

# Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Migrant Working Women in the Arab Region



2020

# Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to sweep countries around the world, spreading in successive waves, the economic and social crisis is likely to intensify with the increasing pressures and challenges facing countries at the economic, health and social levels.

With the increasing facts indicating the many deficiencies in the fields of women's work in the Arab region, reaching unprecedented levels of human rights abuses, the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) must present its recommendations within the framework of the socio-economic response and the recovery measures that are proposed by governments.

ATUC's Secretariat had completed this guidance memorandum on the status of working women in the Arab region through presenting a set of situational examples outlining the experiences of the segments of women who were among the most affected during the COVID-19.

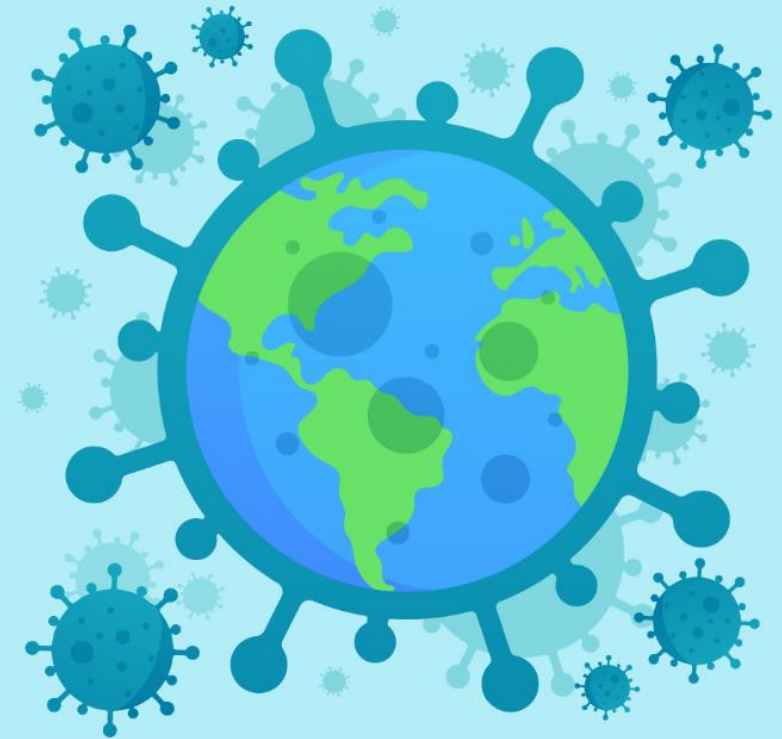
The segments of women that would be referred to in this memorandum will include local domestic workers and migrant agricultural workers. The aim is to develop mechanisms to address the forms of vulnerable work and unfair exploitation patterns.



The COVID-19 pandemic that have swept the world confirmed and exacerbated the precarious situation of migrant workers around the world, including workers in the Arab region. Despite the fact that this segment of workers performs vital functions in the health care, nursing, cleaning and housekeeping sectors, which are areas of work that place them on the front lines facing the COVID-19 pandemic and its catastrophic consequences on the financial and social level.

In addition to the immense difficulties women migrant workers face that include major facets of discrimination such as sexism, inequality and gender restrictions that are imposed by the unsafe, racist and xenophobic policies and forms of work, these workers have been exposed to increased risks after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

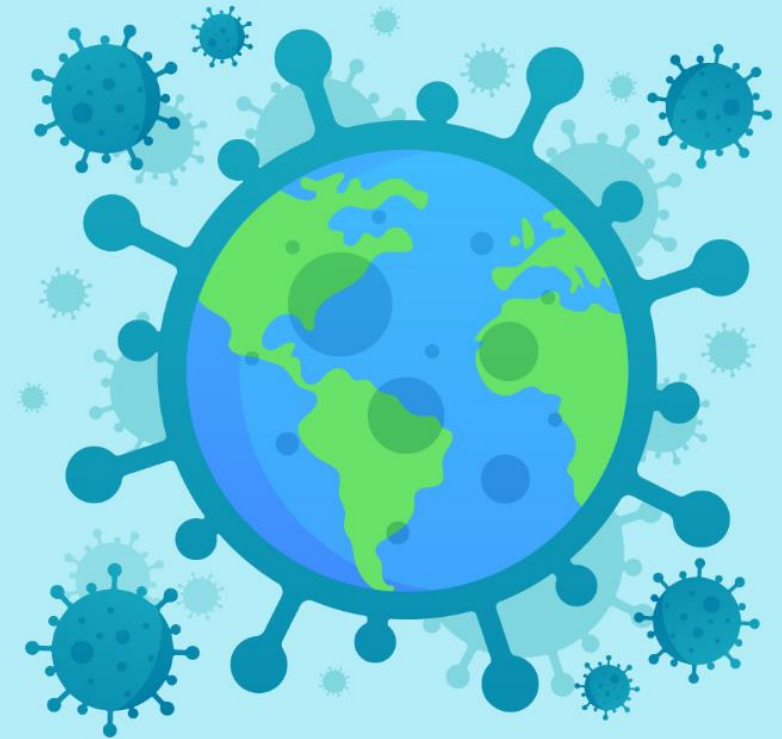
Risks include losing their livelihoods, violating their rights at work and other forms of human rights violations especially that most of them work in the informal sector with insecure contracts. These jobs encompass domestic services and the care sector, which are not subject to social insurance and lack the right to paid leave making them deprived of social security coverage that is necessary to compensate them for the loss of their source of income. They also consequently lack access to health care and maternity protection services.

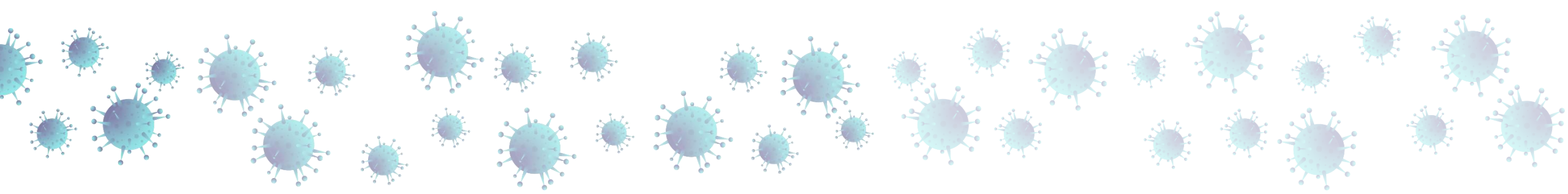


The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the crisis of migrant domestic workers, as the pandemic has led to the violation of their rights and their dismissal from their jobs with the consequent deprivation of housing in the homes of their employers and the loss of shelter without the slightest consideration of their health and safety. This is happening at a time when all countries imposed restrictions on travel and exacerbated financial difficulties, which made it even impossible for many of them to return to their home countries.

The crisis would also have an outcome on their families in their countries of origin, as their conditions have become more precarious and vulnerable, and they are in dire need, especially during this crisis, because of the reliance of a significant segment of these communities on the sums transferred to them from migrant workers for their livelihoods. These transfers decreased because of the economic decline caused by the pandemic.

The conditions of migrant workers in the Arab countries during the COVID-19 pandemic did not deviate from the situation in the rest of the world. They were also affected by the violation and infringement of their material and moral rights and the pandemic exacerbated the difficulties and challenges they are facing.





# **Implications of COVID-19 for migrant working women in the Arab region**

## Loss of jobs and complications in workers' situations

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that global unemployment rates could rise as a result of COVID-19 to nearly 25 million, putting migrant workers' livelihoods at risk, especially women. Reports also indicate that female migrant workers are losing their jobs in large numbers in some sectors, such as those working in sectors such as domestic work, as well as those in-home care facilities and agricultural sectors.

An important number of workers are active in the domestic work sector, in which female migrant workers represent a large proportion, approximately about 8.5 million women. Nineteen percent of these women are located in Arab countries, but this sector remains poorly regulated and is among the most unregulated areas in the informal economy. It is not regulated by formal contracts in most cases and is not subject to labor laws. Therefore, it workers in the sector are threatened by the constant risk of losing their incomes due to the toll of difficult economic conditions.

It has been recorded that migrant women workers in Arab countries have lost their jobs, as it is easy for employers to end their services without any hesitation, due to the impact of the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to that, other more severe risks face those who are unable to return to their home countries where they are exposed to abuse and exploitation.

There have also been several problems related to work permits, residency and visas, in addition to problems related to workers obtaining all their financial dues from their employers after losing their jobs, which exposed them to a housing crisis, especially that some of them were expelled from living in the homes of the employers where they were carrying out their activities.

Dealing with governmental bureaucracy proved difficult, in addition to the lack of immigration support services.



## The impact of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19 on the incomes of migrant workers

### Money transfers

The money transfers that migrant workers send to their families represent a basis for survival for them and simultaneously for many societies around the world. One study estimated that in 2020 that these transfers will record a 7 % decrease in 2020 compared to 2019, dropping from \$ 76 billion to \$ 70 billion at a global level.

In light of the suspension of face-to-face cash transfer services during the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant workers were unable to send money to their families due to their ignorance of the digitalized methods of carrying out these operations through the Internet.

Indeed, families of migrant workers depend on these transferred funds to meet their vital needs in terms of education, health and other basics.

These funds also often represent an alternative that fills up social protection weaknesses that poor families have to endure in countries with limited public welfare systems.

Therefore, the loss of transferred funds, with large numbers of female migrant workers losing their jobs because of the global economic recession caused by COVID-19, has a catastrophic impact, going beyond individuals to reach local economies that depend on money transferred from migrant workers as a main source of income.





## Failure to pay the wages of female migrant workers and financial challenges in receiving countries

### Example 1 Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon

It is estimated that there are more than 300.000 domestic workers of foreign nationalities in Lebanon. These workers have been negatively affected by the conditions imposed by the economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, as dozens of Ethiopian domestic workers were subjected to arbitrary expulsion and were left out on the street.

Ethiopian domestic workers receive wages of up to 200 US dollars per month, which they receive in Lebanese pounds according to the official exchange rate, and no longer has any value when making transfers to their families in Ethiopia as they are forced to convert the amount into US dollars.

Employers were unable to provide foreign currency to pay wages in dollars due to the economic crisis that the country is going through, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the local currency lost two-thirds of its value against the dollar.

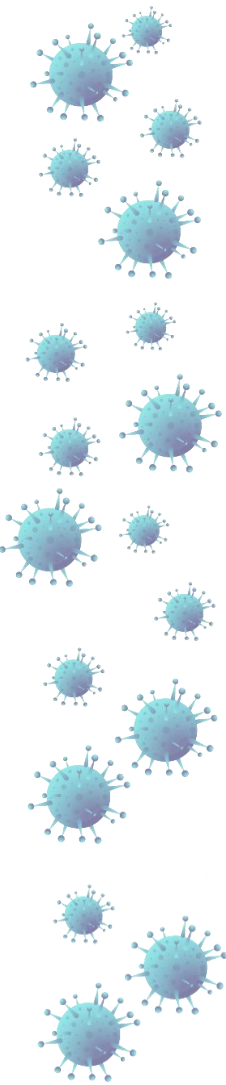
Dollar dropped to reach 4.200 pounds in June compared to 1.507 pounds before the collapse of the system. This increase in the exchange rate of the dollar against the Lebanese pound led to the inability of many employers to pay the wages of dozens of foreign workers.

In light of the high price of the dollar, these workers were expelled during the pandemic crisis and were left homeless, without any money in great suffering.

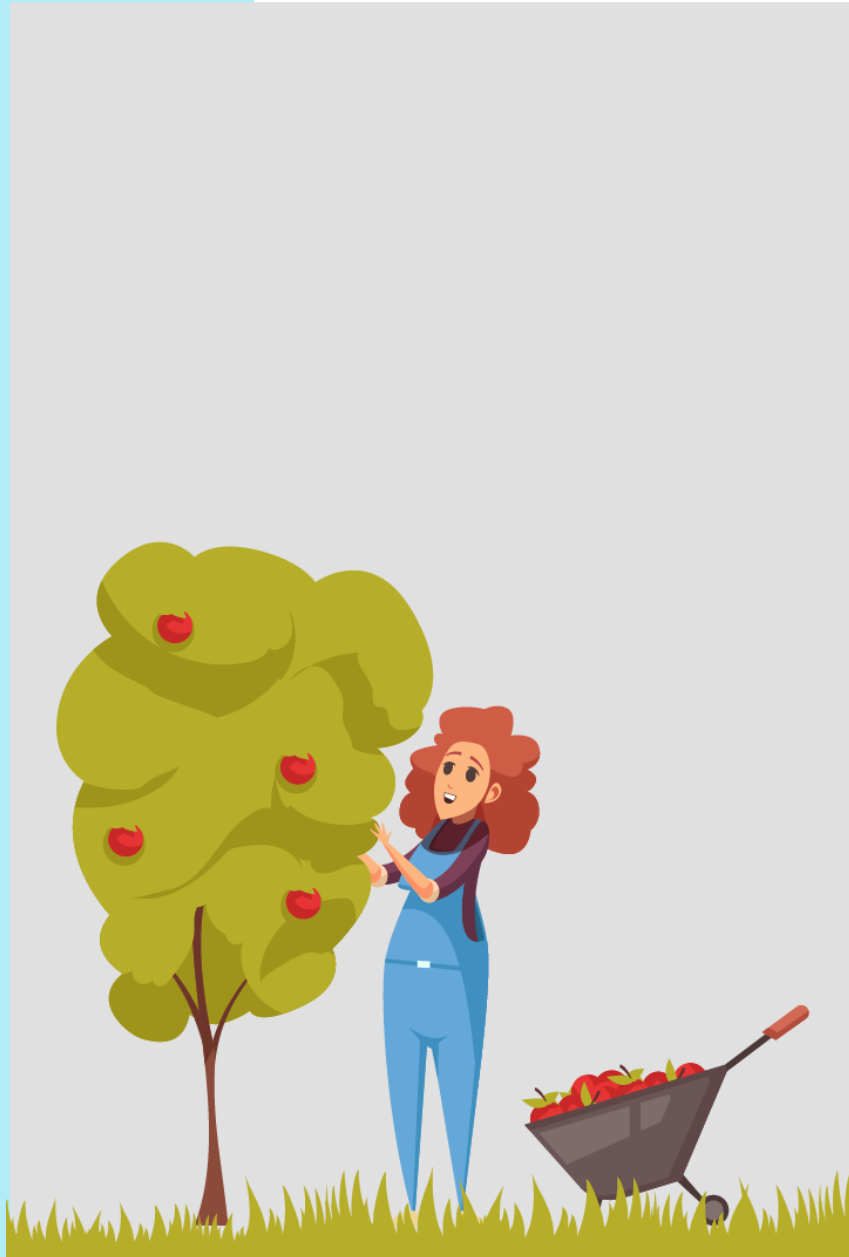
It is important to note that the salaries of foreign workers are among the lowest, due to their exclusion from any protection in the labor law.

In many cases, Ethiopian domestic workers, who were abandoned by their sponsors during the pandemic, did not receive their delayed salaries for periods ranging from one to four months, which they did not claim prior to the crisis or fear of getting fired from their jobs.

Meanwhile, hundreds of others endure working in harsh conditions without pay for fear of expulsion and exposure to an unknown fate.





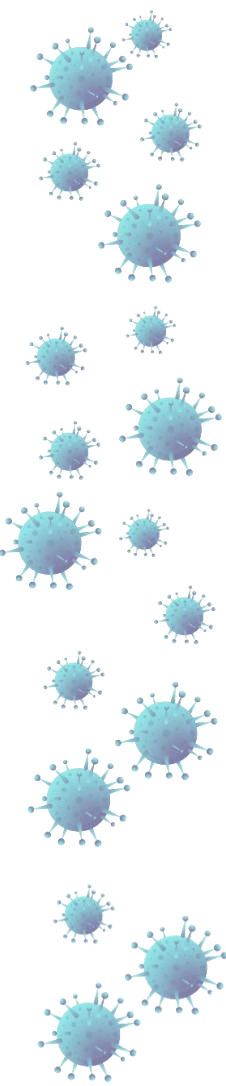


## **Example 2 Moroccan seasonal workers in Spain**

The number of Moroccan female strawberry pickers in Spain in the Huelva region in southern Spain during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of this year reached about 7.000.

In another form of the material crisis resulting from the measures taken to contain the outbreak of the disease, these workers were suspended after the end of their work in Spain.

Some of them had to spend all the money they had saved up to return to their families with, as they were stuck there and could not return because of the travel restrictions between the two countries.





## Additional financial difficulties imposed by migrant workers' own countries

The measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic at the national level exacerbated the financial crisis of domestic workers and made them completely helpless about the desire to return to their homeland.

This was the case for the Ethiopian workers who asked to be evacuated from Lebanon, as the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry informed them of its decision to compel those wishing to return to their country to bear the costs of the quarantine procedure in Hotels at their expense with a cost of 770 US dollars.

Such cost is equivalent to the salary of five months of work in Lebanon, knowing that many do not have this amount because they send money every month to their families.

Ethiopian Airlines also imposed payment of the airfare in US dollars to those wishing to return, which already has a high cost that they are unable to pay, especially with employers refusing to bear the expenses of their return flight tickets home.

This form of treatment necessitated the intervention of several parties, such as the Domestic Workers' Union and the Ethiopian Women's Workers' Committee, by meeting at the headquarters of the National Federation of Employees and Workers' Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), and contacting the Ethiopian Trade Union Federation, to discuss the situation of Ethiopian women workers as well as the consequences of the economic crisis and the effects of Coronavirus.

It was agreed upon that the Ethiopian Union would contact the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Aviation to find a solution to the issue of workers' travel, and that FENASOL and the Workers' Union in Lebanon would follow up with the Ministry of Labor and Public Security and the Ethiopian Embassy as well as coordinate with some associations that showcased interest in assisting those workers .



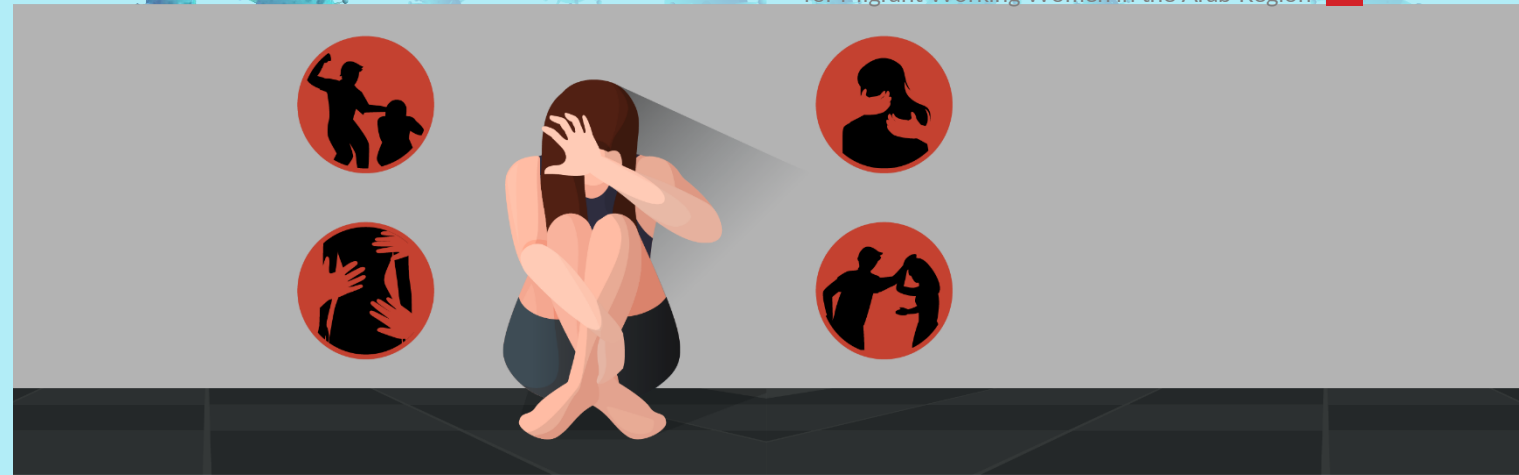
## Psychological pressure migrant female workers face, the multiple factors

### Loss of employment

The biggest threat to migrant domestic workers, which puts them under a great deal of psychological pressure, is the loss of their jobs because of the COVID-19 crisis. Whether it is by dismissal or suspension from work due to the general quarantine measures put to force by almost all countries, as they often belong to the informal employment sector that is exempt from labor laws and makes them subjects to the conditions of sponsorship. This makes them more vulnerable to arbitrary expulsion during the pandemic period due to the lack of mechanisms to assist and protect them.



## Exposure to abuse and inhuman treatment



Because of their work in private homes, domestic workers are subjected to abuse and do not enjoy legal protection. This poses a great danger to them, which can be perceived in the incident of the Ethiopian workers in Lebanon for instance.

These workers were abandoned by their sponsors during the COVID-19 pandemic and they found no other way but to sit-in in front of the Ethiopian Consulate in Beirut, with their luggage and without receiving their salaries, in an inhumane situation. Some sponsors may even persist in abuse by holding up the official documents and passports of their workers.

In another form of abuse and psychological pressure, seasonal Moroccan workers in the strawberry harvest in the Huelva region of Spain lived the worst periods of their lives when their mission ended. Indeed, some of them were expelled from the temporary shelters provided by the agricultural estates, and the hostility reached the point of burning some of their homes in strawberry estates pushing them to stay in shelters that did not have any drinking water or sanitation in total inhumane conditions. **12**

## Exposure to abuse and inhuman treatment



UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, described it as a “migrant settlement contending the level of the worst conditions I have seen anywhere else in the world”.

Member trade union organizations of the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) condemned this matter and drew the attention of the United Nations committees on human rights, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Committee in charge of Migrant Rights and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in order to contact the governments of Spain and Morocco as the sponsor states of the employers of seasonal workers in bilateral agreements, to take firm measures to stop the violation of these workers' rights.

In addition to the psychological pressures they live under due to the reality of the social isolation, they usually endure because of the differences in language and culture, the feeling of isolation of these workers was deepened during the comprehensive quarantine that was imposed in all countries.

In another example, a serious case of violence that affects the physical integrity and threatens life was recently highlighted, showing what could be caused by the absence of standards regulating domestic work and its exclusion from any protection system, causing ill-treatment and bullying that could exceed all limits.

In Egypt, the case of the ten-year-old girl, Umniah, who is a domestic worker that was hired to take care of two children, taking upon herself all house burdens in a situation that is closer to slavery, found herself in a situation where she was getting beaten, tortured and burned by her employers.



## Violence against female migrant workers

- COVID-19 has worsened the phenomenon of sexual and gender-based violence that is practiced against migrant female workers at all the immigration stages, especially irregular migrant women, who are unlikely to report this violence because of discrimination or for fear of arrest or deportation.
- Various forms of violence are exacerbated in situations of crisis, including human trafficking, child marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse. Previous epidemiological experiences have shown that women and girls, including immigrants, have been subjected to gender-based violence, and COVID-19 has led to the emergence of similar trends to violence against migrant women and girls due to the vulnerable situations they find themselves in.
- Migrant women may be also forced to live with potential perpetrators and may not find get always from abusive relationships due to travel restrictions, quarantine measures, or job loss. As for migrant women and girls who experience gender-based violence, they struggle to access health care services and basic support services due to restrictions on freedom of movement, closures of health centers and clinics, and fear of contracting the Coronavirus.

Human rights and press reports have also talked about the deprivation of Moroccan female migrant workers as well as physical and sexual assault during the public health emergency in Spain, The memorandum drafted by the private law office of the “Women Link Worldwide” organization, which deals with women’s rights, stated that Moroccan workers were subjected to sexual violence, violence and were denied of health care services, all of this was exacerbated during the period of Coronavirus “impunity” period, as it was difficult for victims to submit complaints because of the health emergency.



## Increasing workloads in unfavorable conditions to confront the COVID-19 pandemic

On the other hand, segments of domestic workers, sanitation workers and workers in the care sector are exposed to excessive exploitation during the period of general quarantine as they were forced to bear the increasing workloads in order to ensure hygiene and provide the necessary care. All in the absence of any personal protective equipment and without receiving any material compensation for extra hours of work, or enjoying the necessary hours of rest.

It is noteworthy that the period of the COVID-19 crisis increased the workload of most women, including immigrants, and the treatment of employers and companies became more arbitrary, without any respect to security procedures.

The epicenter of the pandemic is in the town of Lalla Maimouna, north of Rabat, Morocco, where the emerging Coronavirus has infected about 900 strawberry farmer workers in a short period, where 450 infections were recorded in one day.

The main culprits in this situation for instance, were the owners of the estates and the ones responsible for providing transport services. This shows the lack of respect for the necessary health and social distancing measures that were necessary to protect female workers and to ensure their health safety.

The mass movements of immigrant women seeking to return to their countries during the period of closure of cities, governorates and businesses increased the risk of transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic among them because they did not possess self-protection equipment and were not provided with the necessary preventive instructions.



## Limitations on the freedom of movement

Travel bans and restrictions imposed on women have prevented migrant workers from returning to their countries of origin, as cross-border travel has become more complicated and difficult.

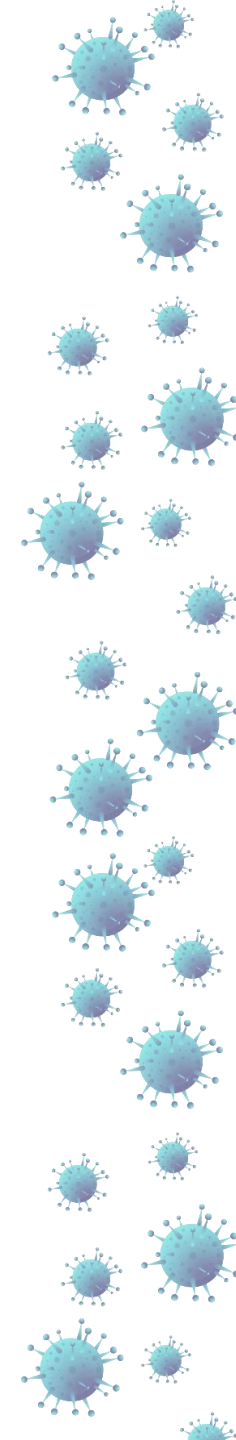
This includes medical examination procedures and requirements for obtaining a health certificate to enter any country. Workers who wish to return to their home countries may be reluctant to travel for fear that they would not be allowed to return to the countries in which they work again.

The restrictions imposed on travel, as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, lead to the spread of a feeling of mistrust, which is expressed by Ethiopian migrant workers in Lebanon as well as Moroccan women who were stranded and unable to return to their homeland.

Female Moroccan workers who found themselves without any options, in asylum situations for several weeks, missing the most basic conditions of life.

They had suffered confusion and fear for their fate and the fate of their families in the short term in relation to their ability to return to their homeland, but on a longer term in relation to the post-return challenge and their fear of completely losing the source of income if they are prevented from returning to the countries in which they have been working.

In the absence of a social protection system, families may also be deprived of financial transfers from their only source of livelihood, and in both cases the solution depends on the political decision within the framework of the pandemic response measures, whether from the receiving country or the country of origin.





## Absence of social protection and healthcare

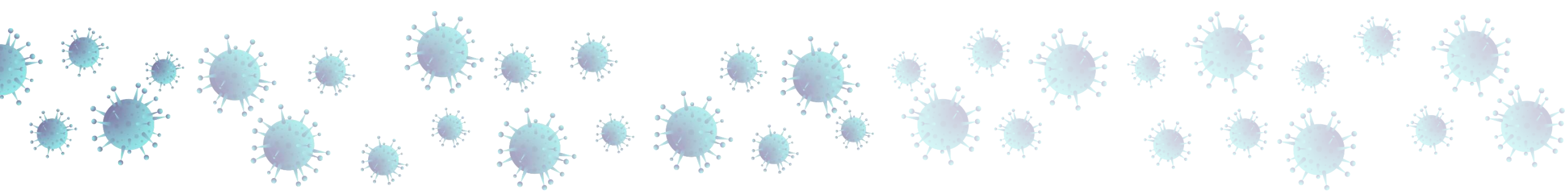
These forms of vulnerable work, whether those that are subject to the sponsorship contract system or the limited work contract system, are subject to contract agreements between the employer and the worker. The high rate of marginalization is alike at all levels: legislative, social and economic.



- In addition to preventing migrant workers in Arab countries from enjoying free medical services, migrant workers in an irregular situation may hesitate to adhere to medical examination examinations, tests and treatment procedures for fear that this will lead to their disclosure to the authorities upon verification of their identity documents and the subsequent possibility of arresting and deporting them.

- The sexual and reproductive health of female migrant workers, namely informal workers, is at risk due to the lack of health insurance coverage and their inaccessibility to health care facilities.

- Migrant workers in sectors requiring contact with others suffer from limited access to personal protective equipment and hand-washing facilities.



# Recommendations

Based on the information mentioned above  
and believing in the necessity of a positive  
change in the conditions of domestic workers  
and migrant farmers in Arab countries, the  
Secretariat of the Arab Trade Union  
Confederation presents the following  
recommendations

# Recommendations

## At the level of intervening organizations

Creating a central Arab database on migrant women workers under a tripartite supervision bringing together the International Labor Organization (ILO) for the Arab region, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for the Arab Region and the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) that would provide the comprehensive data, which should be labeled according to gender and age groups with all the necessary statistics relating to migrant workers.

Calling upon member trade union organizations to establish support centers for migrant workers in their countries, similar to the Migrant Workers Support Center in Jordan, affiliated to the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC). The Secretariat will be responsible for searching for the necessary funds and providing the necessary technical assistance.

Cooperating with UN Women and its partners in order to provide a more accurate picture of the gender-based dimensions of COVID-19, such as the social and economic impacts on girls and women, the measures that should be implemented to meet the needs of girls and women in the Arab region, including migrant workers.

# Recommendations

## On the human rights level

Regularizing their residency status and withdrawing the regular immigrant status on all cases, and keeping it in effect without exception during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, so that they are guaranteed full access to basic services.

Full enjoyment of Migrant workers in Arab countries of all their human rights during the COVID-19 pandemic period and beyond, regardless of their regular or irregular immigration status, all in accordance with international law and human rights standards.

# Recommendations

## On the healthcare level

Ensuring that health insurance coverage is provided for migrant workers in all work sectors, including domestic work, generalizing its scope to include irregulars, in light of national and local crisis response procedures and recovery plans in line with international standards.

This means:

Enabling them to access basic services such as health, security, justice and social services, including victims of and survivors of gender-based violence.

Enabling them to access comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive health services, and facilitating the provision of COVID-19 examinations, similar to resident citizens. Apart from being a basic human right that is stipulated in international law, it is also a best practice from a public health perspective regarding the pandemic situation.

Expanding the scope of beneficiaries from health care coverage to include husbands and children of migrant workers, and launching initiatives to reach them where they are such as mobile clinics, comprehensive service centers and workplace awareness campaigns, trying to attract some of these workers to provide such services and help with the awareness campaigns that are appropriate for different levels.

# Recommendations

## At the level of social security

Ensuring universal access to gender-responsive social protection measures so that everyone, regardless of their immigration status, has a social safety net coverage in times of need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to preventive measures will help ensure that migrant workers who lose their jobs are provided with a basic income and would also ensure that caregivers receive essential benefits for their families and children.

With regard to migrant women working in the informal economy or returning to their countries of origin after losing their jobs in the wake of the crisis, concrete response measures can be taken to generate employment through public employment programs. For example, women can be included in the production of protective masks and other basic protective equipment, thus contributing to slowing down the spread of the Coronavirus and providing them with at least a modicum of security in their financial status.

# Recommendations

## On the level of handling informal migration issues

Calling upon the governments of receiving countries to refrain from deporting irregular migrants, including women, men and children, and not detaining them or arresting them in gatherings, especially since immigration detention facilities usually lack the capabilities to maintain social distancing.

These centers also do not take into account measures to prevent migrants and employees from contracting COVID-19. This is of great importance for migrants who apply for medical examinations and treatment measures in order to support communities in managing the spread of the virus.

Calling on all states to review the status of asylum seekers and irregular migrants in detention centers and release them.

## On the level of counseling, awareness and prevention

Providing female migrant workers with information and advice on how to make digital money transfers to help bridge the digital divide between them.

Calling upon employers to inform migrant domestic workers of the availability of transfer services through the Internet, and also informing them of how the transfer services work through the Internet. They also need to be told that services have been made available in the different languages of migrant workers.

Creating mechanisms to control the housing of migrant workers, in a way that limits the number of inhabitants in one house, and guarantees the conditions for physical distancing due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.



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