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The Precarity of Transnational Migration and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Addressing Female Return Migration in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

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The Precarity of Transnational Migration and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Addressing Female Return Migration in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan¹

KEY MESSAGES

- During the COVID-19, governments' strategic indifference and lack of systematic welfare support lead returnees, transnational migrants, and their families to a high level of precarity.
- The pandemic reveals that by "exporting" human labor, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also export vulnerabilities – such as under-skilled migrants who do not speak Russian and have no prior working experience outside the rural household.
- In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, migration dynamics have gendered effects, such as a significant increase in the female labor force in the economy's low-paid, casual, and agriculture sectors.
- Migration strategies at national and regional levels neither correspond to the lived experiences of female migrants nor reflect transnational relationships between destination and return countries.
- Migrants do not have opportunities to use migration skills and social capital gained through migration, and consequently, returnees tend to remigrate.
- The future of migration governance in rural communities depends on the institutionalization of female migration and the mobilization of women in rural areas.

Introduction

Migration is a central issue in public policy debates. The COVID-19 pandemic came as a shock – for both migrant destinations and return countries. It is estimated that at least 194 countries have implemented mobility restrictions in response (Sanchez & Achilli, 2020). These restrictions have also affected two big migration-dependent countries – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In this brief, we review migration in these countries and discuss COVID-19-induced precariousness in migration and transnational practices among working women. The policy brief addresses the normalization of female migration and avoids victimization of the women involved in international migration, especially given the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Labor informality and lack of social protection related to employment characterize the everyday reality of migrants both in Russia and Central Asia. International labor migration to Russia is characterized by adaptability to uncertainty and restrictions.

Since February 2020, immigration policy in Russia regulating the legal terms for work and residence permits has been modified and prolonged more than three times as part of the COVID-19 migration measures (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020; Varshaver, Ivanova, & Rocheva, 2020). The modifications cause distress among migrants and, at the same time, reinstate a normalization of precarious practices.

The composition of the migrant population from Central Asia is changing. Women are part of the migrant population and compose up to 40 percent (Murzakulova, 2020) of the emigration flow from Kyrgyzstan and around 18 percent from Tajikistan (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). In the return contexts of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, migration dynamics have gendered effects, such as a significant increase in the female labor force in the low-paid, casual, and agriculture sectors of the economy (Mukhamedova & Wegerich, 2018).

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Although women perform a double role by working in agriculture and performing child-rearing and domestic labor, the welfare system does not support them as it did 30 years ago. Besides, different findings on education attainment show that in migrant families, there is a higher likelihood of having early school leavers and regional barriers to labor market access among young people (Abdulloev, Epstein, & Gang, 2020). Recent studies indicate that 40 percent of young people in Tajikistan are neither employed nor in the education system (Mirov, 2020). This policy brief focuses on the return country perspective instead of the destination country perspective.

We consider return migration as a period when a migrant – after at least one year working and living abroad – returns to the country of origin. Economic and non-economic reasons characterize return migration. However, migrants' social ties predominantly motivate decisions to return and to remigrate. At the same, the analysis of migrant returnees' daily lives, activities, social relationships, and aspirations supports an understanding of migrant transnationalism among returnees. From the transnational perspective, the analysis of the female return migration echoes the findings in Armenia and Georgia with the increasingly circular nature of migrants' lives and their simultaneous commitment to multiple societies (Lietaert, 2016). Return migration patterns among Central Asian migrants from Russia resemble Pakistani returnees from Norway, where a migration cycle of a person consists of various stages, and return migration is quite often part of transnational migration (Carling & Erdal, 2014).

Approach and Results

Drawing from data on the experiences of female labor migrants, key stakeholder interviews, and discourse analysis of 50 news articles, this policy brief documents how COVID-19 responses have exposed the lack of migration governance and adequate measures to address the challenges faced by female returnees to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Findings and policy recommendations are presented on government intervention and migration governance of female circular migration and integration of migrants in rural communities.

There were two stages of data collection and analysis. Before COVID-19, the primary data from the fieldwork in Tajikistan on return migrants and their families were analyzed and later compared to available research on the case of Kyrgyzstan. Follow-up interviews were conducted with several women migrants and three stakeholder interviews with lawyers based in Moscow and Tajikistan and with NGO workers. The analysis was based on a review of the selected categories such as migration cycle, transnational experiences, rural return community context, and the regional rural infrastructure. The analysis includes a desk review of existing migration strategies and policies in both countries. The second stage included selecting and analyzing 50 articles from five online news platforms covering news on migration from Central Asia. Newspapers selected included Azzatyk, Cabar.Asia, Radio Ozodi, Novaya Gazeta, and AsiaPlus. These were identified as containing relatively fewer censored publications on Central Asia and Russia. For discourse analysis, two rounds of coding and sorting through the quotes were conducted. The first round included coding and grouping of information on the general conditions of migrants in Russia and returnees due to the pandemic regulations. In the second round, coding consists of a description of the conditions of the female migrants and returnees.

COVID - 19 exacerbates precarity and challenges returnees

Since the first COVID-19 regulation measures were introduced in Russia and Central Asian countries, the discourse on migrants has revolved around labor and skill shortages. The pandemic reveals that by “exporting” human labor, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also export vulnerabilities – such as under-skilled migrants who do not speak Russian and have no prior working experience outside the rural household. Among the women, these characteristics are shared more by young women aged 18-35 and are less common among women of the older age group 36-65. The discourse analysis around migrants focuses on discussing what would happen to all the unemployed labor migrants and returnees and, later on, what the Russian economy needed to do to survive due to the decline in numbers of labor migrants from Central Asia.

A blind spot of such discourse is that migrants are portrayed as an economic resource or economic 'butlers' who serve the countries' economic needs. The social costs of migration and the needs of migrants and migrant families are not included in the discussion.

While states in the region struggle to react to the challenges faced by a mobile population during the pandemic, structural inequalities and unworkable migration regulations are exposed. Unplanned or unexpected delays resulting from closures or restrictions result in migrants often finding themselves stranded without resources. In the process of helping to normalize the abnormal, news articles about female returnees stranded in camps or a pregnant woman being repatriated with the help of the national states tend to be framed in decontextualized ways. These practices serve two purposes: first, to show that the government is involved in doing something, and second to use the victimization of these women as a focus, to aid the government in avoiding dealing with the problems of citizens stranded in Russia on a larger scale.

The analysis of both stages lends support to the argument that the existing migration system is not safe. Migration regulations do not protect migrant workers from discrimination, fraud, and abuse. An interview with an immigration lawyer based in Moscow reveals that together these vulnerabilities create a situation in which migrants agree to accept jobs with undesirable conditions attached. The analysis of in-depth interviews indicates that female migrants from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are exposed to various work-related precarity in both migration and return. This scenario resembles the cases of migrant women worldwide who embody a state of legal labor-market precarity, including working without labor laws to protect their rights (Dave, 2014; Parreñas & Silvey, 2018). Data analysis also shows that many young women were limited to a home space with a lack of contact with the outside world long before COVID-19 led to social isolation measures introduced in Russia.

Increased risks and uncertainties among female migrants are also demonstrated by the cases of four women migrants who were fired and not paid promised salaries right at the beginning of the pandemic.

The women worked as maids in a hotel and were told that they would be deported if they complained to the police. When one of the female migrants asked for mercy and understanding of their difficult situation and the need for money - her Russian employer responded: 'we all are in a difficult situation - what am I supposed to do for you?'. The interviews with a migration lawyer and the NGOs shared many such cases of discrimination of migrants by employers and law enforcement representatives. The institutionalization of migration precarity combined with welfare implications and lack of adequate policy reactions is what we are observing during COVID-19. What does this mean for policymakers? This policy brief stresses that labor migrants need to be perceived not as factors of production and not as agents of change. Collectively, we need to remember to use and adopt a human-centered approach to migrants and migration governance.

Transnational precarity and the everyday life during the pandemic

The analysis of transnational ties and experiences during the pandemic period indicates that men, women, and children are being separated from family members between countries of immigration and return. Migrant transnationalism has arguably become even more precarious during the pandemic. Gulnoza's case, a 40-year-old from the Sugd region, is illustrative. She returned to Tajikistan to run family errands. Little did she know that COVID-19 pandemic measures would prevent her from migrating back to Russia, where her two children, an older daughter and a toddler, still live. While Gulnoza was booking and re-booking her flights to travel to Russia, her eldest daughter was involved in a car accident and died. Her younger daughter is under the supervision of her neighbors while the mother is trying to find a way to return to her. This case is one of many cases of transnational realities for women migrants being distorted by the pandemic.

More studies are needed to collect and analyze alternative migration realities and help construct a more realistic idea of the lived experiences of migrants from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The ongoing depiction of the migration reality is one-dimensional and at the core is a male migrant. In contrast, a story of a migrant from Central Asia is a story of a woman as much as it is a story of a man. This analysis indicates how ignorance about the social costs of migration depends on the gender and family roles ascribed to men and women (Lutz, 2010). Most of the interviews indicate how among governmental and non-governmental institutions, migrants are considered mere economic agents whose decisions to marry and bring a family member or child are considered irrational and burden.

“Men and women are exposed to different precarity. Men are profiled by police more often than women and have had to deal with discrimination (vimoganie deneg). In contrast, women are exposed to more health and social related precarity since they bring their children with them and give birth in Russian.”

- Moscow based migration lawyer, online interview on September 15, 2020

Rural return communities and the migrant households

In the rural communities of return, migrants do not have opportunities to use migration skills and social capital gained through migration. Consequently, returnees tend to re-migrate to Russia and maintain a transnational lifestyle with frequent visits to rural communities of origin. Besides, the social costs of migration tend to be minimized while labor migration is portrayed through success stories. Female migration stories tend to be depicted as rare cases and framed as the victimization of women returnees. The analysis confirms that migration experiences contribute to increases in the wealth inequality between men and women and among women of different age groups within the household (Kholmatova, 2018). This policy brief proposes that the future of migration governance in rural communities depends on the institutionalization of female migration and the mobilization of women in rural areas.

Migrant households that depend on remittances are affected the most by the pandemic. Non-migrant family members, community members, and broader social networks are also part of the transnational mobility system (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992).



Source: Radio Ozodi (December 10, 2020), photo archives of the government of Konibodom district

In rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the economic status of a family will influence the educational attainment of children, and consequently, migrant families are hit harder when migration fluctuations take place (Gatskova, Ivlevs, & Dietz, 2019; Jaupart, 2019; Nazridod, Pereira, & Guerreiro, 2019). For example, families in rural areas cope with a lack of income from remittances by growing vegetables for household consumption. Children are forced to work in fields and skip school. Lack of remittances due to COVID-19 also pushed unskilled women to seek money to sustain themselves and their children with food. For instance, in Bokhtar, 100km away from Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan, the number of women of different ages joining an informal handyman market – mardikor bozor – is substantially increasing and reaching about 100 per day.² For instance, Radio Ozodi covered several news stories about an informal open-air location in the city where men and women stay and wait every day for potential employers to come. They negotiate a price and hire a worker for a day or two of hard physical work at a construction site or an agricultural field. Women report that they are paid less than men are.

² Radio Ozodi (December 22, 2020), Vaziri mehnat Shirin Amonzoda bo mardikorzanon mukoqot kard, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31013147.html>

Conclusions and recommendations

In the context of transnational migration, individual and group resilience are critical to migration policy analysis and to addressing COVID-19 regulation measures. Better governance of labor migration would improve migration conditions and increase the possibility for migrants to demand their rights (Parreñas & Silvey, 2018). Migration policy is a national policy. Linking together migration research and policymaking is crucial for better-informed policies that focus on inclusivity and protection of the individuals and social groups involved in migration. In sum, any solutions to governing return migration and contributing to people's safety on the move under COVID-19 must recognize the systemic flaws in current migration regulations and address the challenges rural return communities face.

In both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, a policy is needed to respond to the precarious practices and lack of welfare support for migrants and their families. Several key state ministries are called on to collaborate and take action with the local NGOs: the State Migration Service Ministry of Labor and Social Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Economy. The migration department in each Ministry of Labor and Social Protection needs to coordinate with the Immigration Department of Russia.

Recommendations

Post-COVID-19 policy initiatives need to respond to increasingly precarious practices linked to reliance on remittances and labor export and address the lack of integration policies to accommodate returnees.

- We need to adopt a different approach to migration policies that involves perceiving Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as return countries, not as 'donor' countries or just countries of emigration.
- We need to create a return migration and migrant diaspora dataset (similar to, for example, Ethiopia) where the diaspora members invest openly in support of migrant entrepreneurship in the return country.

- We need to improve the conditions under which migrant workers integrate into the labor market, including strengthening labor laws to protect migrant workers' rights, improving employer training regarding workers' rights, and creating worker-oriented pre-departure training to educate and empower workers for their rights. The pre-departure orientation seminars provide a realistic picture of the challenges and difficulties that will likely confront migrant workers in their destination countries.
- Women migrants need to be institutionally supported in rural communities. The analysis shows that the social, economic, and cultural capital that migrant women gain through many years of transnational migration experience increases the capacity to act effectively in their lives. The current governments need to acknowledge this capacity and build the labor participation of working women that reflects this capacity and ensures their smooth integration into rural communities.

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AGRUMIG Project

The project titled AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

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(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)



Project website: <http://agrumig.iwmi.org>

For more information on the project, contact: Angela Haynes, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK (ah121@soas.ac.uk) This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>)