



Labour Migration in Africa



Labour migration, human rights and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest event of 2020. It has affected every aspect of daily life and could fundamentally change global economies, work and health. The world's recorded 164 million migrant workers have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, and a July 2020 report by the African Development states that up to 25 million Africans will lose their jobs this year.

The African Union Labour Migration Advisory Committee (LMAC) has expressed concern for African migrant workers. The LMAC states that "some [labour migrants] are likely to fall victim to hardship, exploitation, and extortion in their desperate effort to return to their homes and families before the intensification of the on-going global containment measures. Disruptions in hospitality and tourism, agriculture and informal sectors have left migrant workers without a means of income. Increased job insecurity has led to an increase in dangerous migration from North Africa to the Canary Islands.

As governments start to look towards plans for post-pandemic economic recovery, migrant workers are at risk of being sidelined in budgets, policies and programmes. An already vulnerable group, the realities of an African migrant worker will only get worse.

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An important component in understand the unique realities of labour migrants during this pandemic is media coverage. Julie Masiga is an instructor for the AWiM Labour Migrations programme course, Covering Migration during health pandemics. Based in Kenya and a lawyer by training, she switched to a career in journalism in 2005, and currently works for a science communication website.

Her course focuses on identifying important labour migration stories and analysing how the media has covered migrants during the pandemic. In her opinion, reporting on labour migration during the pandemic has not been extensive. "Many of the stories are from Asia and the Middle East. There is definitely a need for more focus on the continent," Masiga says. A look at the top hits on Google shows stories from Asia, Europe, North America and the Middle East.

This gap in reportage means that the experiences of labour migrants are missing from perceptions of Africa and COVID-19. This is especially important for migrants in the informal sector, the biggest employer of labour migrants. "Because COVID-19 has affected lives across board, but even more so migrant workers, specifically those in the lower income bracket -- their stories need to be told, and hopefully then, more will be done at the policy level to support them," Masiga emphasises. So what kind of stories need coverage?

For Masiga, focusing on human stories is the best angle. "More (stories) about people's lives and how they are coping, especially how children are handling it. Also, more on the emerging research, including the social sciences, to give policy makers access to science that can modify and improve COVID-19 protocols."

Media coverage of migrant labour is only part of the story. Racha Haffar is the founder and CEO of the Youth Against Slavery Movement. A Tunisian journalist, researcher and anti-slavery and anti-human trafficking advocate, she is also the instructor for the AWiM course, Understanding Human and Labour rights of migrant workers. "It (the course) sheds light on international and regional instruments, and local instruments around Africa that are used to protect the rights of migrants and migrant workers," says Haffar.

The international treaties and conventions, such as the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, are not ratified by the countries that are the destination for labour migrants. "They (the countries) do not want to grant irregular migrants the same rights as regular migrants," she says. This convention grants illegal migrants the same rights as legal migrants. For the estimated 40 000 African migrants who reached the Canary Islands since the beginning of 2020, these protections are vital in ensuring that they receive support and protection during the global pandemic. However, no countries in Western Europe have ratified the convention, and only 15 African countries have ratified.

For women and children, there are the added dangers of physical and sexual abuse, and human trafficking. "The number one country that is the exporter of female migrant workers to Tunisia from Sub-Saharan Africa is the Ivory Coast. A lot of these women come to Tunisia thinking they're going to have a good job in a restaurant or cafe, and then they find themselves trafficked into domestic slavery or into sexual exploitation," Haffar explains. A lack of legal protections and social nets, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers, makes it difficult for migrants in this situations to seek help.

The pandemic has only made migrant workers more vulnerable. Often living in cramped conditions, without access to sufficient healthcare and financial support, there are two choices: try find work and put their health and lives at risk, or starve. With no protections from their respective states, their countries of residence or businesses, the experiences of labour migrants are in danger of being overlooked.

For Haffar, this situation highlights the need for inter-sectoral cooperation to support the rights of migrant workers. "The civil society could work hand in hand with journalists. You as a journalist have a responsibility to your community. When you have all this information you should share it," says Haffar. As the pandemic continues, even as the hope of a vaccine becomes stronger, it will not be an overnight recovery for the migrants whose lives and livelihoods have been disrupted this year.

Migrant workers and rights:

Under the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, migrants have the right to:



Life



Freedom



Security



Health



Decent housing



Fair trial and legal address



Associations and unions



Asylum

The Labour migrants speak

When it comes to labour migration in Africa, the voices and experiences of the migrants often do not take centre stage. In understanding how better to protect, facilitate and manage labour migration, the migrants themselves are the best source of information and insights. Here are some perspectives of people who migrated for work:

"I arrived from Kinshasa. I landed in Johannesburg in 2014, in March. I got my ID the first year I got here, but South Africa is not easy. They don't recognise other schools outside South Africa. This country has disappointed a lot of people. I understand their standards, because there are some fake schools out there. But why did I spend 19 years studying then? I'm 40 years old. I'm done studying."

Eric

"When I came into South Africa in 1997, you could change jobs on a weekly basis. If you lose a job today, by next week you have another job. The government of South Africa itself was good to the foreigners, and they were also strict. You wouldn't just come to South Africa without proper documentation. But today you have South Africans saying now that we're taking our jobs. There are more than enough jobs for South Africans."

Joseph

"The system is very restrictive, in terms of getting papers and everything. Even though I studied here, I did my undergraduate and my Master's here, there are still so many requirements that you need to get permanent residence and requirement you need to get placed. A critical skills visa is not good enough, so you realise that it's very restrictive."

Priscilla



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