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Action Brief:

Role of Embassies in Addressing Violence against Women Migrant Workers

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This Action Brief was developed as part of the Safe and Fair Programme: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region (2018–2023). Safe and Fair is part of the multi-year EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls, funded by the European Union, and is implemented by ILO and UN Women in collaboration with UNODC. It delivers technical assistance and support with the overall objective of making labour migration safe and fair for all women in the ASEAN region.

This brief is part of a series of action briefs illustrating lessons learnt and promising approaches as the result of the implementation of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative in South-East Asia. The other briefs in the series include:

- Safe Technologies in Providing Remote Services
- Peer Networks Empower Women Migrant Workers
- Women Migrant Workers and Mental Health

For additional resources and more information on the initiative, see:
www.spotlightinitiative.org/safe-and-fair

What's the Issue?

Women who migrate for work contribute greatly to stronger societies and economies in both their countries of origin and their countries of destination.¹ For many, the decision to work abroad involves prioritizing their families' welfare over their own personal comfort and desires. Women generally have fewer options than men for regular migration, and are often employed in lower paid, informal sectors with few, if any, labour protections.²

This unfortunately puts them at a heightened risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, including trafficking at different points of the migration cycle. This includes pre-departure, in transit, at the destination and upon their return and reintegration into their community.³ Choosing to migrate can challenge traditional social norms around women's roles resulting in an increase in violence from families or intimate partners, especially upon return when there are expectations to resume traditional roles.⁴

Along the migration journey women can face risks of sexual violence or exploitation from a range of different actors with whom they come into contact. At the destination women can face exploitative working conditions, abuse by employers, other forms of violence and harassment connected to their work and in public spaces, and in some instances when engaging with service providers or authorities. Women who migrate may also face intimate partner violence from spouses or partners that migrated with them, or who remain in the country of origin. Upon returning, women may be blamed if they experienced violence or abuse at the destination. They may also face stigma and rejection by their families with little recognition of their increased skills and agency by their intimate partners or families.

Many survivors of violence experience health consequences related to abuse and violence, and quick access to health services can be life changing- to prevent pregnancy or diseases such as HIV, for example.

These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of information and access to services at each stage of migration and women without documentation have the added barrier of fearing deportation or other legal consequences, leaving them with little power and resources.⁵

Women migrant workers hesitate to seek support in countries of destination

Many women migrant workers who have experienced violence or abuse do not seek the official services that may be available to them in the countries of destination, even when

¹ UN Women. 2017. [Research Paper: At What Cost? Women Migrant Workers, Remittances and Development.](#)

² ILO. ND. [Protecting the rights of migrant workers in irregular situations and addressing irregular labour migration: A compendium.](#)

³ United Nations. 2019. [Report of the Secretary-General on Violence against Women Migrant Workers \(A/74/235\)](#)

⁴ IOM. 2009. [Gender and Labour Migration in Asia.](#)

⁵ UN Women. 2021. [Risk of Violence against Women in the Labour Migration Cycle and Services that Need to be in Place throughout the Migration Cycle.](#)

laws are in place to protect their rights.^{6,7} Survivors of violence, irrespective of their migration status, are impacted in many ways from their experience. They may feel ashamed, stigmatized, powerless, blamed and even blame themselves for what has happened to them. This can make it challenging to reach out for support in any circumstance. For migrant women workers, this can be even worse, compounded by a number of factors:

- Isolation and disconnection from support networks (e.g. family and friends).
- Lack of knowledge of their rights and available services.
- Fear of mandatory reporting to police or other authorities and deportation for irregular migrants.
- Language barriers or fears of being discriminated against in service provision because of their migrant status, ethnicity or language.
- Fear of losing residency permits/stay permits for family and the ability to support family back home.
- Fear of retaliation by the employer (e.g. filing cases against the woman, who ends up being prosecuted).
- Fear of losing custody of children or being deported and separated from their children.
- Fear of being rejected by their families and/or home community, poverty, persecution or other challenging situations if they return.

Even when survivors do access support in the destination country, they often lack cross-border support or continuity in critical services (e.g. counseling, legal support, medical assistance, financial and social protections) when they return home. Additionally, upon return, it is difficult to pursue claims and legal proceedings for acts that have happened in the country of destination. Particularly, legal redress can take a long time, and the cost of returning to the country of origin to handle legal affairs can be prohibitively high.



Photo: UN Women/Nicholas Axelrod, and Luke Duggleby

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated risks for violence, exploitation, and abuse and have negatively impacted support service availability⁸

During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, women migrant workers face numerous additional challenges to the ones that they are already facing. For example, during the pandemic many had lost jobs, had been forced to return home or had stayed behind in more

⁶ IOM and the Ministry for Social Development of the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. 2015. [Migrant Women and Gender Violence: Strategies and perspectives for interventions.](#)

⁷ ILO and UN Women. 2019. [“16 Essentials for quality multisectoral service provision to women migrant works subject to violence.”](#)

⁸ ILO and UN Women. 2020. [COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN.](#)

vulnerable circumstances. Women migrant workers experienced stigma and discrimination as they were thought to “carry” the virus, or they had been expected to work long hours without adequate protections from the virus.⁹ For those who had experienced abuse and harassment, access to services had been limited due to movement restrictions and closures. Restrictive circumstances had also limited the ability to seek support from family, friends and networks.

Embassies and foreign service personnel are considered priority contacts for support by migrant women, yet familiarity with responding to violence against women may be limited

Embassies and/or consular offices in countries of destination have a responsibility to protect all of their citizens, including those citizens who are migrant workers. Embassy personnel such as labour attachés and consular officers (where available) often act as the first responder to provide support for the citizens who have experienced violence while they are living, working or visiting the country. While they play a key role in referring survivors to crisis services, many foreign service personnel report needing to strengthen their knowledge and skills to support survivors after experiencing abuse or violence. In addition, logistical and practical challenges exist due to non-existent or under-developed referral procedures across and between countries for survivors of violence against women. Where referrals do exist, often there are gaps in coordination across the various sectors, such as: health, justice, social services, law enforcement and labour- that are key to providing quality essential services for all survivors and for women migrant workers specifically.

How Do We Make a Difference?

Develop standard operating procedures to support embassy staff – consular officers, labor attachés, and others - to understand and respond sensitively to violence against women migrant workers

Embassy staff - consular officers, labor attachés, and other foreign service personnel - play a critical role in responding to violence against women migrant workers. As a key point of contact between survivors in countries of destination and the embassy/consular office of their respective governments, they can be a source of credible information and instrumental in responding sensitively to women migrant workers' needs who have been subjected to violence and harassment.

Equipping foreign service offices and personnel with knowledge, skills and clear procedures to support women migrant workers who survived abuse or violence can be life-changing. Efforts include: building an understanding of the unique risks and experiences of violence and harassment that women migrant workers face; enhancing survivor-centred communication skills; and developing protocols to ensure timely and adequate referrals to qualified crisis services such as health care, police and justice services, and social protection

⁹ IOM. 2020. [COVID-19 Impacts on the Labour Migration and Mobility of Young Women and Girls in South-East Asia and the Pacific.](#)

(e.g. safe housing, emergency and psycho-social support, repatriation, etc.) or other expressed needs of the survivor.

Foreign service officials are well placed to use existing international standards in the development and enhancement of standard operating procedures (SOPs), guidelines and regulations to respond to violence against women and can help facilitate continuity of care across borders.

In **Indonesia**, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment developed the [Guideline for the Protection of Indonesian Women Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). The Guideline serves as a reference for the ministries/agencies and service providers managed by the government and community-based organizations at national and local levels, as well as consular services for Indonesian women at every stage of the migration journey. The guidelines outline support, services, assistance, and the creation of an environment that enables protection of women migrant workers.

The guideline also outlines specific measures for handling and ensuring more coordinated, quality services to better support women migrant workers. Importantly, the protocol outlines procedures for women migrant workers to return to Indonesia, and the services they should receive to support their psychological and economic recovery during the stage of return and reintegration.

In the **Philippines**, the Department of Foreign Affairs has strengthened the capacity of embassy officials in collecting and using data on violence against women migrant workers through better coordination among service providers and by fostering a shared understandings of ethical principles around data anonymity and confidentiality and the measures that need to be in place to ensure them. A series of trainings delivered with the technical support of Safe and Fair provided embassy officials with nuanced information about the different types of data on violence against women, principles for data collection, administrative data strengths and weaknesses, and how to enhance data collection related to violence against women and migration.

In **Viet Nam** a learning series was conducted to support embassy officials and foreign service personnel working overseas. The seminars covered how to assist women migrant workers exposed to violence; building a deeper understanding of violence against women, labour migration, and coordinated essential services for survivors; supportive communication and making sensitive and urgent referrals for women migrant workers.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Viet Nam has drafted standard operating procedures for *Supporting Overseas Vietnamese Women*

Mr. Vu Viet Anh, Director General of the Consular Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that protecting Vietnamese citizens living abroad is always a top priority of Vietnam's migration policy and this is also an important mandate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while performing the function of state management of external affairs. "This training workshop will help enhance capacity of diplomats who will work at Vietnamese diplomatic missions and consular posts abroad to better protect the rights of migrants, especially women migrant workers who may have experienced violence when working overseas."

Victims of Violence, Abuse, Sexual Harassment and Trafficking in Persons. This guidance equips Vietnamese foreign service officials abroad with a tool to enhance the provision of victim-centred support in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and trafficking in persons (TIP) at all stages of the migration journey. The tool also provides guidance for Vietnamese embassies abroad to collect administrative data in a safe and ethical manner on reported cases of violence and abuse.



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The joint ILO-UN Women Safe and Fair Programme: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region (part of the multi-year EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls) undertook a qualitative study involving potential and returned women migrant workers in four countries of origin in the ASEAN region – Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. The study covers intra-ASEAN labour migration, including women who intended to migrate to, or had just returned from, Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand. The study provides insight into women migrant workers' use of mobile phones, and how women migrant workers could access more accurate information throughout the migration process and increase their connections with peers.

The Spotlight Initiative is a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. It is the world's largest targeted effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls. Launched with a seed funding commitment of €500 million from the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative represents an unprecedented global effort to invest in gender equality as a precondition and driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. As a demonstration fund for action on the Sustainable Development Goals, the Spotlight Initiative is demonstrating that a significant, concerted and comprehensive investment in gender equality and ending violence can make a transformative difference in the lives of women and girls.

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