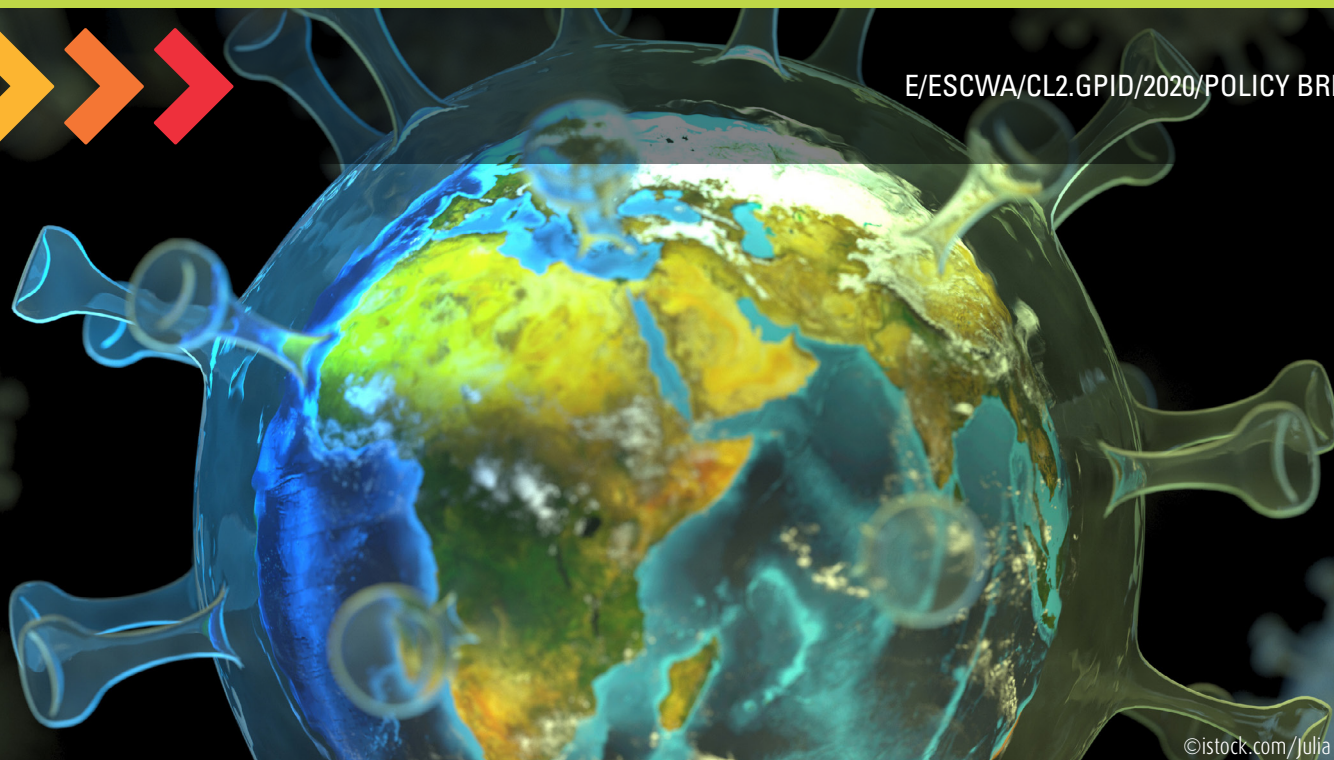


THE IMPACT OF **COVID-19** on **Migrants and Refugees** in the Arab Region



E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/POLICY BRIEF.2

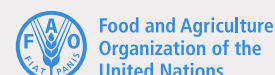


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Introduction

Migrants and refugees are among the social groups most impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and are suffering disproportionately from its social and economic consequences. They are at the forefront of the pandemic, providing essential services including health, cleaning, domestic work, agriculture and food production, and ensuring the continuity of supply chains across the Arab region. The pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers in urban, rural and camp contexts, while negatively impacting humanitarian assistance.

Countries are called upon to take immediate steps to protect and empower migrants and refugees, and enable them to overcome the direct and longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus ensuring that no one is left behind. Countries are also called upon to recognize the contribution of migrants and refugees to the societies and economies of the region and to their countries of origin, and are urged to fight xenophobia and discrimination towards them.



Why focus on migrants and refugees

The immediate effects of the pandemic included restrictions on mobility, imposed by countries to limit human-to-human transmission of the virus. As a result, many migrants and refugees have been left stranded in host countries, without food, shelter, access to essential services or the ability to return home. Moreover, many asylum seekers have not been able to access asylum countries to seek protection. Numerous migrants are also at risk of falling into an irregular situation, as they are unable to meet legal requirements or access visa processes.

The pandemic has increased stigma, xenophobia and discrimination, and migrants have been accused of contributing to the spread of the disease. Furthermore, migrant families and communities in countries of origin are expected to be significantly impacted owing to a drop in remittances, particularly affecting food security, nutrition, and access to basic services, such as health care and education.

Specific groups of migrants and refugees are at particular risk, including individuals in an irregular administrative situation or without documentation, low-skilled/low-income migrants, migrant and refugee women, girls with special needs, those without family/community support, children, persons with disabilities and stateless persons. Ensuring that migrants and refugees are not left behind is essential to achieving the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG target 3.8: Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

GCM objective 15. Provide access to basic services for migrants.

GCR paragraph 72. In line with national health care laws, policies and plans, and in support of host countries, States and relevant stakeholders will contribute resources and expertise to expand and enhance the quality of national health systems to facilitate access by refugees and host communities, including women and girls; children, adolescents and youth; older persons; those with chronic illnesses, including tuberculosis and HIV; survivors of trafficking in persons, torture, trauma or violence, including sexual and gender-based violence; and persons with disabilities.

Over 40 million migrants and refugees were hosted in the Arab region in 2019

15 %
of all migrants and refugees worldwide are hosted in the Arab region



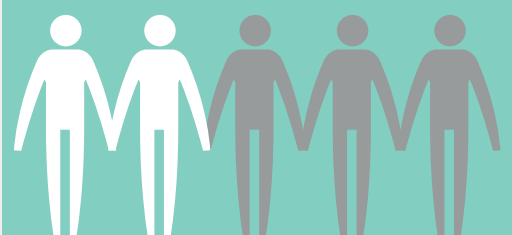
Around 32 million migrants and refugees originated from Arab countries by 2019

50%
of migrants and refugees from Arab countries stayed in the Arab region

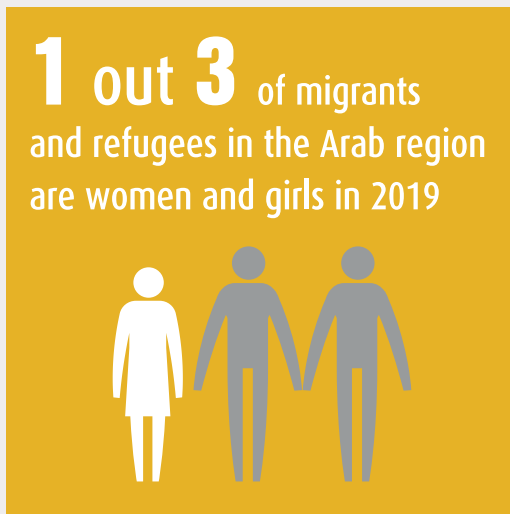


The GCC subregion had the highest proportion of migrant workers as a share of the national workforce worldwide in 2017

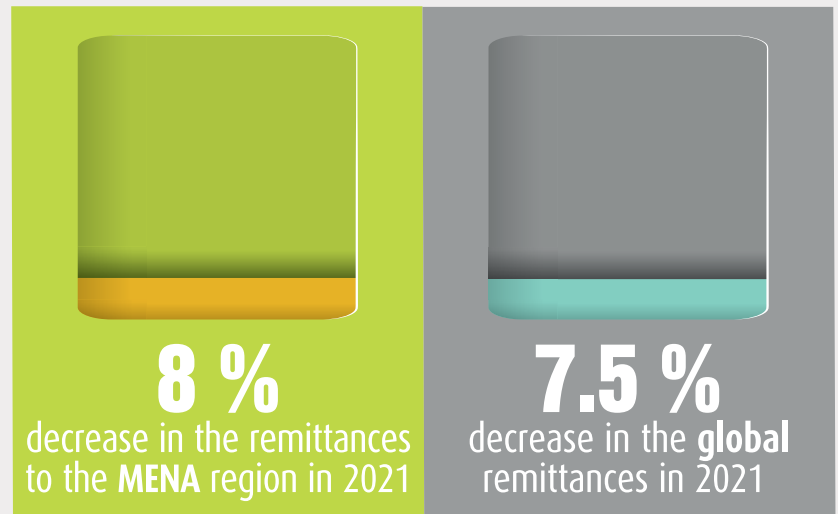
2 out of 5
of all workers in the Middle East were migrants in 2017



COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on women and girls



Remittances to the MENA region are projected to decrease as a result of COVID-19



Policy response

The recommendations in the present policy brief are drawn from the analysis presented in a technical paper entitled “Impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees in the Arab region”. The technical paper analyses the health and socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and refugees, and discusses its impact on a number of related issues, including return and voluntary repatriation, trafficking in persons, women and children, and refugees in the Arab region.

Short-term recommendations

Health

1. Provide full access to quality health services, including HIV and reproductive health services, to migrants and refugees of all ages, genders and backgrounds, particularly those in vulnerable situations such as migrants and refugees in irregular administrative situations, including those without documentation, domestic workers, and victims of trafficking in persons;
2. Ensure access to female health-care providers and separate access to health-care services for women in clinics and hospitals;
3. Guarantee access to asylum and protection for individuals with international protection needs, while implementing health and security protocols;
4. Extend health insurance schemes to include all migrants and refugees, including migrants and refugees in irregular administrative situations;
5. Ensure that employers do not hinder employees from accessing COVID-19 tests and receiving medical care, and that workers who test positive are provided with suitable facilities to self-isolate and are entitled to paid sick leave;
6. Train employers on health policy directives to ensure that they are properly implemented in workplaces and worker accommodations facilities, and ensure proper monitoring of their implementation;
7. Provide COVID-19 prevention and control measures to migrants and refugees in languages they comprehend, including isolation and quarantine services;
8. Raise awareness among migrants and refugees on the importance of seeking health care, regardless of their administrative situation;

9. Implement communication with community strategies to reach migrants and refugees of all ages, genders and backgrounds, and facilitate their access to protection and assistance;
10. Provide training on special context considerations for health workers, community health workers and others responsible for meeting the health needs of migrants and refugees;
11. Guarantee that care-rationing choices should not be made on the basis of nationality or displacement status;
12. Ensure that mental health and psychosocial support, including specialized services for persons with severe mental health conditions, remain available to all migrants and refugees during the pandemic, including those in detention;
13. Ensure that health, mental health and psychosocial support service providers are trained by gender-based violence (GBV) specialists on how to recognize signs that a person may be a GBV survivor; are prepared to deal with GBV disclosures in a safe, sensitive, confidential and survivor-centred manner; and are able to offer psychological support, first aid, and make referrals as needed;
14. Ensure that mental health and psychosocial support continues to be provided remotely, for instance, through tele-counselling services;
15. Protect and promote the human rights of people with severe mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities, for example, by monitoring whether they have equal access to COVID-19 care;
16. Ensure that national and local COVID-19 preparedness and response strategies and plans include migrants and refugees;
17. Ensure that national strategies for disease infection, prevention and control, and access to essential non-COVID health services include migrants and refugees, and identify ways to reach marginalized or hard-to-reach groups amongst them;
18. Guarantee continued availability of pre- and post-natal health care, contraceptives, and critical provisions for clinical management of rape.

Administrative situation

1. Modify visa and permit requirements and provide flexible arrangements for regularization to ensure that victims of trafficking in persons and migrants with temporary documents do not fall into irregular situations;
2. Facilitate the safe, dignified and voluntary return of stranded migrants, and ensure that they have access to health services, including COVID-19 testing, adequate housing, water, food, and financial and reintegration support while awaiting return or repatriation;
3. Suspend all forced returns during the pandemic, especially of vulnerable migrants and asylum-seekers, including unaccompanied or separated children, and provide them with health care, temporary residence, psychosocial support services, community-based accommodation, and legal assistance;
4. Introduce mandatory individual assessment of children's cases and their best interest by child protection authorities, prior to any decision on return, to ensure the voluntariness of children's return and reunification with family, and the mitigation of risks of abuse, exploitation, GBV and trafficking in the country of origin;
5. Ensure continued implementation of resettlement and complementary pathways for refugees to facilitate access to protection and solutions, including access to family reunification, employment opportunities and basic services, safety and security;
6. Widen pathways for safe, orderly, and regular migration to promote and protect human rights, including by developing strengthened asylum systems along the Central Mediterranean route and legal migration pathways through family reunification, education and labour mobility.

Education, formal employment and decent work

1. Increase efforts to promote formalization of employment for all segments of society, including migrants and refugees, to achieve inclusive and decent work for all, based on clear employment contracts;
2. Ensure protective measures for migrants and refugees in their workplaces, including by revitalizing existing models such as the Jordan Compact;

3. Increase the penetration and quality of digital access and promote other measures that enable the reintegration of migrant and refugee children into the education system and young people into the job market;
4. Enhance investment into new forms of remote formal and informal education, training and vocational capacity-building, while ensuring equity in access to learning for both male and female migrant and refugee students of different ages.

Services, information, and complaint and justice mechanisms

1. Ensure access to basic services for migrants, refugees and their families, with a focus on the needs of migrant women, children and others in vulnerable situations;
2. Ensure that language and technology barriers are addressed in accessing services;
3. Include women among hotline/helpline operators and in national security and law enforcement agencies;
4. Organize separate access for men and women to goods, services and distributions, when possible;
5. Introduce measures that obligate companies operating and managing labour accommodation facilities to ensure cleanliness, access to food and hygiene facilities, reduce overcrowding and prohibit any form of eviction;
6. Establish emergency handwashing facilities and health-care services close to at-risk and underserved migrant workers' neighbourhoods to decrease commuting;
7. Provide cash transfers to migrants and refugees most affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic to reduce homelessness and malnutrition;
8. Provide support services to victims of GBV and promote awareness of such services among migrant and refugee communities;
9. Ensure effective two-way communication mechanisms, and provision of information and awareness material on basic protective measures and procedures in different languages and tailored to people of different ages, genders and backgrounds, including people with varying literacy levels;

10. Conduct awareness raising campaigns to fight social stigma and confront xenophobia and discrimination by highlighting the positive contribution of migrants and refugees to their countries of origin and destination;
11. Strengthen existing complaint and feedback mechanisms; provide hotlines and other mechanisms in relevant languages for migrants and refugees to report abuse and access information; and promote awareness of these hotlines among migrants and refugees;
12. Safeguard access to justice mechanisms for all migrants and refugees, especially those at risk, and ensure that they can register complaints for delayed or non-payment of wages and other entitlements, such as end-of-service benefits and reimbursement of social security contributions before their departure from the host country;
13. Strengthen the capacity of law enforcement to remain vigilant and address new and evolving human trafficking patterns.

Medium-term recommendations

1. Ensure that all migrants and refugees benefit from affordable universal health care, particularly in times of crisis; and include them in health sector policies, plans and strategies;
2. Include migrants and refugees in disaster risk reduction strategies;
3. Promote the regularization of migrants in an irregular situation, undocumented migrants and refugees;
4. Ensure inclusive social protection programmes for all migrants and refugees and their families or, if this is not possible, provide direct assistance such as humanitarian cash transfers that can strengthen and influence social protection systems;
5. Establish or strengthen cross-border cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination to provide protection-sensitive migration governance mechanisms, and ensure such mechanisms are age and gender sensitive;
6. Support the resilience of education systems and ensure that all learners, including migrants and refugees, have access to equitable quality education;

7. Support independent, objective and quality media reporting to promote evidence-based public discourse that informs public opinion on migration;
8. Implement alternatives to detention for migrants and refugees, prioritizing people with specific needs such as persons with disabilities, older persons, children, victims or persons at risk of being trafficked or exploited, and stateless persons;
9. Support enhanced coordination between countries to facilitate access to protection, assistance and health care for migrants and refugees through legal pathways, and prevent dangerous crossings that regularly lead to the death of vulnerable individuals.



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