

Essential Voices: Migrant Workers on Living Through the Pandemic

Article by Cláudia Santos, Felix Kwabena, Marula Tsagkari

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Migration has been a dividing line in politics in recent years. But the fact remains that society would not function without the contributions of people from other countries. The essential workers who staff care homes and hospitals are often migrants. If more just societies are to emerge after the pandemic, they must recognise and protect the rights of all those within them. We hear from migrant workers in Greece, Iran, and South Africa on their experiences of Covid-19 and their hopes for the future.

People migrate for a myriad of reasons. Whether they are escaping poverty, conflict, or persecution, they all hope for the same: a more secure, prosperous livelihood and improved wellbeing. Migrants often face stigma and discrimination in their new environments, and women on the move face additional difficulties.

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Women make up around half of the 244 million migrants who live and work outside their country of origin. In recent years, understandings of why women migrate have shifted to reflect that women do so not only to follow their spouse or family but also independently to seek work for themselves. As women in many countries – particularly white and middle-class women – increasingly gained access to the labour market, a care gap opened up in their households. This gap was filled by migrant women working in nurseries or care homes, or within the home itself, providing care for children and the elderly or performing household duties. Today, the domestic and care sectors are dominated by migrant women who in many cases have left behind their own families to take up low-paid jobs, often in poor working conditions.

According to a recent report by the International Organization for Migration, 74 per cent of migrant women work in the service industry (including domestic work).² The pandemic exposed the precarity of these women who often work without social protection and basic employment rights. Spanning experiences in Greece, South Africa, and Iran, the stories in this piece are not isolated cases but are representative of the circumstances of millions of women across the world.^[1]

Caring from the shadows in Greece

Ivanka and Evi have both lived in Greece for over a decade and work in the domestic care sector. Ivanka is a nurse from Bulgaria who came to Greece dreaming of a well-paid job that would help her support her daughters and

grandchildren back in Vratsa. Since arriving, she has worked as a care provider for the elderly. More than 10 years later, she still does not have a residence or work permit. Evi arrived in Athens from Albania 19 years ago. She was pregnant at the time, and she and her husband hoped to find secure jobs and provide a better future for their daughter. Today she earns a living as a cleaner and holds a work permit. Ivanka and Evi both work in the “shadow” or informal economy, meaning that they have no social safety net or access to the healthcare system.

During the pandemic, migrants in Greece faced a difficult new reality. Following in the footsteps of Italy and Spain, Greece went into a strict lockdown on 22 March that lasted 42 days. To protect the most vulnerable citizens and hardest-hit businesses, the government implemented a series of emergency measures such as covering social security contributions and offering tax relief. Migrants, however, were excluded from these measures. The closing of borders left many people trapped, like the thousands of Albanian agricultural workers not permitted to re-enter. For months, migrant workers in Greece were unable to travel back to their countries of origin. Evi could not visit her parents: “My father had a stroke. I had to try and find someone to take care of him while I was here.” Similarly, Ivanka has not seen her family for a year, though she is grateful they can at least talk via video call.

Separation from family and friends was not the only burden during the coronavirus crisis. Working lives were also radically impacted. Ivanka’s income fell significantly: “Before the pandemic, I was caring for an elderly lady and doing chores for some other older couples in the area. Now, I only take care of the one lady because it’s dangerous to interact with multiple elderly people.” Even though she now earns considerably less money, she tries to send the same amount back home every month to her family in Bulgaria. In contrast, Evi finds herself with an increased workload: “Many women needed household help – as well as cleaning, they expected me to cook and look after their children while they were working online or buying groceries.” Nevertheless, Evi considers herself lucky – she knows that worldwide, many female migrant domestic workers have lost their jobs.

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Both Evi and Ivanka agree that the Greek government failed to protect them during the crisis. “I never received any help from the government. To them, we do not exist”, says Ivanka. Evi complains that “the government wanted us to stop working. They did not realise that we cannot afford to lose our income, and that our jobs are essential to society. This was crazy. We were also not entitled to the financial support offered to workers in other professions.” Both women stress the importance of their work during the lockdown, which did not translate into increased recognition or government support. They were not entitled to paid leave, though the nature of their jobs means that working from home was not an option, and they were highly exposed to the virus.

Despite their disappointment and fear, Evi and Ivanka aspire for a better future for themselves and all other women working in the care and domestic sector. Evi, who wants to stay in Greece, hopes that the pandemic will change the way the government treats migrant workers: “I want to see more respect for the Albanian immigrants who have lived in Greece for the past 20 years and do essential jobs. We should have the same rights as other workers.” Ivanka hopes to one day return to Bulgaria. Until then, she calls on the government to protect the rights of migrant women in cleaning and care jobs: “We want decent working rights, pensions, healthcare, and the ability to bring our families with us.” She hopes that the many Bulgarian women moving into the Greek care sector will gain easier access to work permits and social rights.

Hunger as reality in South Africa

When Kanoni left Tanzania and first set out for South Africa, it was with high hopes. Fifteen years down the line,

she finds herself trapped on the margins of society, distributing flyers to make ends meet. The reality of shattered dreams has been exacerbated by the pandemic's disproportionate impacts on undocumented migrants in the streets of Johannesburg. After its first confirmed case of the virus on 5 March, South Africa went on to implement one of the world's strictest lockdowns to combat an infection rate among the highest on the African continent (at one point, fifth highest globally).

Compliance with restrictions was a greater challenge for those with precarious livelihoods. South Africa's Covid-19 response may deepen existing divides in one of the world's most unequal countries. In 2017, approximately two million foreign-born migrants of working age (15 to 64) were living in South Africa. Research suggests that xenophobia has forced this group into extreme poverty, something made worse by the government's failure to include migrants in its Covid-19 poverty relief schemes.

For people like Kanoni, hunger is a reality. But worrying about where the next meal will come from is now one of many problems. What about utility bills and rent? Kanoni and others' exasperation with the hard lockdown points to an often-voiced argument that African countries cannot behave like their European counterparts. Without a clear and considered strategy, strict lockdowns can harm the wellbeing of certain communities. Kanoni wants the curfew to be lifted so that she and others in similar situations can return to full-time work, allowing them to look after themselves, since the government is failing to do so. Otherwise, she sees the outcome as clear: "People will die of hunger instead of corona."

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Kanoni used to send money back home to her family but, devoid of any social protection, no longer can afford to. The sense of hopelessness she feels drives her to avoid their phone calls: "I have nothing to give them [...] it is stressful for me, so I just try to stay away from them." In the debilitating effects of the pandemic, our common humanity is laid bare.

Stateless in Iran

Born in Iran to Afghan parents, Benesh, Afhak, and Alia have all grown up without Iranian citizenship.[2] All they have is a residence card known as Amayesh and Afghan nationality. Their stories are similar in many ways. Their parents fled a country torn by war, hoping for a better life elsewhere. None of them crossed a border; their parents did, and by default they are migrants too. They consider themselves Afghan, notwithstanding being foreign to Afghanistan.

As children, the three girls attended school and sewed clothes in a factory to help support their families. Now that they have graduated from high school, the hardship of the factory prevails. As the daughters of Afghan parents, they do not enjoy the same rights as others born in Iran. They are not entitled to social protection and are denied the insurance from their employers that should be a legal obligation. Their salaries are among the lowest in the country: Benesh earns a monthly average of 7 million rials (approximately 21 euros), half the minimum salary in Iran.

When the pandemic hit Iran in February, the country had already been rocked by a series of crises, including the government's dramatic hike in petrol prices in November 2019 and the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. The government did not opt for a strict lockdown but instead limited restrictions to cancelling public events and closing schools, shops, and places of worship. Iran's GDP has fallen by 15 per cent since the

beginning of the pandemic (figure from October 2020) and, to make matters worse, the United States has announced new sanctions, pushing the country to the verge of a deeper humanitarian crisis.

For Benesh, the pandemic saw her salary cut by almost half, even though she works from 8am to 7pm. While Afhak earns twice as much as Benesh, the pandemic has also caused her monthly salary to fluctuate between 27 and 48 euros. Alia's income depends on the number of clothes she makes. As production fell, her average monthly income dropped from between 23 and 27 euros to around 21 euros.

Afhak acknowledges that the job market is difficult and that the recession brings further hardship. Living in a household with six children and an ill father with no access to medical care, Afhak, her mother, and her sister work hard to provide for the family. All their earnings go towards their father's medical treatment because they cannot turn to Iranian banks for a loan. When they need money, Afhak admits to borrowing from her neighbours. As they do not own their home, her family is shouldered with a double burden: an annual deposit and rent. Afhak must also pay yearly for a residency card despite being born in Iran, as well as for a mandatory working permit after turning 18 years old. Afhak says they have sought financial help from the United Nations but received no answer. She believes the Iranian government could help them if it wanted to. Her wish is for her father's health to improve and her family to have proper medical insurance.

Benesh bluntly states that she has zero expectations from the Iranian government – everything hangs on her hard work. She hopes for a better job in the future, perhaps related to business. If the situation in Afghanistan were to improve, she would like to live there. Benesh observes that, during the pandemic, “Iranians have had better conditions – they have been given a subsidy or a living package”. She felt she deserved the same kind of support: “We also work in Iran like Iranians.”

If Alia could make one request to the Iranian government, it would be compliance with the law that protects migrants' rights, access to education, and insurance at work – like the rest of Iranians. In face of great adversity, the three women hope to recover and pick up their lives in a post-Covid era, a mark of their resilience.

A rights-based recovery

No two migrant stories are the same. But each unique experience contributes to shaping the global narrative. A common thread from Greece to South Africa to Iran is the hopes of these women as the world recovers from the health crisis. All three feel abandoned as outcasts in their countries of residence and wish for a new reality with better working and living conditions – an environment where they are respected as equal citizens and their invaluable contributions are recognised. For these women, the lockdown highlighted the inequality and uncertainty they face, putting their lives and incomes on the line – as well as the wellbeing of their families back home, whom they were unable to support as before. In many countries, migrants were blamed for the spreading of the virus, while themselves undertaking high-risk jobs.

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The pandemic has caused unprecedented levels of deprivation, a historic human crisis that is hitting the poorest hardest and worsening insecurity – yet all the while allowing billionaires to further increase their wealth to a staggering 10.2 trillion US dollars. The International Labour Organization projects that around half of the world's working population is at risk of losing their livelihoods. For migrant workers, the impacts of the coronavirus-

induced economic meltdown could be long, deep, and pervasive. If the fortunes of migrant women are to improve, governments must create conducive environments for them to live and work. According to the World Bank, this means including migrants in health services, cash transfer schemes, and other social programmes, all the while safeguarding them from discrimination.

The pandemic has seen examples worldwide of policy responses that protect the rights of migrant workers. New Zealand designed a wage subsidy scheme available to migrants, while in California, a fund provides income support to migrant workers irrespective of their status. Portugal adopted measures to treat migrants as permanent residents, and Italy considered the regularisation of about 200 000 migrants to avoid labour shortages before closing its borders.

Civil society played a key role in supporting migrants throughout the lockdown. In Singapore, faith-based organisations delivered food to migrant workers and bought calling credit so they could communicate with their families overseas. They also provided masks and essentials, as well as cash donations and a friendly ear on the phone. From Colombia to Ghana and Nigeria, faith-based organisations and NGOs provided essentials to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants where the state failed to do so.

Crises like the one we currently face can be used to downgrade human rights in the name of emergency. But they are also an opportunity to address entrenched inequalities by establishing new ground from which to claim people's rights. Beyond the health crisis, the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing injustice and stressed the need for profound change in our societies. As we try to build that change, listening to those in precarious positions is paramount.

Footnotes

1. All names in this article have been changed to protect the identities of the women interviewed.

2. In 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees commended Iran for the introduction of a new law that allows children born to Iranian women and non-Iranian men to acquire Iranian nationality. Despite this effort to reduce statelessness in the country, many others remain without Iranian nationality.



Cláudia Santos is a doctoral student in climate change and sustainable development policies at the Institute of Social Sciences (ICS), University of Lisbon. She tweets at @ClaudiaLSantos.



Felix Kwabena Donkor is a post-doctoral researcher at the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (UNISA), South Africa. He is a member of Future Earth's Knowledge-Action Networks and a deputy chair of the South African Adaptation Network.



Marula Tsagkari is a PhD candidate in ecological economics at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Her work focusses on decentralised energy systems, energy democracy and degrowth in Southern Europe. She tweets at @MarulaTsagkari.

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