

Migrant care and domestic workers beyond the COVID-19 crisis

A call to action for transnational cooperation

Policy brief

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CIPPEC (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth) is an independent, non-partisan, nonprofit organization that works for a just, democratic, and efficient state that improves people's lives. To this end, it concentrates its efforts on analysing and promoting public policies that foster equity and growth in Argentina and beyond. Known for the high qualification of its staff, CIPPEC has become one of the most recognized and respected public policy think tanks in the region.

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Women's Economic Imperative is a global, non-profit organization committed to promoting women's economic empowerment and inclusive economic growth for the benefit of all in society. WEI's foundation is rooted in the work of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel (UNHLP) on Women's Economic Empowerment and was founded by the UNHLP's Chief of Secretariat in conjunction with several members of the Panel. Our primary areas of focus are women's economic empowerment and women's entrepreneurship, including: providing policy advice to key stakeholders on policy frameworks, ecosystems and issues related to women's economic activity; design and implementation of interventions and capacity building to deepen impact and drive systemic change; policy advocacy and thought leadership.

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The COVID-19 crisis pointed out what truly matters for our well-being. In this process, it unveiled a fact that remained largely unspoken in the global public agenda: care work is essential for sustaining life as we know it.

Care and domestic work encompass multiple activities and bonds aimed at meeting the physical, emotional and psychological needs of people at different moments of their lives.¹ These tasks involve both face-to-face actions between a care recipient and a caregiver (taking someone to the doctor, feeding a child) and household work that creates the preconditions for direct caregiving (cooking, cleaning, shopping, gardening).² Overall, care work presents three key characteristics: it is overwhelmingly feminized, it is undervalued, and it is a vital pillar of our societies.³

During the last decades, diverse factors have increased care demand. As women massively entered the labor market, the traditional family model with full-time female caregivers became outdated. Consequently, outsourcing care became an alternative for households to address their needs. This process gave rise to an internationalization of care services known as "global care chains."

As defined by Arlie Hochschild,⁴ global care chains are "a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring." While these chains entail multiple occupations and sectors, they frequently involve a household that recruits a foreign woman to provide care, who in turn transfers her own care needs to others. Consequently, a network of inter-connected households emerges which links individual lives with global trends through domestic work.

Global care chains unveil structures and processes that perpetuate inequalities worldwide. The social organization of care and domestic work has traditionally been structured upon several sources of disparity, such as gender and class. The migration of care workers ignites two new dimensions: the North-South and the local-migrant cleavages, which extend gendered, classed and raced inequalities across borders.

»Among migrants, domestic workers have historically faced more risks and less assistance during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic was no exception.«

Migrant care workers are particularly exposed to vulnerabilities. The compounding and intersecting inequalities they experience due to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are deepened because global care chains sit at the crossroads of labor, migration and care policies. These policy regimes are frequently inconsistent with each other or present contradictions and voids, both within and between countries. As global care chains are transnational processes governed by national-level policies,⁵ chal-

lenges arise to protecting migrant care workers' rights.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges have magnified. Since 2020, all lives have become vulnerable – to varying degrees – to the coronavirus, and care became a crucial resource to mitigate the risks. In this way, while the global health threat paralyzed economies, the burden of care work intensified.

Yet while care relevance increased during COVID-19, care workers, especially the migrants, saw their rights severely affected. The impacts of the pandemic on migrants' livelihoods and their families were evident in several dimensions, as national measures and emergencies produced transnational consequences. Among migrants, care and domestic workers have historically faced more risks and have been less assisted during crises,⁶ and the COVID-19 pandemic was no exception.

Overall, global care chains mesh migration, class, gender, labor, and care at a transnational level, requiring coherent multilateral approaches to tackle challenges and seize opportunities to guarantee rights. The G20 has a paramount role in this endeavor, as the pandemic emphasizes the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing global systemic concerns.

This topic is particularly relevant during the current G20 Presidency: Indonesia has one of the largest migrant worker communities, estimated at around 9 million people. Half of them are women, usually employed as domestic workers in the informal economy.⁷ This situation hinders their access to decent work and affects their human rights.

It is crucial to strengthen the role of transnational cooperation to ensure decent livelihoods for migrant care workers and advance gender equality globally. To this end, we need a new paradigm in which the socioeconomic system puts life at its core.

MIGRANT CARE AND DOMESTIC WORKERS: CONCEPTS, DATA AND CHALLENGES

Domestic work can be defined as the labor performed in or for a household.⁸ Domestic workers might include caregivers, nannies, social workers and others who conduct different tasks in private household settings. Around the world, the ILO⁹ estimates there are more than 67 million domestic workers, 83% of whom are women.

Obtaining a global perspective of migrant domestic workers is challenging, as data is scarce and patchy.¹⁰ The struggles are related to limited demographic information, different conceptual definitions and the absence of migrant tracking, among others. At the same time, a significant share of domestic workers is employed in the informal economy or lack documentation, which leads to deficits in their recording. Bearing these caveats in mind, the ILO¹¹ calculates that more than one of every sixth domestic worker in the world is an international migrant, accounting for 11.5 million people. This figure means that approximately 7.7% of all migrant workers are domestic workers.

While 78% of the domestic workers are in Asia and Latin America,¹² the distribution of international migrant domestic workers reveals a different picture: 35% are in Asia, 27% in the Arab States and 19% in Europe, while only 7% are in

Latin America.¹³ They experience deprivations globally, yet the exercise of their rights varies greatly between countries and regions.

Overall, deficits in their labor conditions are ubiquitous, particularly for migrants.¹⁴ They experience low access to social security, lack of joint representation, low remuneration and high levels of informality. In extreme cases, human rights can be severely compromised. Domestic workers might experience gender-based violence, forced labor, sexual abuse and restrictions in their fundamental freedoms. The risks are especially significant for live-in workers.¹⁵

These rights violations are related to several factors. Domestic workers are frequently isolated in private settings. This situation hampers law enforcement, while it hinders their possibilities for collective representation. Furthermore, job protection regulations sometimes exclude domestic workers. In 2010, general labor laws covered only 10% of the domestic workers globally while 30% of the workforce was completely excluded from any labor regime.¹⁶ The neglect of care as an essential activity thus translates into the mistreatment of care and domestic workers.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC ON MIGRATION AND GLOBAL CARE CHAINS

While inequalities have been longstanding, the pandemic worsened the experience of migrants. Migrants were frequently excluded from emergency policy responses, while, sometimes, discriminatory attitudes were fostered¹⁷. Moreover, they usually worked in the sectors more affected by

the crisis.¹⁸ Consequently, their livelihoods and their families' situation back home deteriorated, as the crisis also impacted remittances.¹⁹

The pandemic also affected migrants' health: they have been disproportionately at risk of being infected, especially those in precarious jobs and irregular status, while they had lower access to healthcare services and vaccines.²⁰ At the same time, they played a critical role in addressing the pandemic by working in diverse care sectors.

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In terms of mobility, border closures restricted the possibilities for travelling between host and home countries, increasing the separation between migrants and their families.²¹ Emigration also decreased and more migrants returned to their countries of origin due to socioeconomic and sanitary risks.²² While some countries tried to reach agreements, repatriation and information provision was often limited.²³

Regarding domestic workers, the pandemic underscored the obstacles for law enforcement in private households. Experiences varied depending on the employment relationship: live-in workers increased the dependence upon their employers and their isolation, while those who lived elsewhere were unable to get to work.²⁴ These obstacles were particularly harsh for sponsored migrant domestic workers, who were tied to specific employers and, hence, could not look for a new job, access social protection or return home.²⁵

While their labor situation worsened, migrant domestic workers had limited access to employment protection policies and COVID relief programs. Rao et al²⁶ highlight that the workers reacted to these exclusions by mobilizing and increasing claims-making. Nonetheless, these achievements could only partially offset their gendered, classed and raced vulnerabilities shaped by structural power relationships.

A CALL TO ACTION TO THE G20

Around the world, the pandemic had negative consequences on livelihoods and well-being for all, yet migrant domestic workers' deprivations were particularly exacerbated. As the ongoing challenges aggravate, governments must act locally and transnationally, fostering cooperation across borders to guarantee human rights and decent labor standards for migrant domestic workers. This approach requires the adoption of a new paradigm in which the socioeconomic system sustains life by building collective structures and resources that address people's needs in three realms:

Building back better through guaranteeing the right to care: to support life needs, care policies must remain a priority beyond the COVID-19 emergency. This approach requires fostering shared responsibility and valuing essential workers. ILO's 5R Framework can be a good starting point to recognize the value of care and domestic work, reduce women's burden, and redistribute it both within families and with other stakeholders, while rewarding care work fairly and guaranteeing the representation of care and domestic workers.²⁷ For migrants, it is especially relevant to enable skills portability across borders by recognizing informal learning and foreign diplomas and providing training to strengthen their career paths.²⁸ These policies can bring positive impacts by reducing gender and socioeconomic gaps while producing economic returns in terms of job creation and GDP growth.²⁹

Establishing social protection floors to leave no one behind: as COVID-19 heightened vulnerabilities and exposed the interconnections of our mutual well-being, it is urgent to expand the coverage of social protection policies to include all migrants regardless of their status. A lesson learnt from the pandemic is that the risks of protecting only part of the population are costlier in terms of public safety than implementing preventive interventions.³⁰ Thus, a rights-based approach to policy can contribute to guaranteeing an adequate standard of living for all, fostering more inclusive and resilient societies that can better face future crises.

Establishing synergetic legal frameworks: in most countries, migration regimes prevail over labor law so migrants face obstacles to claiming their rights;

migrant domestic workers are especially disadvantaged. Therefore, countries should implement regulatory frameworks that provide domestic workers with the same rights as workers in other fields and allow all migrants to claim their human and labor rights, regardless of their status. At the same time, governments should implement rights-based migration schemes that enshrine human dignity above all, aiming at keeping families together, fostering formal employment, regulating recruitment processes and facilitating access to justice. In many regions, this means revising the sponsorship systems for migrant domestic workers, as they often restrict their fundamental rights and freedoms.³¹

Spanning multiple countries and involving diverse policy regimes, national interventions by themselves are not enough: global care chains require coherent transnational approaches.³²

»Addressing the socio-spatial dimensions of care must be part of a comprehensive strategy that rethinks our socioeconomic system from a human-centred perspective.«

Transborder cooperation can take several shapes. Some countries of origin have negotiated bi- and multilateral agreements to protect their migrant citizens in host countries. For example, some Asian countries (e.g., Indonesia, the Philippines and India) have demanded better protec-

»The role of the G20 is paramount, as the pandemic emphasizes the importance of transnational cooperation in addressing global systemic concerns.«

tion for migrant domestic workers in countries of destination (e.g., Malaysia, Saudi Arabia) and arranged memorandums of understanding.³³ In other care sectors, such as healthcare, there are codes for ethical recruitment that also aim at mitigating the potential negative implications of care work migration.³⁴ While challenges still prevail, these agreements – when appropriately enforced – can be valuable to foster migrant domestic workers' well-being and address global systemic concerns, especially when involving multiple stakeholders in the process.

Furthermore, collaboration among unions at a transnational level can also bring about positive effects. Around the

world, achievements have included improved collective agreements, higher minimum wages, and better terms of employment, among others.³⁵ At the supranational level, efforts have involved building networks among organizations and reaching bilateral agreements between unions in sending and receiving countries, as it happened in Latin America and in Africa.³⁶

The G20, as an international forum that gathers leaders from all sectors in different tracks, provides a unique platform to contribute to this endeavor by engaging multiple stakeholders in the process. First, the G20 can have a critical role in building alliances to address challenges in global care chains by facilitating exchanges on experiences, strategies and potential transboundary effects of national interventions.³⁷ Joint work opportunities between tracks and working groups can be especially promising to attain better coherence,³⁸ raise awareness of the challenges ahead, trigger synergies and tackle trade-offs among policies.

Second, the G20 can also improve data collection and disaggregation on care migration in its member countries and beyond. This step is crucial to better understand the integration of countries into care chains, analyze the determinants of migration flows, monitor the situation of migrants, and identify any intersecting discrimination that they might suffer. This information can, in turn, foster research on the topic and put forth evidence-based policy proposals to guarantee migrant care and domestic workers' rights. To this end, collaboration with engagement groups and peer learning mechanisms can produce virtuous processes of evidence generation and exchange of good practices.

While backlash against globalization tries to emerge, movements of people across the world are unlikely to disappear; this includes people migrating to provide care. Any discussion at the multilateral level, hence, should consider the lives that exist across borders and rethink our social protection schemes transnationally. The G20 and its leaders can take a pioneering role in igniting discussions and advancing interventions to ensure basic social welfare schemes and labor rights for all beyond the nation-state level in times when people are not geographically tied to a single place.

Addressing the socio-spatial dimensions of care must be part of a comprehensive strategy that rethinks our socio-economic system from a human-centered perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface the prevailing challenges in caring and deepened existing inequalities. Thus, the G20 has a need and a duty to prioritize care policies worldwide and promote transnational cooperation to ensure migrant care and domestic workers' rights.

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