

International Migrants Day 2020: Time to Give Back to Migrants

A STATEMENT BY MIGRANT FORUM IN ASIA
DECEMBER 18, 2020



Today, December 18, 2020, marks *International Migrants Day*, the 30-year anniversary of the adoption of the 1990 *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families*, and the two-year anniversary of the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration*.

A Time for Transformative Action

Our world today faces extraordinary challenges; after thirty years of deliberations that lead to the drafting and final adoption of the UN Convention on Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and three years of deliberations that culminated in the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration, the international community is yet to muster political will to effectuate real change in the lives of all migrants and members of their families.

The “low hanging fruit” approach which has lately been characteristic in international migration governance cannot be the basis for building back better. We must be able to tackle the difficult and pressing issues in migration governance in order to bring about lasting and positive change in the lives of the 272 million migrants in the world.

Celebrating the Recognition of Essential Workers

The year 2020 has forced us to re-examine our old ways and adapt to the new challenges of our world today. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped us to realize the nature and value of work. This year, we celebrate how the pandemic has brought to the forefront the value and importance of essential workers, many of whom are migrant workers.

As the world came to a halt earlier this year, it is these courageous women and men who were at the forefront of our society’s response. These women and men, whether healthcare workers, supermarket workers, care workers, domestic workers, sanitation workers, have been central in ensuring the continued functioning of our societies even amid growing global uncertainty. This often came at a great personal risk and expense. Many were separated from their loved ones to reduce the risk of contagion. Others had to continue to work long hours in risky conditions in exchange for a meagre pay.



It is time that we do not only celebrate essential workers with applause and rhetoric but also ensure that this celebration translates into action. We need to make sure that all workers including migrant workers have equal rights and working conditions, equal pay for equal work, social protections, equal access to services and to the vaccine, and other protective measures.

2020: The Year of Stolen Wages and Lost Justice

For many of the 272 million international migrants, this year has brought increased hardship. While the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc across the globe destroying economies, separating families, and spreading pain and suffering, migrant workers have borne the brunt of the pandemic.

During the last few months, millions of migrant workers especially in the low skills sector have lost their jobs and were denied their hard earned wages and benefits. Many were forced to take unpaid leave or accept reduced wages. And although millions of workers have now been repatriated to their countries of origin, many remain stranded in countries of destination awaiting repatriation in destitute situations and forced to live without jobs and wages. In the rush to repatriate, very little attention has been paid to the individual claims of migrant workers, who were forced to survive for many months without pay.

This continued, large scale systematic denial of justice has been going on for several years. By neglecting to seriously focus on migrants' right to justice, countries of origin and destination are complicit in allowing human rights violations to continue with impunity.

The time has now come to put an end to the injustice and indignity suffered by migrant workers and to put in place justice mechanisms that would address their plight expeditiously.

An Opportunity to Relaunch Mobility in Rights and Dignity

What has been most unique about this year, is the almost complete and long halt in human mobility. Never before in history has mobility come to a complete pause like it did this year. As human mobility is resumed, we have a unique opportunity to radically reform the recruitment industry, to completely rid it of the exploitation which has plagued the industry for so long.

In our pre-pandemic world, recruitment reform was seen as a complex and unattainable goal. The pandemic has however debunked this myth. It has shown that we can indeed pause and build back slower and with more solid foundations. Now is the time to build robust systems that facilitate mobility rather than exploit it, systems that put the rights of migrants front and center, systems in which the migration journey and the development trajectory of each and every migrant count.

On the occasion of International Migrants Day and, in this exceptional year where migrant workers have contributed and given up so much, we call on all member states to give back to the migrants and ratify the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. We also call on member states to take concrete measures to recognize the contribution of all migrants, to bridge the access to services gap, to address wage theft, and to reform the recruitment industry.

