



► ILO Brief

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Gender-sensitive reporting and communication on labour migration

Introduction¹

In 2021, the ILO published the latest global estimates² on international migrant workers. According to this study, 169 million international migrant work globally. This figure has been steadily growing, up 3.0 per cent from the 2019 estimate and 12.7 per cent from the 2013 estimate.

While women are equally represented in the overall population, they only represent 41.5 per cent of international migrant workers. A proportion which has been stable over the past years. This situation can be explained by the under-representation of women among international migrants of working age and their lower labour force participation. Several additional factors have been suggested as well: women are more likely to migrate as an accompanying family member and face additional economic or non-economic obstacles in their access to the labour market.

Data at the regional level suggest strong differences from region to region. In Northern, Southern and Western Europe, there are slightly more women international migrant workers than men. On the other hand, in the Arab States, the ratio between women and men international migrant workers is of one to five.

Public debates around labour migration do not always capture these gender-related disparities. Stories about “migrants” tend to be gender neutral and the specific

challenges that women or men can face in their labour migration experiences are seldom detailed.

This document explores how journalists and communicators could introduce a gender-sensitive approach to their work on labour migration. The first part of the document studies how gender impacts – positively or negatively – the experiences of international migrant workers. The second part includes a case study on the gender dimension of labour migration reporting in Nepal. The final section of the document provides recommendations for journalists, editors, communicators, and educators.

Key concepts

Agreeing on common terminology is necessary to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. To foster gender-sensitive reporting on labour migration, the ILO-UN Women Safe and Fair Programme has compiled a glossary³ which includes some important gender-related definitions:

Gender: the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being men or women in a particular point in time. Also refers to the socially constructed relationship between women and men and the attributes, behaviour and activities to which each is expected to adhere. Gender differences are determined and reinforced by cultural, historical, ethnic, religious and

¹ This report was prepared under the framework of the ILO Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment (FAIR) project. The study was carried out by Charles Autheman, and was reviewed and edited by Heike Lautenschlager and Gaëla Roudy Fraser.

² [Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers, ILO, 2021](#)

³ [Media-friendly glossary on migration: Women migrant workers and ending violence against women \(EVAW\) edition](#)

economic factors. Gender roles differ over time and between cultures but may be changed. Gender is often wrongly conflated with "sex", which refers to biological differences.

Gender blind: The failure to recognize that gender is an essential determinant of social outcomes impacting on projects and policies. A gender-blind approach assumes gender is not an influencing factor in projects, programmes, or policy.

Gender equality: Enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of all people, with recognition that people of different genders have different needs, priorities and experiences of injustice.



[Media Friendly glossary on migration: Women migrant workers and ending violence against women \(EVAW\) edition](#)

Gender mainstreaming: The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.

Gender non-conforming: A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender

expression does not fit neatly into the gender binary i.e., woman/man.

Gender norms: Social expectations that define what is considered appropriate behaviour for women and men. Gender norms shape the different roles and behaviours of women and men, and of children as well as adults.

Gender-sensitive: Taking into account particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men with an aim to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources.

Sex: The physical and biological characteristics that distinguish males and females (versus, socially constructed roles, or gender).

Mexico's migrant women, trapped between real and imaginary frontiers

In this article featured in the Mexican online platform *Pie de Página*, Angeles Mariscal looks at the stigma that female migrant workers from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador face when they migrate to Mexico. Whether working in domestic work, agriculture, cleaning services or sex work, they commonly suffer from discrimination and abuse.

Read the original story (Spanish):

<https://enelcamino.piedepagina.mx/ruta/mujeres-frontera/>

Translated (English):

<https://mexicanjournalismtranslationproject.wordpress.com/2014/11/20/mexicos-migrant-women-trapped-between-real-and-imaginary-frontiers-angeles-mariscal-en-el-camino/>

Ángeles Mariscal is a freelance journalist. She lives in the state of Chiapas, located on the southern border of Mexico. Her journalistic work focuses on human rights, environmental issues, land and territory defence, migration, and indigenous peoples. Her story on women migrants in Mexico won the 1st ILO global media competition on labour migration in 2015. The story was also featured in an online anthology⁴ to celebrate the 10-

⁴ Online anthology on Migrant Domestic Worker, ILO, 2021

year anniversary of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)⁵.

General observations

How men and women engage in labour migration varies quite significantly from country to country. However, a recent analysis⁶ of female labour migration statistics indicates that current trends tend to mirror or amplify what can be observed for non-migrant populations:

1. **The share of female migrant workers with an advanced level of education is increasing**, particularly in high-income countries. This can be explained by progress in educational attainment in countries of origin and the growing demand for qualified workers in sectors where women are predominant. The share of highly qualified female migrant workers exceeds that of their male counterparts in more than half of the high-income countries where the data is available.
2. **Female migrant workers are less likely to be employed than male migrant workers**. This can also be observed in the general population⁷, yet the gender gap tends to be wider amongst migrants. Except in some instances, the employment-to-population ratio of female migrant workers is systematically lower than that of men migrant workers. The difference between those two ratios tends to be greater in high- and upper-middle-income countries.
3. **Female migrant workers are more likely to work in elementary occupation than migrant workers**. This situation is particularly prevalent in high-income countries and is not necessarily related to the level of education of the workers.
4. **Female migrant workers are likely to earn less than male migrant workers**⁸. In more than half of the countries where the data is available, the gender pay gap is greater than 20%, meaning that male migrant workers earn more than female migrant workers by a proportion of 20% and above. The gender pay gap is also a reality for non-migrant workers for almost every

country. However, in most cases, the gap is wider for migrant workers than for non-migrant workers.

The analysis also highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected female migrant workers. Initial data suggests that female migrant workers are at a higher risk of losing their jobs and, considering that they make up the majority health workers in many countries, are at a greater risk of infection. As economies recover from the pandemic, a gender-sensitive approach will be necessary to observe how male and female migrant workers fare with the new situation.

Occupational gender-based segregation

Occupational gender-based segregation refers to the distribution of workers across and within occupation based on gender. While data for migrant workers is insufficient to draw global comparisons, looking at occupational segregation in the general population is useful to understand commonalities and disparities across sectors and regions.

In the 2017 edition of the World Employment Social Outlook⁹, the ILO measured gender-based segregation by sectors and by regions, providing informative data on which sectors have the highest concentration of men or women.

The data shows that gender segregation is not static and is not identical across all regions. At the global level, occupational segregation has increased over the 1997-2017 and sectors that are traditionally perceived as women-dominated (education, health and social work) or men-dominated (construction or transport, storage and communication) have the highest relative concentration of workers from each sex. However, regional statistics can show that these trends can be different and at times opposite in some regions, as is the case for the agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing sector which is women dominated in some regions and men-dominated in others.

⁵ ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)

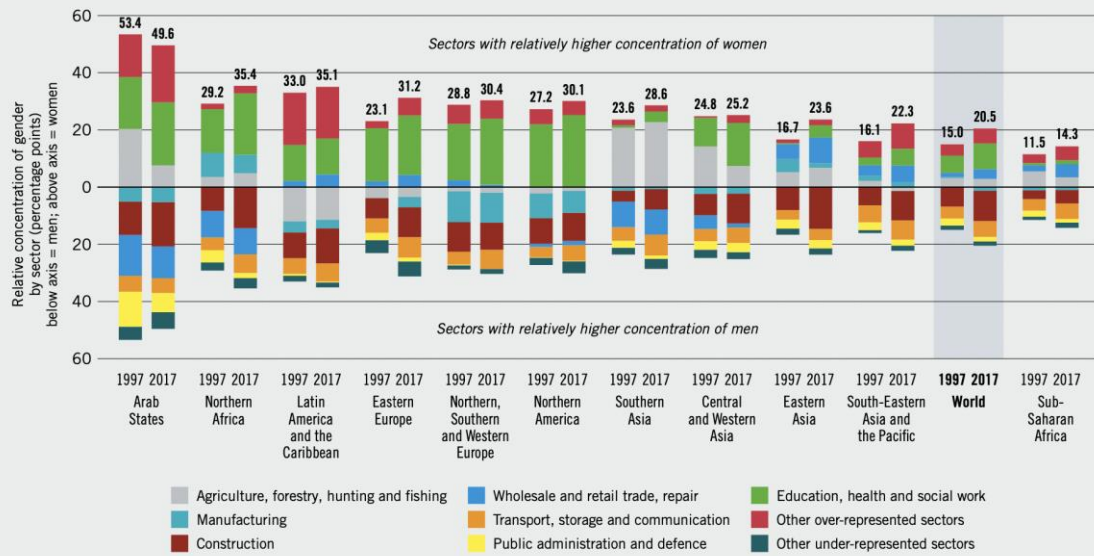
⁶ Who are the women on the move? A portrait of female migrant workers, ILO, 2020

⁷ The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back?, ILO, 2018

⁸ Further analysis of the migrant pay gap can be found in The migrant pay gap: Understanding wage differences between migrants and nationals, ILO, 2020

⁹ World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for women 2017, ILO, 2017

Composition of total sectoral segregation by region, 1997 and 2017



No Country for Young Men

In this article featured in *Thomson Reuters Foundation Platform*, Kieran Guilbert highlights how migration from Senegal to Europe disproportionately affects young men. In his multimedia work, he tries to understand the multiple implications of this situation, not only for the migrants themselves, but also for the communities which remain in the country of origin.

Read the story: <https://news.trust.org/shorthand/no-country-for-young-men/>

Kieran Guilbert is a journalist and editor based in London, with expertise in human rights, aid and development, and modern slavery. He spent seven years working as a journalist for the Thomson Reuters Foundation in various roles including West Africa Correspondent, News Editor, and Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Editor. His story on Senegalese men migrating to Europe won the 2nd ILO global media competition in 2016.

Labour standards and gender equality

Over time, several labour standards have been adopted with regards to ensure equality of opportunity and treatment, notably with regards to gender. They include:

Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)¹⁰

This convention requires ratifying countries to ensure the application to all workers of the principle of equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value.

Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)¹¹

This convention requires ratifying countries to declare and pursue a national policy designed to promote, by methods appropriate to national conditions and practice, equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation, with a view to eliminating any discrimination in these fields.

Both conventions are fundamental conventions. Following the adoption of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work¹², member states must

¹⁰ [Equal Remuneration Convention](#)

¹¹ [Discrimination \(Employment and Occupation\) Convention, 1958 \(No. 111\)](#)

¹² [Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, ILO, 1998](#)

promote the principles of these conventions whether they have ratified them or not.

More recently, the ILO has adopted two instruments to address growing concerns on violence and harassment at work, including gender-based violence and harassment. These instruments are the **Violence and Harassment Convention**, 2019 (No. 190)¹³ and the accompanying **Violence and Harassment Recommendation** (No. 206)¹⁴. The recommendation includes a specific reference to migrant workers: “Members should take legislative or other measures to protect migrant workers, particularly women migrant workers, regardless of migrant status, in origin, transit and destination countries as appropriate from violence and harassment in the world of work.”

The recommendation also stresses the importance of awareness-raising and the role that journalists can play in this matter: “Members should fund, develop, implement and disseminate, as appropriate: (...) materials for journalists and other media personnel on gender-based violence and harassment, including its underlying causes and risk factors, with due respect for their independence and freedom of expression.”

One additional labour standard which is important to consider when looking at gender and labour migration is the **Domestic Workers Convention**, 2011 (No. 189)¹⁵. The convention recalls in its preamble that “domestic work continues to be undervalued and invisible and is mainly carried out by women and girls, many of whom are migrants or members of disadvantaged communities and who are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in respect of conditions of employment and of work, and to other abuses of human rights.”

Gender-sensitivity in labour migration agreements

Bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) and Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) are agreements that define the responsibilities of parties along a migration corridor. There has been an increase in such agreements in recent years and they are often recognized as important tools to improve the management of labour migration. A briefing note details the why such agreements should be gender-

sensitive, providing concrete examples and recommendations.

Read the briefing note: [Gender sensitivity in labour migration-related agreements and MOUs](#)

Case study: Nepal

Nepal has a long history of its citizens going abroad for foreign employment, from fighting wars as mercenaries in the World Wars to working as seasonal farm workers across the border in India. And over the last two decades, the reliance on foreign employment to keep the country's economy afloat has grown by multiple folds. As a result, anything related to foreign employment becomes a major source of news, with foreign employment being considered a separate ‘beat’ of its own in Nepali newsrooms.

Rai Bhrikuti, an investigative journalist from Nepal, carried out a media mapping to see how news outlets report foreign employment and labour related stories. The mapping included 56 news items published between June 2019 and October 2021 in six news outlets:

- two Nepali language national dailies: **Kantipur** and **Nagarik**
- one English language national daily: **Kathmandu Post**
- one English language weekly and news portal: **Nepali Times**
- two Nepali language news portals: **Onlinekhabar.com** and **Setopati.com**

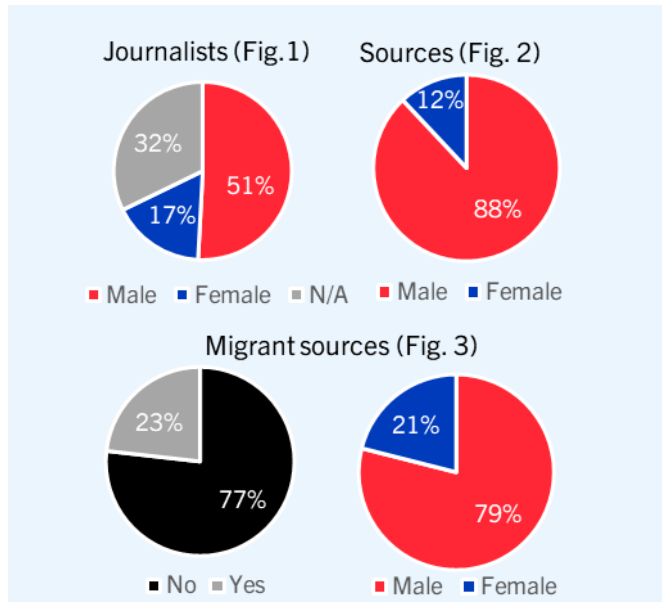
Gender-related quantitative information was collected regarding the author, the sources and, when applicable, migrant sources. A qualitative analysis of the news items was also done to see how the gender dimension of labour migration is considered.

¹³ [Violence and Harassment Convention](#), 2019 (No. 190)

¹⁴ [Violence and Harassment Recommendation](#), 2019 (No. 206)

¹⁵ [Domestic Workers Convention](#), 2011 (No. 189)

Key data



While Nepal receives a fair share of media coverage there is a blatant disregard for gender lens in these stories of migration. And even more so in the last year and half as newsrooms' coverage of pandemic took centre stage. Most of these stories are written by men (**Fig.1**), who almost always turn to male sources (**Fig.2**), either as experts to comment on the situation or male migrant workers as subject of the stories. Even when the stories were written by females, women experts were quoted as much.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, news stories have reported about foreign employment and the challenges caused by the pandemic induced travel restrictions using very broad strokes. They were either about Nepali migrants left in lurch, both in origin and destination countries, or the fears of how the pandemic would affect the economy. But very few tried to explore how the pandemic might have affected female migrant workers differently.

The Nepali migrant worker is a man

In these stories of plight and challenges around foreign employment, the migrant worker by default is a man. This might be because Nepali women under the age of 24 aren't legally allowed to work in most countries in the Middle East, where Nepalis make up a large share of migrant workers. In the media mapping, there were many stories about deaths of Nepali male migrant workers dying abroad, or their bodies being brought back to

Nepal. These stories were accompanied by heart-breaking photos, and in almost all most photos, it only highlighted females being the most emotional and presented them as helpless compared to the other male subjects in the photos.

When such important aspect of gender dimension in labour migration is overlooked in the media, from the gender makeup of Nepali migrant workers, or the provisions for females qualifying for jobs in countries like Israel, or the skewed policy of the Nepali state of having age bars for women, resulting in oversea employment being more accessible to Nepali men, it subtly impacts on public narratives. This might cause the general reader or even aspiring migrant workers to assume that these opportunities, the ability to work abroad legally, applies only to men.

Migration and foreign employment stories tend to be about hard number crunching, such as how much remittances increased or dropped. On the other side of the foreign employment news story spectrum were the more tragic side about the deaths of migrant workers. These general news stories paint a bleak picture of foreign employment but do not go beyond stories of coffin count. There weren't many investigative, in-depth pieces about what the connection between policy gaps and workplace hazards. Journalists have spent little time talking to the colleagues or friends of the deceased, which could give a better idea of why abuse or workplace accidents are happening. The stories we analysed didn't consistently have the voice of migrant workers, and even when they did, the number of female migrant workers who were quoted was negligent (**Fig.3**).

Of the stories we analysed, women mostly figured in heart-breaking stories of despair when there has been an accident or death, and the story veers towards the women who have been left behind. In such stories, women are presented as devoid of any agency over their life and family decisions. There is rarely any attempt to learn about these 'left behind' women beyond their identity as the wife of a Nepali male migrant worker.

Moving away from the pandemic related stories of migration foreign employment, there were also some noticeable stories about how dangerous irregular migration can be, and the lack of awareness about fraudulent practices while migrating abroad for work. However, such stories once again fail to highlight the gender dimension of such issues, and how female migrant workers could be at heightened risk in similar conditions.

Recommendations for journalists, editors, communicators, and educators

Using a gender-sensitive approach to inform public debate on labour migration is much needed in the global effort towards gender equality. The following recommendations can help improve:

1. Use gender-sensitive terminology

Words matter. Consciously or inadvertently, words that are used by journalists and communicators can shape the public debate positively or negatively. Tools like the [Media-friendly glossary on migration: Women migrant workers and ending violence against women \(EVAW\) edition](#) are intended to guide the choice of words and ensure that labour migration reporting and communication does not omit the gender dimension.

2. Consider the role of images in conveying existing stereotypes

Images are very important in reporting and communication. Even more so with the surge of social media and the virality of images associated with short texts. Working with professional photojournalists and photo editors can help ensure that ethical guidelines are being respected and that vulnerable sources of information are being protected. Listening to ongoing conversations within the community of visual journalists is also a good way to keep in touch with complex debates, such as the one around [documenting sexual violence](#).

3. Include voices of women migrant workers in your stories

As illustrated above (and in a recent [study](#) in Jordan), journalists seldom reach out to migrant workers when reporting on labour migration. When they do, it tends to be men migrant workers rather than women. To address this imbalance, journalists should include voices of women migrant workers more systematically and ask themselves

for every story if reaching out to women migrant workers could provide added context.

4. Look for opportunities to increase your knowledge on gender and migration

More and more training activities, whether in-person or virtual, are being offered. One interesting and accessible course to start with is the [UN Women I Know Gender 16: Gender Equality and Migration](#).

5. Apply to dedicated fellowships

Development aid project or specialized organizations offer fellowships for journalists on gender-sensitive reporting of migration. These programs can include training, mentoring or grants to carry out investigations. The International Women's Media Foundation has set up such activities recently, such as the [Adelante](#) program or the [African Great Lakes Reporting Initiative](#). The ILO-UN Women project *Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region* has also offered such [fellowship opportunities](#).

6. Introduce discussions about gender-sensitive reporting of migration in journalism education

Labour migration reporting is gradually being introduced in journalism education either through short sessions or dedicated courses. Programs such as the [Global Migration Project](#) at the Columbia Journalism School offer opportunities for students on gender and migration and could inspire other journalism education institutions.

7. Monitor the media and read existing research on gender-sensitive reporting and labour migration

Observing current patterns in reporting and communication can help media practitioners understand how their work reinforces existing narratives or not. In Mexico, the Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI) publishes and [annual media monitoring](#) (Spanish) which sheds light on the structural challenges in the news coverage of migration with regards to gender.

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