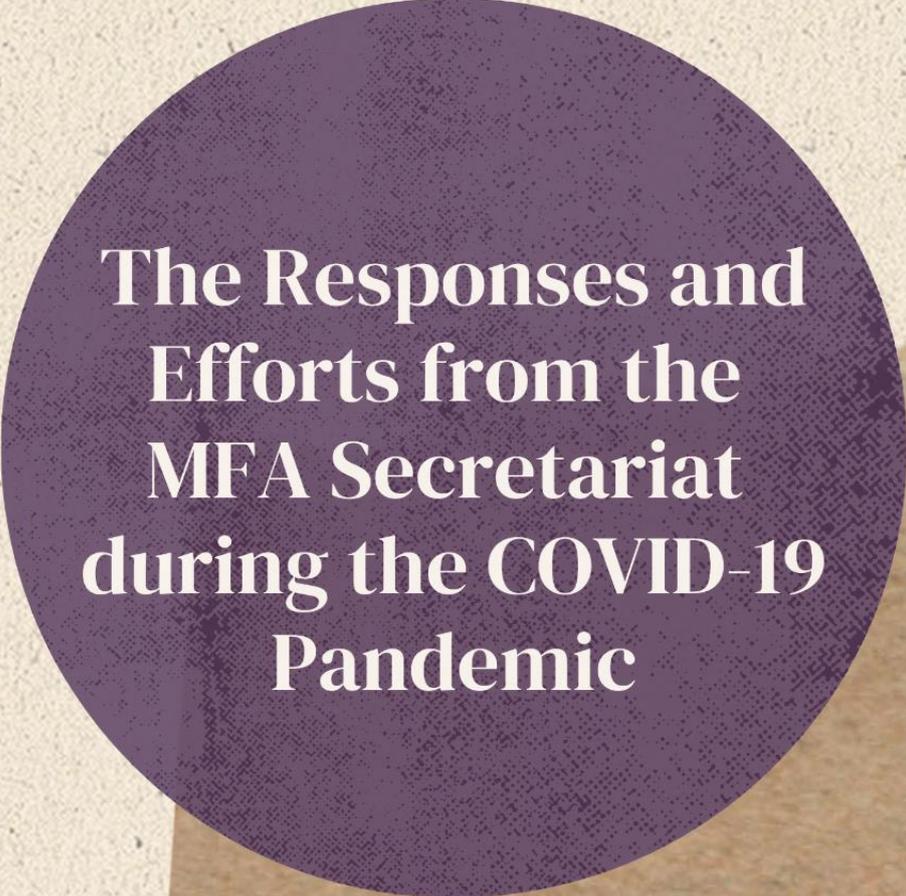
In Lebanon, the migrants have been affected, in addition to the COVID-19 health threat, by the extreme economic crisis. Many employers are no longer capable of paying salaries which has resulted in migrants being forced onto the streets. Many migrants, especially domestic workers, have been left without jobs, shelter or any survival tools. Freelance workers have lost their jobs due to a reluctance by employers to allow them in their houses to clean following the lockdown; so many migrant workers have had no money for rent or food. Our partner in Lebanon, INSAN Association has provided direct assistance and advocated for the well-being of migrants.

Initiatives of INSAN Association (INSAN)

INSAN has provided some emergency food and hygiene packages to migrants who were in dire need, in particular to migrants with children. In addition, INSAN has been following up on cases with embassies of origin and/or General Security to ensure workers get their full rights (wages, etc.) before being repatriated. INSAN Association has reached around 250 migrant workers.

This current list is incomplete since many of MFA's partners will be sharing their experiences in the coming weeks. This document will be updated regularly until the effects of lockdown subside. However, it is important for MFA and its members to remain positive and to continue to fight against the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in various capacities. The CSOs in the Asia-Pacific region should be ready for long-term strategies to support the general well-being of the people and migrant workers.

So far, we have seen a variety of responses from various countries by 40 MFA members and partners in the region. Many of these responses are coordinated efforts between the members and in association with the MFA Secretariat as well. The MFA Secretariat has been and continues to be very proactive during the crisis period.



**The Responses and
Efforts from the
MFA Secretariat
during the COVID-19
Pandemic**

Statements and Policy Documents on Migration and the COVID-19 Pandemic

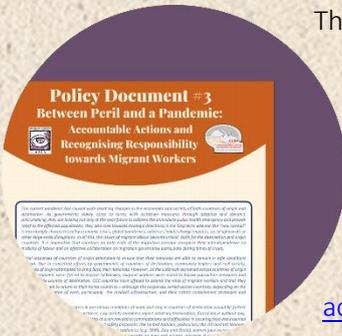
As an immediate response to the worsening situation of migrant workers in countries of destination, MFA released a statement in collaboration with the Cross Regional Center for Refugees and Migrants (CCRM), Pacific Win Pacific, and Solidarity Center, urging governments to uphold migrant workers' rights in crisis situations. The statement included specific recommendations for governments to address the challenges faced by migrant workers. The statement can be found in the MFA website:

<http://mfasia.org/uphold-migrants-rights-in-times-of-crisis-situations/>



The World Health Organization (WHO) has published guidelines for countries that have decided to 'repatriate their nationals from Wuhan City, Hubei province'. MFA members and partners provided inputs on the WHO guidelines through a policy document. The policy document reiterated the obligations of states in contingencies and return/reintegration processes, while emphasizing the perils of repatriation measures for current migrant workers in the region. The policy document can be accessed in the MFA website:

<http://mfasia.org/policy-document-no-3-between-peril-and-a-pandemic-accountable-actions-and-recognizing-responsibility/>



MFA and its Philippine members released a statement appealing for the Philippine Government to revise its guidelines for financial assistance for Filipino migrant workers. The statement states that the guidelines are unfair as it excludes undocumented and irregular migrant workers. The statement can be accessed here:

<https://usa.inquirer.net/54110/does-virus-aid-guidelines-for-ofws-selective-unfair>



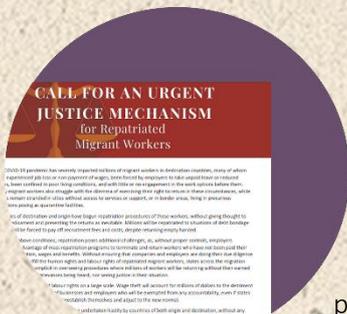
MFA's statement of May Day 2020 highlighted the challenges in decent work and fair recruitment faced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The statement called for governments and private sector/recruitment agencies to ensure protection of migrants' rights during the pandemic; implement decent work and fair recruitment; implement zero recruitment fees and employer pays model in the recruitment of migrants. The statement can be accessed in the MFA website:

<http://mfasia.org/decent-work-for-migrant-workers-at-all-times-implement-zero-fees-and-employer-pays-model-for-recruitment-of-migrant-workers/>



MFA in collaboration with the Lawyers Beyond Borders Network, a network of legal aid practitioners assisting migrants and their families, appealed to governments urging governments to continue to adopt policies that ensure respect for all human rights, the rule of law, and international labour standards, such as, but not limited to, safety and health, employment and decent work, wage protection, social security, and non-discrimination. The members of the Lawyers Beyond Borders International Network, continue assist migrant workers through direct humanitarian aid, public interest litigation, and giving legal assistance and advice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The letter of appeal with its specific calls can be accessed in the MFA website:

<http://mfasia.org/an-appeal-to-governments-on-behalf-of-migrant-workers-in-the-midst-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

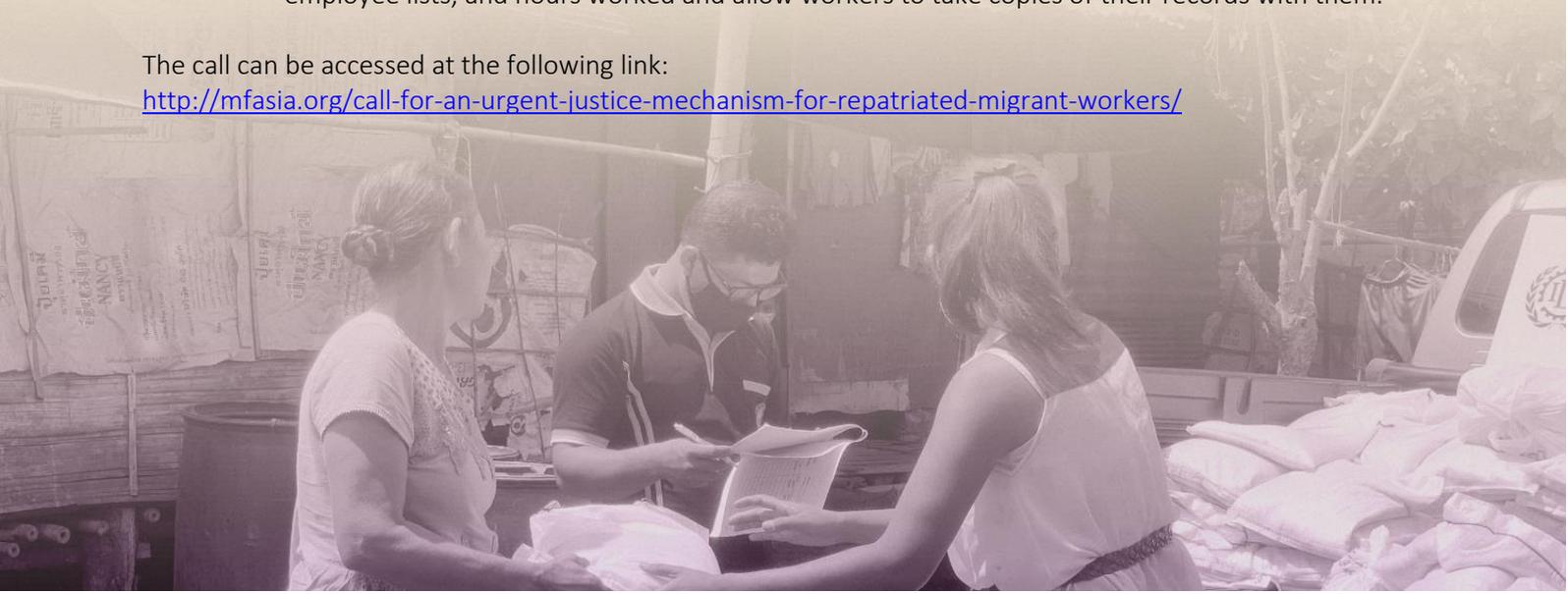


On 01 June 2020, MFA in collaboration with Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB) Network, Cross Regional Centre for Migrants and Refugees (CCRM), South Asia Trade Union Council (SARTUC), and Solidarity Center (SC), released a Call for an Urgent Justice Mechanism for Repatriated Migrant Workers. The call focused on the issue of wage theft among migrants who are being repatriated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The urgent appeal called on governments to implement a transitional justice mechanism to address issues of wage theft during the pandemic. The following specific calls were put forward:

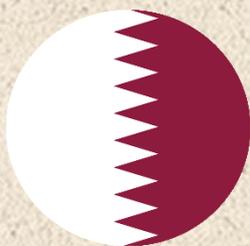
1. The transitional justice mechanism will address grievances, claims and labour disputes of repatriated workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. That the mechanism needs to be expedited, accessible, affordable, and efficient.
2. It should be a priority to guarantee that all repatriated workers with legitimate claims are able to access justice and some kind of compensation.
3. While it must be of the utmost importance to ensure that cases are resolved as soon as possible, without delay, especially in cases involving labour disputes, safeguards must be put in place to ensure that migrants are able to pursue their cases post return. Access to legal advice and support, facilitating power of attorney procedures, and easing requirements for in-person testimony and court appearance or appearance in front of a tribunal/grievance mechanism are paramount.
4. States should require employers and businesses to keep all employment records, including payroll, employee lists, and hours worked and allow workers to take copies of their records with them.

The call can be accessed at the following link:

<http://mfasia.org/call-for-an-urgent-justice-mechanism-for-repatriated-migrant-workers/>



Engaging Governments in Advocacy in line with Responding to Situations of Migrants Affected by the Pandemic



Engaging the Qatar Government

MFA continues to engage with Governments in line with pushing for rights-based responses to situations of migrants in crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the quarantine period, MFA has been in dialogue with the Government of Qatar, specifically the Ministry of Administrative Development Labour and Social Affairs (ADLSA) in line with developing the government's response to COVID-19 and migrants. MFA has sent recommendations to ADLSA on the directives for migrants developed by the Qatar government during the quarantine period. MFA also shared recommendations on good practices compiled from various sources on governments' response to the situation of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engaging the Global Forum on Migration and Development

At the global level, MFA as a member of the Friends of the Forum on the Global Forum on Migration and Development, was among the first organizations to push for the GFMD to take up the COVID-19 pandemic as a special thematic issue within the GFMD. MFA's advocacy led to the GFMD convening a webinar among stakeholders on developing the GFMD response to COVID-19. MFA was part of the core group that helped in developing the concept for the GFMD webinar on COVID-19.



MFA as a member of the Ad Hoc Committee preparing for the 2020-2021 GFMD, was part of the consultation process that looked at bringing the GFMD process online. The first GFMD regional consultation, the Bali Process, was scheduled in March 2020. The program had to be cancelled due to the travel restriction brought about by COVID-19. MFA was in consultation with the UAE Government, host of the GFMD in line with developing mechanisms to bring the regional consultations online.





COLOMBO PROCESS

Safe, Regular and Managed Migration: A Win-Win for All

Engaging the Colombo Process

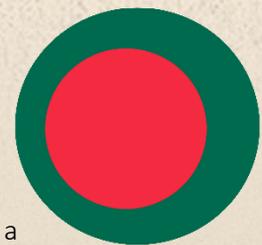
The MFA team has also been working with the MFA members to get in touch with their government representatives who are members of the Colombo (CP) Process to push for an online convening of CP member states to discuss COVID-19 and migrants. The following are the proposed objectives of the online consultation:

- 1.) Ensure that CP Member States have sufficiently discussed guidelines and measures to be taken by countries of destination in relation to migrant workers after the lifting of the lockdowns and travel bans
- 2.) Identify learnings acquired from the lockdown and how these can be accounted for in the measures and procedures developed with regard to repatriation of workers once lockdowns have been lifted.
- 3.) Determine what measures and assistance is expected from countries of destinations in facilitating repatriation procedures and what services should be made available to the migrant workers during the process (e.g. testing prior to departure, quarantine facilities, etc.)
- 4.) Continue with some of the positive measures that were taken during the lockdown, for example, free access to medical testing for the virus, access to food distribution while we are still waiting for companies to come back on the scale, and access to sanitation.
- 5.) Develop measures establishing a transitional mechanism for access to justice to ensure that migrant workers receive their dues and what is owed to them by their companies/employers as end of service benefit and to ensure that migrants are able to transfer a power-of-attorney to the Missions to follow up on their cases as they are no longer able to continue to reside in the country of destination.
- 6.) Discuss medium and long term reintegration plans for migrant workers returning to their country of origin.

MFA have members who have written to their government representatives requesting online consultation. The MFA Secretariat has recommended and discussed with the CP Secretariat through the IOM regional office MFA's recommendation for an online meeting among CP member states. The CP Secretariat has informed MFA that they will be following up with CP member states on this recommendation.

Engaging the Bangladesh Government

MFA members in Bangladesh started a national campaign requesting the government introduce measures to require private recruitment agencies to return recruitment fees of migrant workers who have not finished their contracts, or migrants who were not deployed. The national campaign was adopted by the MFA network and became a regional campaign as part of its recruitment reform program. The regional call for decent work and recruitment reform specifically was the message carried by the MFA network for May Day 2020 (refer to May Day statement above).



Solidarity and Movement Building

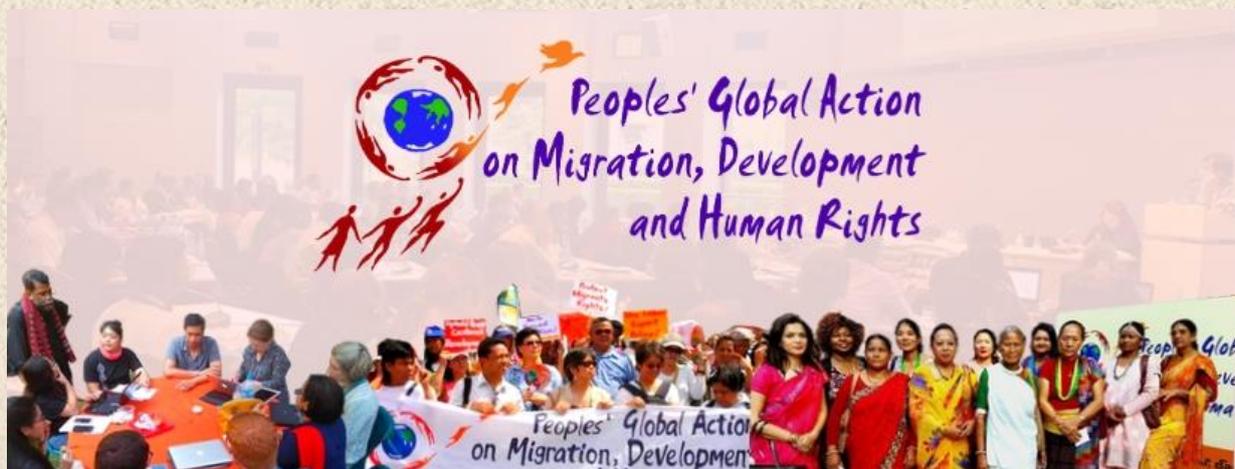
MFA is a member of various regional and global CSO platforms and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic it continues to build solidarity with these platforms. The MFA regional coordinator and some team members have been speaking through a number of platforms contributing to and coordinating responses from migrants in relation to COVID-19 and sharing information on the situation of migrants.

MFA currently sits in the leadership of the Peoples Global Action (PGA) for Migration Development and Human Rights, an alternative global CSO platform that started in the UNHLD and GFMD. MFA is currently working with the leadership of the PGA to highlight migrant grassroots initiatives and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PGA website and social media platforms will be used as the venue for this. The online platforms can be accessed in the following links:

www.peoplesglobalaction.org

<https://www.facebook.com/peoplesglobalaction/>



MFA is a member of the steering committee of the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) and has been involved in online consultations in line with developing the ADN's response on COVID-19.





MFA has also been part of the regional solidarity network led by the Korean Association of Human Rights Studies (KAHRS) and the Asia Development Alliance that has been convening a weekly webinar to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various sectors. On 7 May 2020 MFA co-organized the webinar under the topic Migration and the COVID-19 pandemic. The webinar focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Asia region - Human Rights, Inclusive Democracy and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); challenges and lessons learnt from the Singapore experience; and response of migrant organizations and CSOs to the pandemic.

MFA is also a member of the regional steering committee of the Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD). In line with this, MFA joined APMDD in an online consultation on the COVID-19 response of CSOs to present MFA's initiatives. The online consultation also discussed the situation of various civil society movements in Asia during COVID-19 including among them the situation of workers in the informal sector, peasants, women, human rights organizations, fisher folks, and indigenous people.

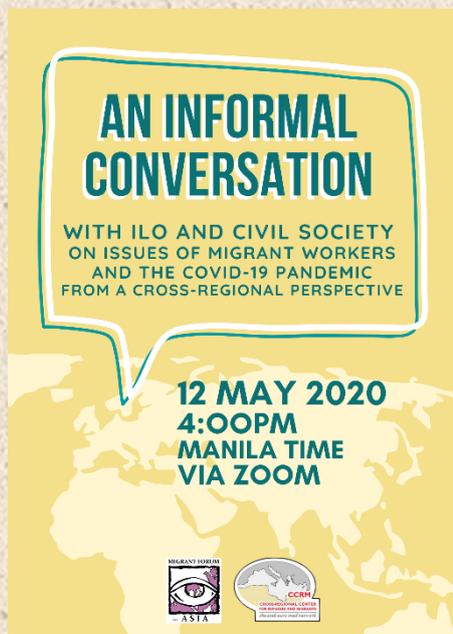
The Civil Society Action Committee was set up by civil society in 2016 ahead of the UN High Level Summit to Address Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees, with the aim to drive collective strategy, organizing and communication as an extra level of civil society advocacy towards Summit outcomes and implementation thereof. The Action Committee currently continues its work to monitor the progress of the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). MFA as a member of the Action Committee has been part of the deliberations and discussion in developing the Action Committee's response to COVID-19.

MFA has also been contributing to webinars on the situation of migrant workers in the GCC region organized by the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and Humanity United. MFA has been invited, as a resource person in the webinars, to help share thinking and response on the impact of COVID-19 for migrants in the Gulf region. To date there have been 4 webinars organized since the beginning of the quarantine period.

MFA also participated in a webinar organized by the International Human Rights and Business (IHRB) on the human rights and business implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The webinar was organized on 16 April 2020. Salil Tripathi - IHRB Senior Advisor Global Issues, presented on the current crisis from the perspective of business and human rights. The presentation was followed by an open discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants.



Webinars and Online Consultations on Migration and COVID-19



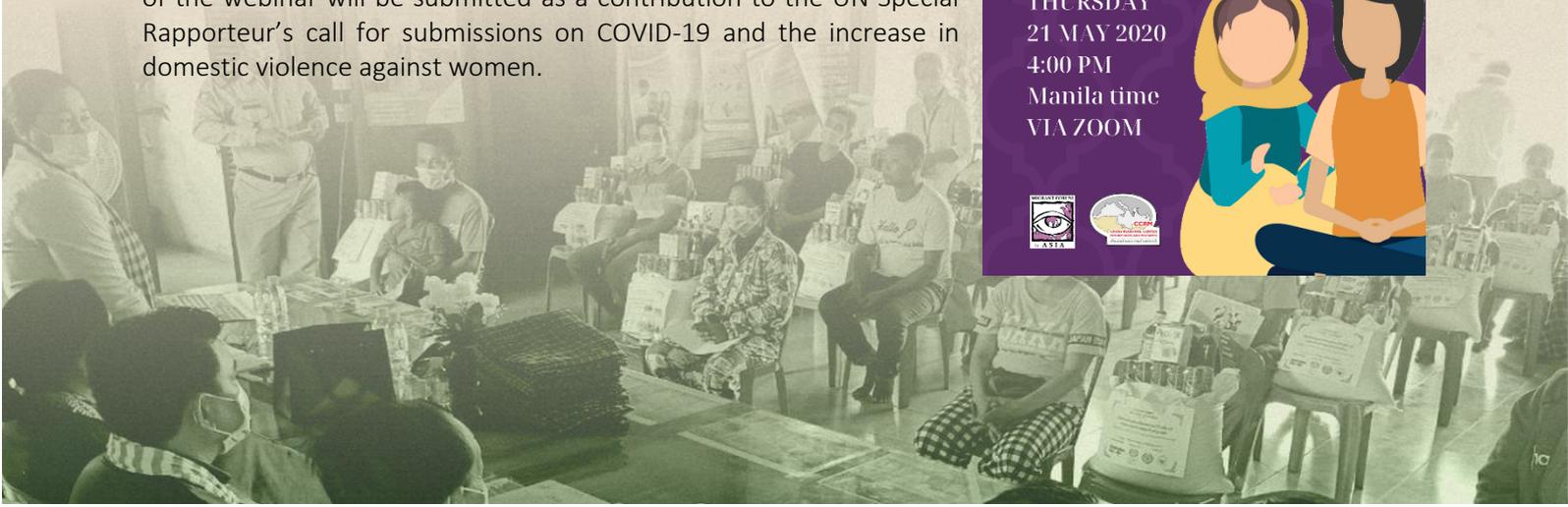
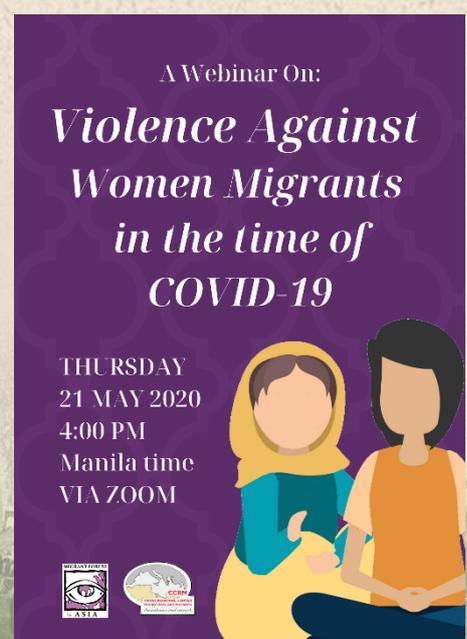
Informal Conversation with ILO and Civil Society on Issues of Migrant Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic from a Cross-Regional Perspective

MFA in collaboration with the Cross-regional Center for Refugees and Migrants (CCRM) organized an 'An Informal Conversation with ILO and Civil Society on Issues of Migrant Workers and the COVID-19 pandemic from a Cross-Regional Perspective'. During the webinar resource persons from ILO provided an overview of labour rights issues faced by migrants and responses of governments in South East Asia, South Asia and the GCC region. The inputs from ILO was followed by presentation from CSO representatives from Malaysia, Philippines, Kuwait and Jordan, on major challenges faced by migrants and responses of CSOs. The presentation of both ILO and CSO representatives highlighted that years of systemic abuse of migrants exacerbated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy and programs that discriminate against migrants made them more vulnerable to the health crisis.

The presentations were followed by a open discussion on what could be done post COVID-19 in line with strengthening responses to issues of migrants rights, how CSOs can utilize intergovernmental processes in the region such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, ASEAN, SAARC, and the Colombo Process in pushing for stronger protection of migrants across borders.

Violence Against Women Migrants in times of COVID-19

MFA in collaboration with CCRM organized a webinar on Violence Against Women (VAW) Migrants in times of COVID-19 on 21 May 2020. The webinar aimed to provide updates on the current situation of women migrants in the region and discussed violence against women in times of COVID-19. Speakers from the webinar included partners from Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Philippines and Bangladesh. The report of the webinar will be submitted as a contribution to the UN Special Rapporteur's call for submissions on COVID-19 and the increase in domestic violence against women.





The New Social Contract Post-COVID-19

MFA in collaboration with CCRM organized a webinar on the new social contract post COVID-19. The webinar aimed to discuss the emerging issue of a 'new social contract' with different stakeholders. During COVID-19, what used to be called '3D' jobs are now being referred to as 'essential work'. This is being applied to both the situation of internal workers, in India, and the returnee migrant workers, most of whom are employed in the informal sectors. There is a need for a new social contract that will provide stronger protection for the rights of workers in the informal sector. Speakers for the webinar include representatives of trade unions and MFA members from India, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Returns, Reintegration, and Repatriation in the time of COVID-19: Challenges and Lessons as we Look Forward

MFA in collaboration with CCRM organized a webinar on returns, reintegration, and repatriation in the time of COVID-19. The webinar was held on 14 May 2020. Specialists for the webinar came from Qatar, Bangladesh, India, Philippines, and Europe. The specialists discussed challenges and good practices in line with facilitating returns, reintegration and repatriation in the time of COVID-19.

A second webinar on the same topic was organized in collaboration with the Open Society Foundation (OSF) on 28 May 2020 as part of the OSF webinar series on COVID-19 and migrants in the Gulf region. The webinar specialists included the International Trade Union Confederation and MFA members from the Philippines, India, Malaysia, and Singapore. During the webinar MFA also presented the Call for Urgent Justice Mechanism for Repatriated Migrant Workers.



Background Context:

Asia is highly diverse in terms of development, economy and forms of government. This diversity was very evident in the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A few governments were highly proactive and responded by quickly developing robust testing regimes, contact tracing and strict community quarantines. Other governments either responded too slowly, and ineffectively or kept quiet over the fear of negative economic repercussions.²

China reported cases from December 2019. Countries including Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and Thailand confirmed cases in January 2020. However, the low rate of increase and the low mortality rate did not create panic among the governments and people. The first death outside China happened in the Philippines and the first reported human to human transmission happened in Malaysia in the first week of February. These were the key events which initiated policy responses from governments in the form of screening at the ports and large-scale testing. By end of February, most of the countries in the continent had reported at least a single case of COVID-19. But none of them except China had adopted lockdown measures to contain the spread. During this period, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan were commended for containing the virus through effective testing and monitoring measures. The Italian decision to keep the most affected region of Lombardy under quarantine from March 8th along with China's success in containing the virus through lockdown policies in Wuhan, definitely influenced the decision-making and subsequent policies of other countries. After China and Italy, the Philippines was the next country to announce strict lockdown measures on March 17th and the second country in Asia to follow this strategy. The following day the Malaysian government enforced the lockdown through Movement Confinement Order (MCO). These two policy decisions had widespread impact and South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh also announced nation-wide lockdowns. Simultaneously, the Gulf countries and other South East Asian countries implemented lockdown in pockets where the virus spread was rampant.

Apart from the health effects on people, the mitigation strategies in response to COVID-19 have had a number of socio-economic implications. The cost of adopting lockdown as a mitigation strategy is high and the implications are long-lasting. The macroeconomic effects, impact on livelihood and food security, effects on human rights, impact on supply chain and logistics are the devastating indirect effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

The sudden decisions by many governments to close down international borders and to stop international flights prevented many migrant workers from travelling back home, specifically from March 17th to March 26th. This worsened the situation for many. Most of the migrant workers in Asia are concentrated in sectors with high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work, characterized by low wages and lack of social protection. 'The unexpected lockdown and economic shocks led to insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns (where returnees may be stigmatized as carriers of the virus)'.¹

The lack of access to health facilities, absence of proper quarantine facilities along with the adverse effects of lockdowns made migrant workers one of the most vulnerable categories of people in Asia. Migrant workers, especially in the Gulf countries, tend to be reluctant to come forward to use the amnesty facilities, or for health check-ups due to the very real fear of deportation and jail sentence. Similar situations have occurred among migrant workers and refugees in South East Asian countries as well. Migrant workers and refugees have suffered further due to the loss of whatever immediate income was available, reduced access to markets and inflated prices for goods. Internal migrant workers, who move within national boundaries for work, especially in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have been hit hardest by the lockdown strategies. Almost all of them work in the informal sector without any social protection.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf

'The lockdowns have meant that hundreds of millions of people who have lost their jobs, hence incomes, have been deprived of their livelihoods, imposing a disproportionate burden on the poor and those who survive just above the poverty line. For them, the trade-off between getting sick and going hungry is no choice. Livelihoods are an imperative for preserving lives'.²

The countries in the Asian region adopted two kinds of strategies from the second week of March. The first strategy was to mitigate the virus through lockdown and provide testing and quarantine facilities for the people. The second strategy was to develop policies to deal with the health and economic impact of the crisis. However, migrant workers fell in between these two policies. The repatriation of migrant workers and accommodation to their well-being was completely ignored. Both home and host country governments delayed their response with embassies providing little help. There was hardly any Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) or crisis support system to assist migrants. Migrant workers globally, especially in Asia often lacked any access to welfare services and basic human rights.

² <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-covid-19-paradox-in-south-asia/article31417806.ece>