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Action Brief:

Peer Networks Empower 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
- Women Migrant Workers and Mental Health
- Role of Embassies in Addressing Violence against Women Migrant Workers

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

What's the Issue?

Women migrant workers often face social isolation

Women migrant workers face a tremendous amount of social isolation throughout the migration journey due to the context, circumstances and type of work they engage in. Language barriers, restrictions on mobility and limited time for socializing, as well as limited use of mobile phones while working or transiting make it challenging to connect with family, friends and other community members.

This social isolation can also prevent women migrant workers from accessing critical support and information that can help them understand the current risks of violence, abuse and trafficking, while strengthening knowledge and skills (protective factors) for a safer migration experience with access to essential services that may be needed should violence or harassment occur. Away from family, friends and their established community connections, many migrant women struggle to find emotional support, information and access to resources when they need it. Upon return and reintegration some experience stigma and discrimination and face challenges in finding support in their families and home communities. **Peer networks have proven to be indispensable in such cases.**¹

Many women migrant workers are often found in low paid jobs in the informal sector, such as domestic work and farming. In the ASEAN region, domestic workers make up nearly 20 percent of all migration workers and 83 percent of domestic workers are women.² For domestic workers, their employers' house is both a workplace and their living space at the same time. This often puts domestic workers in isolation from other fellow women migrant workers, their families and even the broader public creating challenges for and risk to their safety and well-being. Women migrant workers in other high-demand fields, such as manufacturing and farming, may also have less opportunities for interacting with peers due to long working hours or strict working environments. Many of these individuals are also living in employer-provided accommodations on or close to their worksites.

Lack of language skills can further inhibit women from linking with other women when living and working away from their home country and/or discrimination can make it hard for them to integrate with host populations and benefit fully from efforts for social cohesion. Isolation has been further exacerbated during recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where movement restrictions, social distancing measures and lockdowns were imposed.

Women migrant workers often lack access to trade unions, worker associations, cooperatives and other formal support mechanisms

The ability of migrant workers to join and/or establish more formal mechanisms to organize, connect, learn and advocate for themselves are often limited by legal barriers, discriminatory practices by existing bodies or for lack of information and accessibility. Migrant women are often excluded from organizing efforts in the first place, so they are often underrepresented

¹ Ho KHM, Yang C, Leung AKY, Bressington D, Chien WT, Cheng Q, Cheung DSK. 2022. [Peer Support and Mental Health of Migrant Domestic Workers: A Scoping Review.](#)

² ILO. 2017. [Towards achieving decent work for domestic workers in ASEAN.](#)

in trade union membership and leadership with little voice to improve understanding of their unique challenges, risks and experiences at work.³ Where membership is possible, some fear being fired or sanctioned by their employer if they join or find that they have no voice or meaningful participation.

Women migrant workers lack access to support and information on their rights, services, and protections

Efforts by governments and civil society groups to conduct pre-departure training designed to improve women migrant workers' access to information have been strengthened over the years. However, many practical barriers to availing of pre-departure opportunities have demonstrated that women migrant workers still lack access to information on their rights, available services, protections and support. Women



Photo: UN Women/Nicholas Axelrod

migrant workers predominantly rely on the advice and support of their peers (and recruitment brokers) over official channels.⁴

While peers are an important complementary source of information, there tends to be a predisposition to sharing success stories of returned migrant workers with diminished or no sharing of negative experiences. Returned women migrant workers may be reluctant to speak about their negative experiences, especially as related to violence, harassment and abuse for fear of stigma, victim-blaming and rejection by their family, friends and community.

In addition to shouldering negative experiences without support, returned women migrant workers may face resistance and backlash from their families when exhibiting increased agency, skills, and knowledge or as a result of an elevated financial status, which is viewed as challenging the traditional power dynamics in the family.⁵ These situations, together with other challenges related to a smooth transition back home (e.g. skills transfer, employment help and social protection needs, etc.) that returned women migrants face result from limited availability and access to reintegration services and support.

³ ILO. 2021. [Organizing women migrant workers: Manual for trade unionists in ASEAN.](#)

⁴ Safe and Fair and Goals. 2022. [Prevention of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment against Women Migrant Workers in South and South-East Asia.](#)

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

How Do We Make a Difference?

Strengthening peer networks between countries of origin and destination

Organizing and networking empowers women migrant workers to better understand what they are entitled to and feel emboldened to demand their rights, reducing the risks women face related to marginalization, isolation and lack of information. Well-functioning peer networks in countries of origin and destination have been found to provide a forum for women to come together, share experiences, provide mutual support, and learn together about risks, mitigation measures and support services, including for rights violations, violence and trafficking in a safe and trusting environment.

CSOs have been instrumental in establishing and nurturing peer networks, having been supported by Safe and Fair to further develop their leadership capacities. By strengthening peer networks, a greater number of women migrant workers have been able to organize, analyze existing and evolving problems (e.g. such as those related to COVID-19) and set agendas for learning and action. Through these structures they received clear and credible information related to the risks of violence, trafficking and poor working conditions to advocate for their rights. The peer networks have also given women better access to resources, services and recourse mechanisms throughout their migration journeys.

Peer networks function within countries and across borders, providing continuity and support to women migrant workers during their migration journey, and offering them a way to stay connected upon their return.

These networks have been important sources of support and were critical in filling gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic and in its aftermath. They have been at the frontline of response, often the only accessible source for information sharing and promotion of resiliency strategies in the face of negative working and living consequences spinning off the pandemic. They were a key resource for accessing vaccinations and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Through collaboration with CARE, peer networks of women migrant workers established within **Cambodia** and across the border in **Thailand** have played a pivotal role during the pandemic in creating a safe environment for returnee women migrant workers to share their stories, resources, and information with members. Information has been shared on rights, on issues related to violence against women and trafficking in persons, and on available services in countries of destination. Together women have identified and declined risky migration opportunities and gained access to much needed financial resources and PPE.

In the **Philippines**, through collaboration with the [Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau and the Center for Migrant Advocacy](#), women migrant workers shared information on the heightened risks of violence and on safe migration. Women migrant workers received training, with many of them now acting as peer supporters in their communities to disseminate information to fellow women migrant workers on violence against women and trafficking, thus equipping more women migrant workers with better knowledge on their rights and protective factors that can contribute to mitigating risks.

In **Indonesia**, peer networks created a supportive environment for women migrant workers through safe accommodations/shelters. These networks organized group support sessions,

where returned women migrant workers comfort each other, share tips and support each other through the challenging reintegration period. They also help to keep each other informed about support available to anyone who experienced violence and abuse.

In **Viet Nam**, several peer networks have been established and/or expanded with training and knowledge exchanges on gender equality, prevention and response to gender-based violence, rights of migrant workers, access to information and quality support services in both the countries of origin and destination. In just the Ha Tinh Province, network members grew from 60 to nearly 1,000 over a one-year period.⁶

Samuon's Story: A Peer Network in Cambodia

Interview with Dok Samuon, member of a peer networking group, Ou Bak Ror Tes commune, Kampong Seila district, Preah Sihanouk province, Cambodia



Samuon: *"I have worked on numerous construction sites in Thailand for the last 20 years. I am a hard worker with a good reputation with my supervisors. After the COVID-19 outbreak, my work situation quickly deteriorated. Many construction projects were halted in March-April and, of course, this meant no work and no income for me. My colleagues and I stopped*

⁶ UN Women. 2022. [Community-based networks help Vietnamese women migrant workers better protect their rights.](#)

working around the time Cambodia celebrated the Khmer New Year. I wanted to be with my family during this difficult time, so I decided to come back to my home country.

Before I came home, I was a bit nervous as I had heard many cases of returnee migrant workers being stigmatized. I was lucky that I was warmly welcomed, and I felt comfortable being in my hometown. Local authorities designated a building as a quarantine centre for me and other returnee migrant workers. They gave me some food, masks, soap and food. I also received medical checks from local hospital health workers who came regularly to check my temperature along with the other people in the quarantine centre.

*After my quarantine period ended, I was introduced to the peer networking group in my community by one of the peer network groups, so I can settle in easily. The peer networking group consists of returnee women migrant workers just like me, it's a group where we could share resources, information and experiences on our migration experiences and if someone wants to hear our experience, we also share our information with them. **We help future women migrant workers be informed about services available in case of violence, safe contact numbers and what to do in case something happens in the countries of destination.***

*When I first joined the group, the members shared PPE products with me despite the shortage. **I learned a lot from them during this difficult time and am keeping myself safe thanks to them.** I don't think I would have those products and that knowledge if there was no peer group in my community. Now I do the same for those who recently came back to our town and joined the peer network group. We always update each other about the situation in our community. We also share safe migration information. As many of us went through similar experiences, it is easy to communicate with each other. Peers teach peers! **Although we are not official frontline service providers who support women migrant workers, we definitely support each other as we are able to understand each other's situation and challenges better than anyone else.***

*To women migrant workers who are still abroad, I would like to say: Keep yourselves safe and stay connected with your loved ones. It is important to have up-to-date information on available services, including in response to violence and abuses, and rules on migration procedures, including legal aspects. If possible, try to form a small network with your colleagues. It could be as simple as something like a group chat on mobile messengers. For those who are planning to come back, I would like to say: Welcome home, you are most welcome. **Solidarity is what we all need, not discrimination against returnee women migrant workers.***

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Workers

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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