

# COVID-19 AND MIGRANT WOMEN AND MEN: Evidence from big data analysis



Before the COVID-19 outbreak, there were an estimated 10 million international migrants in ASEAN, of whom nearly 50 per cent were women. In countries of destination in the region women migrant workers make up the majority of domestic and care workers, those in entertainment, seafood processing, electronics manufacturing, and garment manufacturing, among others. In order to better understand the unique set of challenges that women and men migrants are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Women<sup>1</sup> partnered with Quilt.AI to analyze big data from internet searches and on-line posts. Keywords pertaining to migrants and associated searches/posts were utilized to capture related discourse. A dragnet<sup>2</sup> experiment was also set up in three migrant-dense neighborhoods in three destination countries (e.g. countries where many migrants live and work): Kota Raya in Malaysia, Lucky Plaza in Singapore, and Ratburana in Thailand. The dragnet ran from December 8 to December 10, 2020. This experiment provided crucial information on the topics women and men migrants are most searching for, offering proxy insights into their immediate needs. These findings shed light on the multi-dimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants. COVID-19 is not only affecting their physical and mental health but also posing challenges related to violence, harassment, employment, income, social protection, access to services and access to justice.

## THE PANDEMIC IS SEVERELY AFFECTING MIGRANTS' MENTAL HEALTH.

Rapid assessment surveys conducted by UN Women during the first quarter of 2020 showcased that the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting the mental health of as many as 66 per cent of the female population in Asia-Pacific, compared to 58 per cent of males. These percentages may have increased since, in light of the lingering effects of the crisis, and are expected to be larger for women and men migrants, as the economic constraints caused by the crisis may be overlapping with social exclusion and violence and discrimination based on migration status, sex and other variables. Dragnet analysis in migrant-dense neighborhoods provided evidence on this. It showcased that nearly 80 per cent of searches were tied to mental health. Of these, an estimated 30 per cent were classified as help-seeking searches. **Based on search content analysis, COVID-19 brought about a greater level of stress, depression, fear, anxiety and loneliness.**

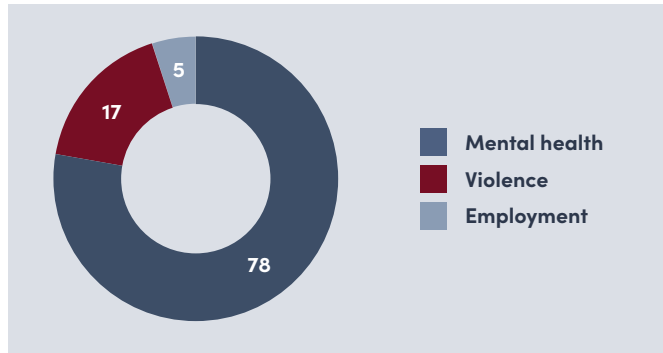
Many migrant workers have faced cuts in pay and retrenchment. Those who remain employed may be forced or coerced to continue work in unsafe conditions, or without sufficient protective equipment. In light of movement restrictions and quarantine rules, support

1 This initiative was supported by the joint ILO-UN Women Safe and Fair Programme, as part of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

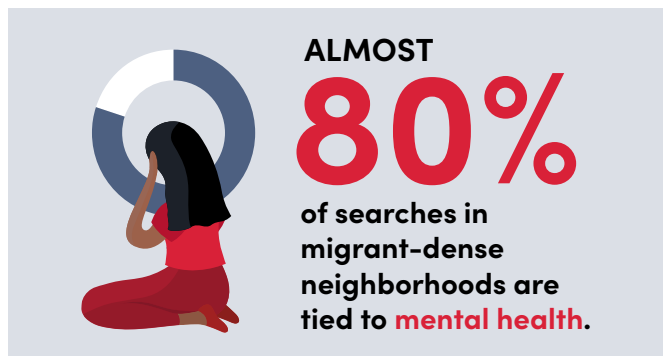
2 A dragnet reveals the number of times someone in a specified area uses a specific keyword in real time. In the selected neighborhoods, an assumption is made that most of the searches in the dragnet findings come from migrant workers because these locations are migrant-dense.

services, violence response services and legal aid are hard to access. All of these factors may be contributing to deteriorating mental health.

**Figure 1:**  
Proportion of searches made by individuals in migrant-dense neighborhoods, by category (percentage).



**Infographic 1:**



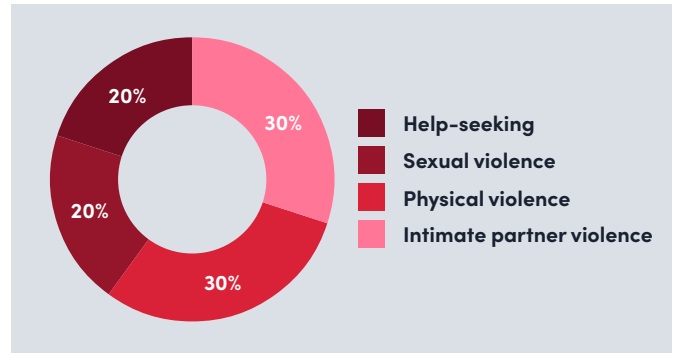
**MIGRANT WOMEN ARE SUFFERING FROM VIOLENCE, BUT BARRIERS TO ACCESS HELP MAY BE DETERRING THEM FROM SEARCHING.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of violence and harassment against women migrant workers perpetrated by employers, partners, law enforcement officials or front-line service providers. Language barriers, scarcity of services and concerns about their migration status, however, may be detering women from seeking help, including life-saving health and psychosocial care, as well as security and justice services.

Search data suggests that migrant women residing in the dragnet areas are suffering from physical violence (20 per cent of violence-related searches) and sexual violence (20

per cent), but only 20 per cent of searches are tied to help-seeking, indicating that survivors may give up help-seeking as a result of the heightened difficulties, lack of information or lack of trust in technology-based service provision.

**Figure 2:**  
Proportion of violence against women related searches by type (percentage)



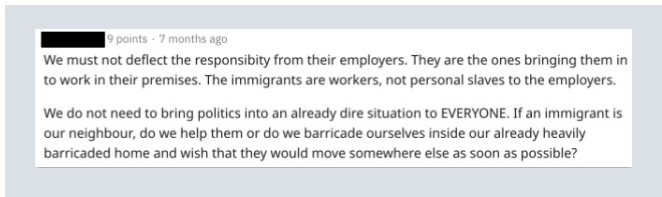
**Infographic 2:**



**PEER NETWORKS AND CSOs OFFERED CRITICAL SUPPORT DURING THE PANDEMIC.**

Across countries, CSOs, women’s networks and community-based organizations are playing a key role in supporting migrants during the crisis, and this shows online. In Malaysia, for instance, although many people show concern towards migrant workers on Facebook, the discourse is dominated mostly by CSOs who publish articles highlighting solidarity with migrants and the difficulties faced by migrant workers. Similar trends can be observed in Indonesia and the Philippines.

**Figure 3:**  
**Reddit post from Malaysian user showing support towards migrant workers**



Migrants themselves have also established networks and on-line spaces to support their peers. Indonesian migrant support groups (for Indonesian overseas workers) were picked up during the analysis, along with Youtube posts by migrant influencers. On these platforms, Indonesian migrants seek advice and share their own experiences to help others. These also become spaces where CSOs and other organizations can provide pandemic and help-seeking related information.

Similarly, big data shows that migrants from Myanmar (many of whom live in Thailand) use Facebook to show solidarity among peers, and to stay informed about pandemic-related rules and case numbers in Thailand. The high number of re-shares per post indicates that Facebook is a key tool for migrants from Myanmar to stay informed.

Facebook is also widely used by Filipina Overseas Domestic Workers to stay informed during the pandemic. They use it to access information published by the Department of Labor and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, as well as to find details on financial assistance schemes.

**Figure 4:**  
**Facebook posts and Whatsapp notification screenshot demonstrating peer support**

