



Domestic Workers at the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis



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Growing GDP and Migration Disparities:

Domestic Workers in Asia Under COVID-19

A common tale states that crises create insecurities. Oftentimes, however, these insecurities predate the emerging crises and are perhaps their source. Today, we are witnessing how the spread of COVID-19 has made the struggles of Domestic Workers (DWs) more visible. Structural in nature, they are amplified by the public health crisis.

In this endeavor, we hope to shed light on individual contexts of the regions DWs work in and come from. The below briefs are prepared based on information provided through the tireless and relentless efforts of our affiliates and domestic worker groups working on achieving labor justice around the world.¹

#CareForThoseWhoCareForYou

The Asian continent at large has the fastest growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the world. In particular, Asia “accounts for one-fifth of the world’s population and contributes more than 15 percent to global growth.”² While governance, expansion of industries and urban growth contribute to the GDP growth in the continent, the remittances of migrants to their countries, such as Sri Lanka, Philippines, and Nepal comprise the largest part of the GDP, making for a governmental reliance on migrant labor. The relevance of domestic work as a source of wage employment for women is increasing in significance, whether regionally or globally. Destination countries in Asia highly depend on migrant domestic workers: 1/6 of families in Singapore employ domestic workers. Similarly, in Hong Kong, economically disadvantaged families are employing DWs, as the total earnings requirement of a local family to be able to employ a DW is a little above the poverty line, half of the family median income, set by the government Commission on Poverty. A local family earning 2,000 USD is eligible to employ DWs, whereas the median family’s income in the administrative area is almost 3,700 USD.

The transformations witnessed in the market economy translate into the feminization of labor, as more women are acquiring mobility in the economic sphere. Multiple factors influence the mobility of women within the market economy. Climate change has affected the ability to grow

¹ Prepared by Roula Seghaier, Strategic Program Coordinator at IDWF.

² Goretti, M., et al. “Is South Asia Ready for Take Off?: A Sustainable and Inclusive Growth Agenda.” *International Monetary Fund: Asia and Pacific Department*, 2019.

crops and to engage in farming activities making the sector suffer economic losses. Governmental policies push women to migrate to sustain their countries' reliance on remittances: they “are estimated to amount to US\$7-8 billion to the Philippines and US\$2 billion to Indonesia.”³ The privatization of education forced workers to seek higher salaries to guarantee their children’s access to knowledge. The aging demographic of the population in Asia-Pacific, “expected to increase from an estimated 548 million in 2019, to nearly 1.3 billion by 2050,” is also expected to create further need for domestic workers. The migration cycle of domestic workers in Asia is not solely prompted by individual financial need, rather is a result of an intricate web of governmental policies, economic, demographic and climate fluctuations.

Domestic work, however important, is not recognized as work in most Asian countries, thus negatively affecting the equal access to job securities, pensions, and other social protection schemes. The number of domestic workers in India⁴ and Indonesia⁵ is over four million and almost two million in the Philippines⁶. Many of these workers are young girls who migrate, nationally and internationally, with an estimate of 800,000 women per year⁷. Starting from an already weakened position, DWs are suffering the consequences of COVID-19 daily.

The IDWF affiliates reported, through our assessment survey, that nearly 100% of live-out domestic workers have lost their income during the crisis. Those who remain employed as live-in workers face increased exploitation and discrimination. In Hong Kong, the protected entitlement to the day off from many DWs was violated by the stay-at-home rule, enforced by the employer. Likewise, the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore, has released [an advisory](#) on June 17, 2020, suggesting that migrant domestic workers do not “gather or loiter public places.” Beyond the illusion of harmless public health advice, employers could be encouraged to withhold the day-off from their workers. Similarly, in Malaysia, the governmental discourse holds that migrant workers live in poorer and less hygienic areas, and hence are more susceptible to carry the virus. The prejudice of migrants as agents of “loitering” resonates in class-based racist discourse: intra-Asian racism is on the rise with discriminatory messages shared implying that migrant domestic workers carry COVID-19. Furthermore, issues of class, caste, and religious belonging feed into the racism: urban employers spray disinfectant over the bodies of rural domestic workers who desire to return to their villages but are stuck in the cities under lockdown. In South Asia, caste plays into the perception of “untouchability.” Furthermore, rumors in India⁸ and Nepal are spread, implying an intentional spread of COVID-19 by Muslims. Whether migrating from a different country or a different city, domestic workers are unable to access governmental support. Rural migrants with no residency in the city of their work are directly affected. In India,

³ “Overview of Key Issues Related to Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia.” *International Labor Organization*, 2006.

⁴ “India: Domestic Workers,” *Anti-Slavery: Today’s Fight for Tomorrow’s Freedom*.

⁵ Britton, Jack. “Indonesia’s Domestic Workers Need Urgent Protection,” 2018.

⁶ “Domestic Workers in the Philippines: Profile and Working Conditions,” International Labor Organization.

⁷ Footnote 2.

⁸ Ganguly, M. “India’s Steps to Contain Covid-19 Have Failed to Curb Anti-Muslim Rhetoric.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2020.

they do not get ration cards meant for government food subsidies for the impoverished. In Indonesia, it translates to the lack of access to government food packages. In Vietnam and Mainland China, social security is also directly linked to the residency. Some countries also simply exclude DWs from social security: In Cambodia, DWs can only register the yellow card limited to public hospitals, whereas formal workers have white cards. In Hong Kong, DWs are excluded from the Mandatory pension scheme. Most DWs are also not registered in the social security scheme: 1) In South Korea, DWs cannot register for it due to low income, 2) In Indonesia, they need a proof of employment to register for it, which is not accessible, 3) In Thailand, rural migrant DWs keep their registration as farmers to get a better insurance scheme. 4) In the Philippines and Nepal, employers of DWs do not register them into social security, which calls for closer implementation.

Best practices, however, exist. In Thailand, workers can register for a relief package of \$150 per month if their ability to work and access income has been affected by COVID-19. A decree in Hong Kong makes it unlawful for employers to (i) dismiss DWs if they contract COVID-19; and/or (ii) based on imputed disability discrimination, an assumed but unmet contraction of COVID-19. These protective measures are made possible by the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in Hong Kong. The economy in Asia cannot recover unless remittances are sent. With the lockdown, many migrants are unable to make the money transfers, influencing their entire families in Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in particular, which creates a domino effect. Our affiliates continue to fight for a just world of work. They are creating innovative solutions for alternative economies and sustainability of livelihoods. They are producing their own masks in India, creating a mutual help-center in Sri Lanka, leading the organizing of districts and sub communities in Indonesia, increasing their membership in Malaysia, and organizing in a decentralized manner based on villages in the Philippines. The DW's movement leadership is representative and grounded in the community. It is crucial for governments to use the gains achieved by the DWs movement, be it the ratification of the ILO conventions, the decentralization of organizing, or the intersectional lens that seeks to dismantle labor injustice from its roots.

Read IDWF's full report and global recommendations in our brief: [The Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers and Policy Responses](#).

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