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8.6

Humanities

Mr. McNeice

Migrant Workers

A power corrupted, a system awry, a broken people, toiling endlessly under the broiling sun; day after day of work that knows no peace nor rest, that encircles and corrupts the soul, strangling every pathetic drop of life and vitality out of empty husks of men that once knew hope, that now knows of the broken wings of the butterflies in the fields they are chained to, that now feels a desperation so deep it swallows the soul like the sun swallows the sky on a hot summer workday, that now has seen friend after friend beat down and denied of their rights. The best real-life adaptation of a dystopian novel. 2.8 million migrant workers have contributed to the health-care sector, 11.5 million migrant workers serve as domestic workers in households; yet these people have been repaid by being among the most vulnerable members of the population (How COVID-19 has...; Migrant Workers and...; Immigrant Health Care...). The plight of these migrants: exploitation, harassment, trafficking, is not a dystopian novel, but real life; the power imbalance and echelon analysis that international students so bemoan over learning is another's reality. While migrant labor is a long-standing phenomenon, recent events including the pandemic have blown the situation near the tipping point. While the vulnerability of migrant workers and inequality they face are related to SDG 10, "reducing inequalities", it is also worthy to consider SDGs one and 4 when dealing with the migrant worker situation. Much can be done and should be done to alleviate these issues, but before that, it is crucial to understand what causes people to become migrant workers, what factors create disadvantages for them, and how Covid-19 has impacted them.

There are many factors that lead to a person becoming a migrant; often times these factors are deeply interconnected across multiple SDGs. Firstly, many individuals actively choose to work in the migrant worker labor force to increase their income and make ends meet. According to “农民工为什么要进城”, workers from rural areas can only make their living from agriculture and land usage, which is generally a costly investment (农民工为什么要进城). However, in cities, land is not the largest factor in economic profit, and this in turn gives them alternate opportunities to increase their income (农民工为什么要进城). People can then also be trafficked and forced into migration labor under the lure of increased income (Human trafficking and Migrant Smuggling). According to an interview conducted by Starfish Project, many female teenagers from rural areas in China are pressured to drop out of school and head to the city to earn a living and provide for their family (McGee). Therefore, we can see that one of the driving reasons for workers to migrate is to generate more income. This is an extremely large factor, especially for those families who are living under the minimum wage. This would deal with SDG 1 (Measuring Progress Towards). Besides that, many workers decide to migrate due to a lack of resources, such as an undersupply of healthcare, housing, and other public welfare services (About Migration and Human Rights). Regions in China provide public welfare services based on the resources and money in that region (农民工为什么要进城) . Therefore, rural workers receive less shared benefits due to the scarcity of resources in local municipalities, infrastructure and investment. Migrating to a more urbanized city which in turn boasts more infrastructure and a more stable economy could potentially provide them with better services for them and their families(农民工为什么要进城). These factors have to do with several SDGs, such as SDG #2 zero hunger, #3 good health and wellbeing, and #4 quality education (Measuring Progress Towards). Furthermore, many choose to migrate to seek a better living environment. According to OHCHR, many choose to migrate due to factors such as environmental degradation, climate change, escaping persecution, and conflict (About Migration and Human Rights). These would relate to SDG #13 and #15 (Measuring Progress Towards). The United Nations illustrates that

many females also choose to migrate to “escape sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices” (How Migration is). These include female genital mutilation, forced underage marriage, et cetera (How Migration is). This would be SDG #5 and #10 (Measuring Progress Towards). Lastly, many individuals choose to migrate, not being fully aware of the dangers of migrating. According to the UN, many individuals do not receive enough information about safe and legal migration pathways, therefore exposing themselves to exploitative shadow markets (How Migration is). This would connect to SDG #4 (Measuring Progress Towards). All of these impacts are severely harmful, and we can see that individuals may choose to migrate to another country, especially a developed country, to make a living for themselves in a safer environment (be it social or natural). These systemic issues that drive individuals to go down the path of migrant labor prove to be complicated and deeply intertwined with other SDGs.

Unfortunately, although migrant workers often migrate to alleviate social disparities that they face, they often face a plethora of disadvantages, some the result of their unique status, the nature of their job, or the environment they are in. Due to the overwhelming number of factors, it is suitable to split the investigation into two sectors—internal and external factors. We start with the former.

Firstly, migrant workers face disadvantages due to their gender and/or sexual orientation. According to the United Nations, female migrants make up about 63.5% of the migrant workforce (How Migration is). These people tend to encounter increased health risks and issues that their male counterparts (Moyce and Shenker). In some cases, female migrants suffer from higher rates of certain types of cancer due to pesticide exposure from their jobs. Women also often face barriers related to reproductive health care, including items and services such as family planning and prenatal care (Moyce and Shenker). This can bring many issues and

directly endanger the health of female migrants. Besides that, the lack of family planning can often lead to unwanted pregnancies. Especially in the case of countries where abortion is considered taboo, this could lead to further unwanted outcomes such as seeking abortion from non-official sources, which only leads to more harm to the health of migrant workers (Netto).



Fig 1: UN -- “How migration is a gender equality issue”

A female migrant’s gender status also allows them to be more vulnerable towards discrimination and exploitation. According to “Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women,” female migrant workers experience a slew of gender-based violence, such as “insults to severe physical abuse, sexual assault, psychological abuse, bullying and intimidation” (End Gender-Based). This begins from their migration, in which many females are at a large risk of being sold into labor or forced into partake in sexual work to gain basic passage, shelter, or money (How Migration is). The harassment does not end here. According to interviews conducted by “Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women”, a Bangladeshi woman recalls being sexually harassed by

her employer's son yet being paralyzed and unable to do anything. Besides that, female migrants also earn less than “immigrant men and native-born women” (Moyce and Schenker). We can see that female migrants are really the most powerless of the powerless. Not only do they have to deal with the above disadvantages caused from their migrant status, but the disadvantage is also twofold. All of this harassment, assault, health issues, and lessened income these migrants face are all because of their gender status— that unfortunately happens to be that of a female. The same holds true for migrants who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community; according to the United Nations, LGBTQIA+ migrants are more likely to work in the informal industry and face more social isolation and violence (How Migration is).

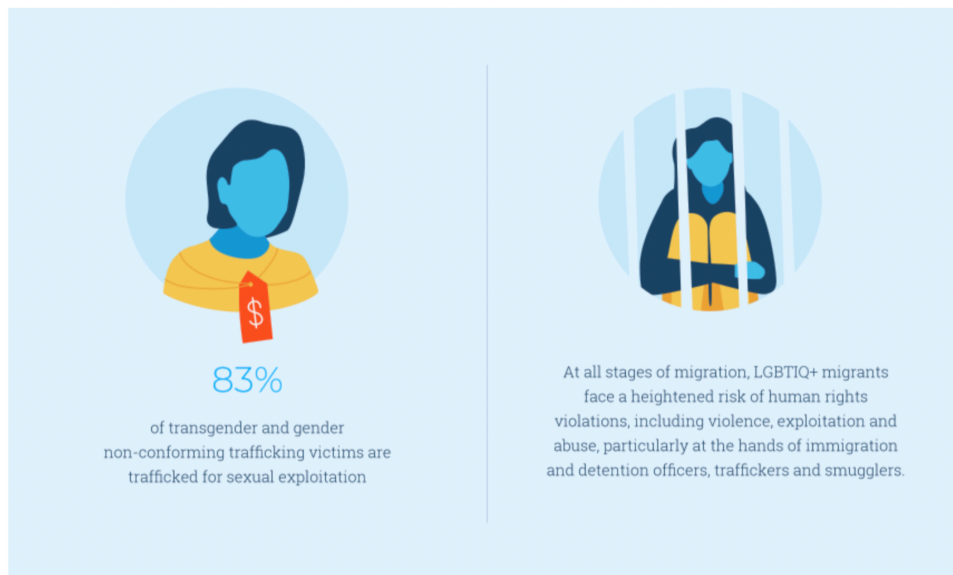


Fig 2: UN -- “How migration is a gender equality issue”

All these disadvantages are caused by internal factors—their status. The factors that cause these can often become systematic issues; in the case of female migrants, deeply misogynistic societies

often believe that female migrants “are women” and “have to tolerate such abuses” (End gender based).

Migrant workers are also often met with an onslaught of external factors that create additional issues. This paragraph will specifically touch on 3 factors: the nature of migrant worker’s jobs, unfamiliar environment, and migrant worker’s documentation. Firstly, according to “Migrant workers and their Occupations,” migrant workers often “engage in 3D jobs”:, jobs which are “Dirty, dangerous, and demanding”(migrant workers and their occupations). At least 122 million workers often encounter higher rates of adverse occupational exposures and working conditions, and they also get paid less for it than non-immigrants (Moyce and Schenker). Furthermore, migrant jobs generally lack safety standards and carry increased probability of exposure to extreme weather and environmental toxins (Moyce and Schenker). Therefore, we can see that the nature of their jobs already presents migrants with several issues and migrants are likely to be hurt on the job. On the other hand, migrant workers often have to work long hours (Health of Labor Migrants). Not only does this lead to a long-term exposure to negative environments and overstrained bodies, this often means difficulty in accessing healthcare during standard operating hours (Moyce and Schenker). In conclusion, jobs that migrant workers are employed in are often hazardous and create obstacles for them accessing healthcare in the likely case that they are hurt. Secondly, Migrant workers, as the name implies, pursue work outside of their home country (Migrant Worker). Therefore, many migrants suffer from a lack of fluency in local language. As aforementioned, migrant worker’s jobs are generally already hazardous and provide a lack of safety standards. This becomes an even larger issue as what little safety trainings migrants may be fortunate to receive may not be in their native language. Furthermore, workers are unable to communicate properly or voice their concerns. As a result of these

handicaps, workers with limited language skills “tend to incur more occupational injuries” and are generally “relegated to more dangerous jobs” (Moyce and Schenker). The impacts of these are extremely large, as we see that Migrant Workers are often already vulnerable and working in hazardous jobs. In 2022, a 47-year-old migrant worker plummeted 18 meters down a construction hole, and a 32-year-old migrant worker died after being crushed by workplace equipment (Borg and Tan). Therefore, this linguistic disadvantage leads to workers having to engage in jobs that are above their skill level or highly dangerous jobs with little protection. These all threaten the wellbeing and safety of the migrant as well as their coworkers. This lack of linguistic proficiency also causes them to struggle while trying to access healthcare (Disparities in Excess). Lastly, the documentation of migrant workers, or a lack thereof, makes them even more vulnerable. According to AAPI data, 1 out of every 7 Asian immigrants is undocumented (One out of Every). According to NCBI, these people are “generally irregularly employed or given temporary assignments” as well as often given “burdensome, arduous, manual, and physically demanding jobs” which can be unfavorable (A first look). This irregular work cycle also “emphasizes vulnerability” and exposes migrant workers to “the most serious risk of abuse and exploitation” (A First Look). According to “Migrant Workers and their Occupational Health and safety”, undocumented migrant workers suffer high rates of wage theft, harassment, and exploitation; in fact, undocumented workers were more than twice as likely to experience wage violation than normal workers (Moyce and Schenker). They also have “no recourse if threatened with deportation by employers” and are on an overall basis “excluded from employment laws designed to protect workers” and “ineligible for various services” (Moyce and Schenker). Furthermore, this irregularly timed work cycle can make it difficult for a migrant’s children to access education. According to Glenn Miller, member of the Migrant Student Network, migrant students suffer from not having the consistency of attending school every day, and in turn migrant students have higher dropout rates (Caesar). This is likely due to the nature of temporary employment of undocumented migrant workers. As a result, this lack of education causes workers to incur more injuries and makes them vulnerable to being exploited due to lack of awareness of their rights (Health of Labor Migrants). In consequence, a systemic problem is

created where generation after generation continue to doom themselves and become vulnerable to exploitation, just like lambs to slaughter. While such un-documentation further adds on to the physical toil and complications that migrant workers already face, but what makes things even worse is that these undocumented workers are faced with many factors that prevent them from voicing out. Migrant workers often have a lack of bargaining power and legal defense due to their unclear employment basis and are in fear of retaliation from their employers (A first Look). While this sounds like something spawning from a dystopian novel, the reality is that these undocumented migrant workers have little to no power and are trapped under the iron fist of their employers. In conclusion, three main external factors contribute to the disadvantages migrant workers face: the nature of migrant workers' jobs, the environment they work in, and their documentation.

Covid-19 has only added mental and physical strain to the burdened backs of migrant workers. COVID has impacted them in all facets of life, including their physical health, jobs, and mental health. Firstly, from a global perspective, migrant workers were much more vulnerable to onslaughts of COVID infections. Migrant workers filled in the labor gap in key areas such as healthcare and manufacturing; however, that also meant that migrants were less able to work remotely (How COVID-19 has). We can then infer that during the pandemic, these people were hit first and the most. This proves true, as according to research conducted by BMJ Public Health, populations with "a migration background had a higher risk of COVID-19 deaths" (Inequalities in COVID-19). Furthermore, migrant workers suffered from a lack of protection against the virus due to many causes. According to BMC public health, migrants did not fall under the jurisdiction of many public policies and were in turn excluded from the protections that the policies offered (Disparities in Excess). Therefore, not only were migrants more likely to be infected by COVID-19, but they could also not enjoy the benefits of healthcare or protection that other natives may receive. On a regional basis, even when migrants had basic healthcare granted by the government, they often had difficulty utilizing the healthcare system; this could be due to

a variety of reasons such as lack of understanding of the system or language barriers. These all contributed to what BMC calls a “structural and systematic health disadvantage” (Disparities in Excess). From the above, it is clear that COVID-19 was detrimental to the health and safety of migrant workers. Additionally, due to economic problems within their families, many migrants opted to work even when unwell (How COVID-19 has). This likely led to disastrous outcomes both pertaining to the safety of the migrant as well as the community. Secondly, covid greatly impacted the livelihoods of migrants. “Migrant data portal” says that migrants during the pandemic suffered from “unstable employment” and “low wages”. While migrants were already facing issues with employment and equality in wages before the pandemic, the pandemic continued to extrapolate these issues. This impact felt was also unequal among all the workforce, since according to “migration data portal”, migrants are the first to be laid off (How COVID-19 has). Other regional covid protocols added fuel to the fire and brought mental stress onto migrants. According to a case study done by BBC, an interviewee said he was confined in a 6x7 meter large room with 11 other men (Covid-19 Singapore). We can see that not only were these dormitory conditions extremely cramped, but it also gave workers very little rest space and made them unable to social distance in the case of infection. Furthermore, due to covid precautions, migrants could not leave their dorms and send money back home; as sole breadwinners, that caused them a lot of stress (Covid-19 Singapore). Reuters notes that during the peak of covid lockdowns in Singapore, there were many articles circulating of migrant workers attempting suicide or self-harm due to mental stress (Spate of suicides). We can see that the destructive virus and its impacts all cause mental and physical burden on migrant workers as well as do little to alleviate the situation.

Things are beginning to be done to alleviate the migrant situation on a national and local status, however much more can be done. For example, Singapore, learning from the past mistakes of Covid, has chartered up new plans to create better living conditions and support network for migrants (Joint MND-MOM). The main target is increasing the quality of dorms. The government plans to achieve these through the short term temporary and fast induction of new dormitories and making use of vacant properties, and in the long-term perspective build 100,000 new dormitories with upgraded facilities to replace the temporary structures.

| Home standards | Current | Improved |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Living space | ≥ 4.5sqm per resident, including shared facilities | ≥ 6sqm per resident, not including shared facilities |
| Occupancy per room | No maximum beds per room. In practice, 12-16 beds per room. Mostly double decker beds | ≤ 10 beds per room. Use of single deck bed only, with 1m spacing between beds |
| Toilets | ≥ 1 set of toilet, bathroom, sink and urinal: 15 beds | ≥ 1 set of toilet, bathroom and sink to 5 beds |
| Sick bay and isolation facility | ≥ 1 sick bay bed per 1,000 bed spaces Additional isolation spaces (to be stood up if needed) at 19 beds per 1,000 bed spaces | ≥ 15 sick bay beds per 1,000 bed spaces Additional isolation spaces (to be stood up if needed) at 10 beds per 1,000 bed spaces |

Fig 3: Singapore Ministry of Manpower -- “Joint MND-MOM Media Release on New Dormitories with Improved Standards for Migrant Workers”

These new dorms are less dense and increase accessibility to services such as barber services, recreation facilities and minimarts. The government is also collaborating with related agencies to create detailed specifications for any new dorms created and increase the capabilities of dorm operators (JOINT MND-MOM). Other governments, such as the Southern California government offered chances for migrant workers' children to attend college (Caesar). However, there is still a stifling abundance of bureaucracy and not enough concrete involved in these actions. For example, while Southern California offered a summer program for migrant children in universities, there is no reasonable framework to make a long-lasting impact of migrant workers. Perhaps on a personal basis migrant workers were able to increase their English-speaking skills and get some better education, however, the amount of help is just like a tiny oasis in a vast desert; prevailing issues such as poverty and lack of access to all migrants remain unshaken. Many other governments choose to turn a blind eye to this issue. According to the United Nations, only 70 out of 163 countries provide social protection for migrant domestic workers (How migration is). There are only 46 UN-named “Least Developed Countries” economies, which leaves 117 countries beyond the “least developed” threshold, yet only 70 of them provide social protection for migrant domestic worker (UN list of). From the above, we can observe that on a regional scale, countries, especially developed countries, should also look to proactively constitute increased rules and regulations in place to deal with some of the disadvantages migrant workers face. On a global perspective, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) presents an international instrument on “Protection of the rights of Migrant workers and members of their families” (International Convention on). While the OHCHR throws out dictum over dictum that the law shall prevail in providing migrant workers and their family a right to life and that they shall not be subject to torture, there is a lack of detail in feasibility and execution that has only been observed in beginner model united nations conferences. What are the empty words of law in the face of corruption, exploitation, and violence? Take article 9, “The right to life of migrant workers and members of their families

shall be protected by law” (International Convention on). The amount of value this article holds is akin to asking someone to bring a birth certificate to prove that they are alive. Not only is the article plagued with a lack of framework for execution, one can spy the holes that logical fallacy has poked in it. Law does not possess that utopian ever seeing reach that humanity hopes for, especially in countries that lack stable framework and where corruption runs wild. In some countries, it is the officials themselves who “control the illicit business or are members of the [trafficking] network” (Corrupt Officials). Leaving the problem of migrant workers to underdeveloped, corrupt governments does little to alleviate the situation, and instead adds fuel to the fire and allows issues to run rampant. Observing the lack of concrete ideas in related international instruments, it is no surprise that regions and countries are unable to enact upon the issue. Therefore, on a global framework basis, it is still worthwhile and crucial to continue to pursue resolution chartering and partnership and work towards developing more feasible solutions to this problem. However, these are all things that are out of civilian control. On a citizen level, there are several non-government organizations that provide help for migrant workers. “Giving.sg” aims to help specifically migrant workers who have been subject to abuse and exploitation through providing services such as shelters, vocational training, and legal aid. All these are services that migrants lack but could benefit from (Support Migrant Workers). “Starfish Project” aims to rescue women and girls who have been exploited and are working in the current sex industry (McGee). Besides providing shelter and basic education, the Starfish Project ensures that these changes are sustainable by providing a vocational opportunity for these women (McGee). These are some venues individuals can take to tackle such large-scale issues.

Through understanding the factors that lead to people becoming migrant workers, what factors disadvantage them, and how recent pandemics have impacted them, societies and individuals can better understand how to take steps towards solving this global issue. While the plights of migrant workers may seem like worlds apart, protection of these people is crucial for society to continue and function. It is in society’s interest to provide basic human rights to all its

citizens, these migrants included. Alleviating the situation could also impact positively on other SDGs, such as providing decent work, boosting the industry, crackdown on corruption, and establishing stronger institutions. These will all allow us to cultivate a more sustainable workforce, something that will benefit humankind on our path of development, especially in the light of a new pandemic. As the essay draws to a conclusion, consider one of Zeno's paradoxes: an infinite number of tasks is needed to achieve a goal, which then makes achieving the goal an impossibility. Indeed, in real life, taking the first step may seem difficult, and impossible; but once that first step is taken, everything else will be possible to achieve. It is crucial for the world to take steps towards solving this issue, no matter what way, no matter how small. Only then can we make a change for good, for these millions of vulnerable people who have contributed to society and deserve their basic rights.

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