

‘The Pandemic Played a Cruel Joke on Us’: The vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz women migrant workers in Russia during COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected various aspects of social and economic life across the world, with women and minorities especially bearing the brunt of its negative consequences. For Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia, this was further compounded by particularities of the low-wage or informal sectors where they worked. This article contributes to the scholarship on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in destination countries. Drawing on data from 298 Kyrgyz women working in Russia, it explores women’s experiences with income, labour protections, freedom of movement, and violence in the workplace during the pandemic. It demonstrates that these experiences are caused by the intersection of gender and migration status. The article concludes with recommendations directed at the Kyrgyz government and civil society to improve the situation of Kyrgyz migrant women working in Russia.

Keywords: COVID-19, women, migration, vulnerability, Russia, Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

The Kyrgyz Republic is one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world.¹ According to the Federal Service of State Statistics, in 2021 there were 711,240 Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, 477,000 of whom were labour migrants.² Estimates suggest that more than one million Kyrgyz people have migrated to Russia for work,³ with around half of them women.⁴ Migrant women face intersectional discrimination based on their gender and migration status.⁵ Over the past five years, Kyrgyz women's migration to Russia has been increasing due to a variety of factors, including the simplification of procedures for labour migration between member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), high unemployment rates and low wages in Kyrgyzstan, family reunification due to earlier migration of men, and an entry ban for men migrants who broke the law.⁶ Therefore, women's labour migration is often seen as the only way to improve a family's living standards.

This article explores the changes in working opportunities and conditions for Kyrgyz women migrants in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is based on data from an online survey with 298 respondents, ten in-depth interviews, and four focus group discussions. The objective is to provide an understanding of how the pandemic affected their living and working conditions.

We found that COVID-19 exacerbated the vulnerability of Kyrgyz women migrant workers. In addition to the higher risk of exposure to the virus as workers in service jobs, their financial situation was also affected due to the closure of the service sector, the layoff of staff, and the shrinking of the informal economy.

¹ L Bossavie and D Garrote-Sánchez, *Safe and Productive Migration from the Kyrgyz Republic: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic*, The World Bank, 2022.

² Federal Service of State Statistics, 'Population and Migration of the Russian Federation in 2021', 2022, retrieved 7 May 2023, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/compendium/document/13283>.

³ D Podolskaya, '1 Million 188 Thousand Citizens of Kyrgyzstan Work Abroad', *24.kg*, 10 February 2022, https://24.kg/obschestvo/223469_zarubejom_rabotaet_1million_188_tyisyach_grajdan_kyrgyzystana.

⁴ D Kurmanova, 'Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic: More than half of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia are women', *Sputnik Kyrgyzstan*, 1 October 2021, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20211001/Posolstvo-KR-bolshe-poloviny-kyrgyzskikh-migrantov-v-Rossii-zhenschiny-1054088855.html>.

⁵ International Federation for Human Rights, 'Women and Children from Kyrgyzstan Affected by Migration', September 2016, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf.

⁶ D Poletayev, 'Female Labor Migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia', *Population*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2018, pp. 68-78.

Therefore, a consequence of the global pandemic was that Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia experienced violations of their rights, as many had no formal written work agreements, lost their source of income, and, as a result, experienced food insecurity.

We begin by providing contextual information on Kyrgyzstan and an overview of literature on migrant women's working conditions before and during the pandemic. We then elaborate on the methodology of the study, followed by a presentation of the findings, and a conclusion with policy recommendations.

Migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia

Kyrgyzstan is a lower middle-income country, with a quarter of the population living below the national poverty line.⁷ The country's economy⁸ is not very diversified and relies on agriculture, migrant remittances (32.7% of GDP),⁹ and natural resources such as gold and copper. The socio-political context of Kyrgyzstan has been volatile. Until 2020, it was the only democratic¹⁰ and partly free¹¹ country in Central Asia. Beginning in 2021, the political situation shifted in a more autocratic direction. The country experienced three revolutions—in 2005, 2010, and 2020—which led to constitutional changes and the overthrow of presidents. In the past few years, there were border conflicts with Tajikistan¹² that led to a mass displacement of people in the Batken Region in 2021 and 2022. Moreover, high density and rapid population growth led to a high demand for jobs and low supply in the labour market. Due to this, many families rely on migrant remittances, and COVID-19 exposed the severity of this dependence as many families faced hunger and poverty.¹³

⁷ World Bank, 'World Bank Open Data', 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

⁸ Global Edge, 'Kyrgyzstan', 2023, <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/kyrgyzstan/memo>.

⁹ World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)—Kyrgyz Republic', World Bank Open Data, n.d., retrieved 9 May 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

¹⁰ S I Lindberg (ed.), *Autocratization Turns Viral – Democracy report 2021*, V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg, 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/12/dr_2021.pdf.

¹¹ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2020: Kyrgyzstan', 2020, retrieved 8 July 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2020>.

¹² A Imanaliyeva, P Leonard, and K Ibragimova, 'Tens of Thousands Displaced as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan Conflict Rages On', *Eurasianet*, 16 September 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/tens-of-thousands-displaced-as-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-conflict-rages-on>.

¹³ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Kyrgyzstan: Study on the Socioeconomic Effects of COVID-19 on Returnees*, IOM, Vienna, 2021, <https://publications.iom.int/books/kyrgyzstan-study-socioeconomic-effects-covid-19-returnees>.

As a former Soviet Republic, the country has strong political and economic relations with Russia. Due to a common history and language and close ties between the two countries, migrants from Kyrgyzstan prefer Russia as a destination country for employment.¹⁴ The establishment of the EAEU, of which both countries are members, eased the procedures for Kyrgyz migrants to be able to live and work in Russia.¹⁵ At the same time, migrants from Kyrgyzstan, including women, still face numerous challenges and violations of their rights.

Academic and applied researchers have demonstrated that the situation of labour migrants in Russia is precarious.¹⁶ Migrants are subjected to ethno-racial profiling¹⁷ and used by Russian politicians to incite anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments.¹⁸ Furthermore, these attitudes lead to racial preferences for jobs and the exclusion of non-Slavic candidates. Outside the workplace, migrants experience difficulties accessing housing and are subjected to regular police checks.¹⁹ As a result, Central Asian migrants 'receive continuous, poignant reminders that they are not only outsiders in a legal sense but also racially alien and inferior'.²⁰ This legal precarity affects other spheres of life such as non-integration into the host society, a sense of non-belonging, physical and mental health issues, and high rates of harassment that go unreported.²¹

¹⁴ It is also the biggest host for migrants from other former Soviet states such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, or Azerbaijan.

¹⁵ Tian Shan Policy Center of the American University of Central Asia, 'Three Years in the EAEU: How are the rights of labor migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic observed in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan?', 23 January 2019, https://auca.kg/ru/tspc_news/3638.

¹⁶ I Kuznetsova *et al.*, 'Migration and COVID-19: Challenges and Policy Responses in Kyrgyzstan', Central Asia Program, 2 December 2020, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/migration-covid-19-challenges-policy-responses-kyrgystan>.

¹⁷ V Agadjanian, C Menjivar, and N Zotova, 'Legality, Racialization, and Immigrants' Experience of Ethnoracial Harassment in Russia', *Social Problems*, vol. 64, issue 4, 2017, pp. 558–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw042>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 562

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Russia: Police Round Up Migrant Workers', HRW, 24 December 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/24/russia-police-round-migrant-workers>.

²⁰ Agadjanian, Menjivar, and Zotova, p. 563.

²¹ V Agadjanian, B Oh, and C Menjivar, '(Il)Legality and Psychosocial Well-Being: Central Asian migrant women in Russia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 48, issue 1, 2022, pp. 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1872373>.

It is widely known that disasters, such as the global pandemic, have more severe consequences for disadvantaged groups under contemporary capitalism.²² Studies on the conditions of women workers across the world have pointed out various weaknesses in national policies.²³ A study on the consequences of COVID-19 on labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan showed that women were the most affected demographic;²⁴ there were similar findings in cross-national research as well.²⁵ Various structural factors have contributed to women being at a greater disadvantage. During the pandemic, women and minority group members were more likely to be affected at work; they either had reduced salaries or were fired.²⁶ Besides economic hardship, some Kyrgyz women labour migrants in Russia were abused by their fellow countrymen²⁷ in waves of so-called patriotic attacks in Moscow.²⁸ These challenges faced by women migrant workers are not captured in general surveys or labour-related economic research. Thanks to the access of NGOs to the target population, it was possible to learn more about the nuanced experiences of women migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan in Russia and assess the changes that occurred during the pandemic. Furthermore, much research focuses on gathering quantitative evidence on health-related issues and the pandemic. In this work, we show that the vulnerabilities of women migrants go beyond health-related issues, which includes consideration of the well-being of their families and dependents.

²² J Cohen and Y van der Meulen Rodgers, 'The Feminist Political Economy of Covid-19: Capitalism, women, and work', *Global Public Health*, vol. 16, issue 8–9, 2021, pp. 1381–1395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1920044>.

²³ B S Sumalatha, L D Bhat, and K P Chitra, 'Impact of Covid-19 on Informal Sector: A Study of women domestic workers in India', *The Indian Economic Journal*, vol. 69, issue 3, 2021, pp. 441–461, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946622111023845>.

²⁴ D V Poletaev, 'Life and Health of Labor Migrants from Central Asia in Russia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Population and Economics*, vol. 6, issue 4, 2022, pp. 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.6.e90370>.

²⁵ A Brodeur *et al.*, 'A Literature Review of the Economics of COVID-19', *Journal of Economic Surveys*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2021, pp. 1007–1044, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12423>.

²⁶ Cohen and van der Meulen Rodgers.

²⁷ There have been reports of Kyrgyz men migrants committing acts of violence against Kyrgyz women migrants in Russia, including women being stoned or beaten to death, because they dated men of another nationality, for example, Tajik. These men, who called themselves 'patriots', said they wanted to 'teach the women a lesson'. See G Ibraeva, A Moldosheva, and M Ablezova, "'We Will Kill You and We Will Be Acquitted!' – Critical Discourse Analysis of a Media Case of Violence against Female Migrants from Kyrgyzstan", in T Kruessmann (ed.), *Gender in Modern Central Asia*, LIT Verlag, Zurich, 2015.

²⁸ R Gabdulhakov, 'In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia', *Media and Communication*, vol. 7, issue 2, 2019, pp. 230–241, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>.

Methodology

This article is based on an analysis of primary data collected through mixed research methods, which made it possible to obtain a comprehensive picture of the experiences of Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. Fieldwork was conducted by the NGO Insan-Leilek Public Foundation²⁹ that works on the issue of labour migration, and the Migrant Workers' Union that represents Kyrgyz labour migrants in foreign countries. Both organisations participated in the development of the research tools, recruitment of research participants, and data collection and validation. The data was collected by Insan-Leilek between 10 March and 25 May 2022. The data collection included an online survey with 298 respondents, four focus group discussions (FGD) with 32 participants in total, and in-depth interviews with ten women. The 32 FGD participants and 10 interviewed women were drawn from the pool of respondents who participated in the online survey.

Online Survey

The first stage of the research involved administering an online survey, which consisted of a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. At the beginning of the survey form, participants were given information about the purpose of the study and how the confidentiality of personal data would be protected. They were asked to provide their consent by clicking on a button which then took them to the survey. The survey was conducted on the Google Forms platform, which recorded and coded the data with minimal interference by the research team.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Insan-Leilek and the Migrant Workers' Union used groups in popular messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp to recruit Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia to share the link to the questionnaire and invite women to participate. Migrants who received the link were encouraged to forward it to their acquaintances. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 60 years. Most of the respondents, 212, resided in Moscow, with 43 in Yekaterinburg, 27 in Novosibirsk, and 16 in other cities. Their occupations were diverse: services (22.5%), catering (23.8%), domestic work (17%), beauty services (12.8%), and others, such as retail and garment manufacturing. About

²⁹ The Insan-Leilek Public Foundation was established in August 2000 as a non-governmental non-profit organisation. Its objective is to protect the rights and interests of labour migrants. The organisation provides free legal assistance, including consulting and informing labour migrants and holding joint events with them, as well as drafting legal documents for them (such as court documents) and providing support in administrative cases. In 2019, the Migrant Workers' Union of Kyrgyzstan was created under the supervision of the Insan-Leilek Public Foundation.

40% had been in Russia between four and six years, 23% for over seven years, and the rest for less than three years.

The online survey provided quantitative data on Kyrgyz women's experiences of working abroad and the changes in the environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was designed with Insan-Leilek's representatives and consisted of six sections focusing on: migration experience, social security, problems during COVID-19, discrimination, harassment, and abuse. The sections included questions related to attitudes, experiences, and perceptions.

Focus Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted to complement the study's quantitative data with qualitative indicators and to gather more information about the women's experiences. Using the same sampling method as the online survey, participants for the qualitative study were also recruited through the Migrant Workers' Union and messaging apps. In total, Insan-Leilek's employees conducted four focus group discussions, with eight different participants in each, with women migrants in Moscow and Yekaterinburg. The central focus of FGDs was on the challenges participants experienced before, during, and after the pandemic as well as how they overcame these obstacles. The ten in-depth interviews focused on the experiences of discrimination and violence at the workplace during the pandemic. These qualitative data elicited information about obstacles to the prevention of gender-based violence and harassment against women working in foreign countries. The in-depth interviews and FGDs took place in the offices of the Migrant Workers' Union and Insan-Leilek. All focus group discussions and interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed. The FGDs and interviews were conducted mostly in the Kyrgyz language, except when the respondents preferred to speak in Russian.

Quantitative data obtained through the surveys was analysed using the SPSS statistical software. As the data are not representative, we did not conduct causal tests but rather provide an exploratory overview of the findings for both types of data.

Ethical Considerations

As the topics covered in the research are highly sensitive, ethical issues were considered. The data collectors, who were Insan-Leilek's employees and researchers, have experience working with women migrants and a good understanding of their living and working conditions. As a result, they could express empathy and address sensitive questions in a professional manner. This ensured the emotional sensibility of the interviewers due to strong awareness

of the context.³⁰ To decrease the emotional effect of the interviews, NGO staff had exit conversations with the respondents. The data were accessible only to the research group and kept confidential.

Limitations

The analysis is based on the data collected from migrant women living and working mainly in cities such as Moscow, Yekaterinburg, and Novosibirsk, which host the largest number of Kyrgyz migrants. However, many migrants live throughout Russia and experience different circumstances and face different issues. Recruitment of respondents was carried out through the Migrant Workers' Union and migrants' groups on social media, which affected what potential participants could be reached and their representation in the study. Furthermore, as Insan-Leilek and the Migrant Workers' Union work mostly with migrants who experience difficulties, the data may not reflect the experiences of all migrants. Thus, the results presented here are not generalisable to all Kyrgyz migrant women working in Russia. Nonetheless, they offer a comprehensive snapshot of the women's experiences as they described them.

Findings

In this section, we present the results of the quantitative and qualitative data starting from the overall experience of the Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia followed by specific challenges they faced during COVID-19.

General Situation of Kyrgyz Women Migrant Workers in Russia

The survey and FGD data show that, in most cases, respondents were forced to work in low-wage jobs. Even migrant women who had obtained qualifications or degrees from educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan faced challenges finding work in their field and worked, instead, as janitors, shop sellers, caregivers, beauticians, couriers, and so on. These professions could not provide the Kyrgyz women with adequate financial resources to ensure a decent quality of life abroad, let alone send remittances to families back home. Thus, the women did not pay much attention to their living and working conditions but only the amount of money they could earn.

³⁰ W Pearlman, 'Emotional Sensibility: Exploring the methodological and ethical implications of research participants' emotions', *American Political Science Review*, 2022, pp. 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001253>.

More than half of the survey respondents indicated that they had no legal protection. Most did not have an employment contract that could guarantee the protection of their labour rights, leaving them vulnerable to the whims of the employers, with whom they typically only had verbal agreements. According to the women who worked without employment contracts, the primary reason was that the employers either did not offer a contract or refused to sign one. Employers typically emphasise the mutual benefits of not signing a contract, highlighting that the workers would receive a higher net amount at the end of the month, because there would be no deductions for social security, taxes, or pension. Kyrgyz migrant women also pointed out that it is easier for them to find an informal job without a contract than a formal one. As one of the respondents reported, 'I personally know many women who have been searching for official work for 1–2 years. It is a challenging process for us because it takes a considerable amount of time. Furthermore, formal jobs tend to offer lower pay rates. Additionally, having all the necessary documents is crucial, and ensuring that the migration card is in order is particularly important.'

When it comes to the employment of migrant workers, employers often violate the provisions of the labour code. A quarter of the Kyrgyz migrant women experienced a delay in the payment of their wages, half did not receive payment for overtime work, and only a fifth could access paid sick leave and paid holiday leave, according to the survey results. Participants in the in-depth interviews confirmed the findings of the survey, as one interviewee explained, 'Not all my friends ... have an employment contract. And it is difficult when there are no documents when employers force us to work three or five hours more than necessary. Because everything is oral, he can just take and delay the salary for a week, two, three, and then disappear. That is, we had no money, we just worked for free here. And for me, therefore, it was important to draw up an employment contract.' Thus, the absence of the main labour rights protection mechanism, an employment contract, does not allow Kyrgyz migrant women to exercise their rights, but forces them to work under the conditions provided by the employer. As a result, they often feel insecure.

Safety Concerns: Harassment at Work and Outside of Work

In addition to violations of their labour rights, Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia, both in domestic services and in other positions, faced even more serious cases of violations and abuses of their human rights during the pandemic. The issue of safety is multifaceted, with concerns arising both within the confines of their residences and their workplaces. The responses regarding feelings of insecurity encompassed various factors related to identity, such as being a woman or a migrant. Participants also expressed fear from hazardous working conditions involving the use of chemical elements and a lack of safety regulations. Instances of harassment and abuse from superiors, colleagues, or customers were also

mentioned as sources of insecurity. Sixty-five per cent of survey respondents encountered discrimination in the workplace, which they attributed mainly to their status as migrants (65 per cent) and women (50 per cent): ‘Our boss is a man; he has a rough temper. He has a softer attitude towards male migrants.’

Intersectional vulnerability puts Kyrgyz women migrants in a position where they have no choice but to continue working while experiencing harassment and abuse. Harassment has become common and ranged from obscene jokes to sexualised violence such as rape. Forty per cent of the research participants said they had experienced comments about their bodies, obscene jokes, and sexually suggestive gestures. Twenty per cent reported violation of personal boundaries such as men touching their waist, breasts, buttocks, and other parts of the body, and 14 per cent were subjected to rape. At the same time, around half of those who experienced violations of their rights did not know where to turn for help or were afraid to talk about it, and therefore were forced to deal with the psychological and physical violence on their own. As one woman shared,

He touched me, showed signs of attention. I didn't know what to do, I couldn't tell my husband because he would blame me. Kyrgyz people have a proverb: 'If the cow doesn't wink, the bull won't break the rope'. Women saw, but didn't say anything.... I didn't know where to turn. In Russia, the worst thing is that you don't know where to turn. The Russians will simply not accept you. They will start checking you, they will scare you with deportation. We've heard about such cases. I don't want to seek help and it's impossible to seek help. I don't want to hear about the police station because they take it negatively there. I would like to see organisations in Russia, centres for the protection of migrants, and women, where we could seek help. If women worked there, it would be even better.

Shockingly, two respondents disclosed that they had experienced gang rape at their workplaces but were unable to report these incidents, as their supervisors dismissed their claims. In a distressing account, one interviewee shared that she was coerced into sexual activity outside of work. When she reported the incident to the police, she faced blackmail, and her relative had to bribe the officers to close the case. As a result, she was advised by her coworkers and sister to suppress the situation, leading to her never receiving any medical or psychological assistance. Consequently, she has internalised the belief that she must simply forget about the assault and move on without seeking the necessary support or resources.

These findings underscore the profound challenges faced by Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia, including the prevalence of unsafe working environments, discrimination, and sexual abuse. They support the findings of other studies on the working conditions and well-being of migrants in Russia, which demonstrate

that severe abuses are left neglected.³¹ The experiences of the survey participants shed light on the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address workplace safety, improve law enforcement responses, and ensure the protection of the rights and wellbeing of Kyrgyz women migrant workers. The consequences of COVID-19 described in the following section provide more evidence in support of this urgent need.

Challenges and Risks Faced by Kyrgyz Migrant Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The vulnerability and widespread violation of the labour rights of Kyrgyz migrant women became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing crisis, which imposed certain restrictions on economic activities. Since the data collection was conducted in 2022, research participants had had time to reflect on the effects of the pandemic and draw conclusions retrospectively. The closure and suspension of businesses created new difficulties for their survival. They previously relied on a source of income from work which they used to pay for housing and food. The COVID-19 restrictions deprived them of this income, and as a result, affected all aspects of their lives.

Along with the pre-existing issues the women faced, which were aggravated by the pandemic, the survey respondents noted increased levels of anxiety and depression. Being far from their home country, where citizenship grants them social protections and relatives and acquaintances are ready to provide any kind of support, migrant women did not feel safe in Russia. The study participants highlighted several challenges they experienced during the pandemic. These can be classified into legal, financial, and psychological problems.

Due to the imposed restrictions, many Kyrgyz migrant women encountered difficulties in extending or renewing the registration at their place of residence. In most cases, migrants lived in rented apartments, where the owner did not allow them to register. The closure and suspension of businesses that, in the presence of an employment contract, allowed migrants to register in their place of work, meant that they could no longer register in that way either. Lack of address registration puts migrants at risk of being fined, placed in a Center for Temporary Detention of Foreign Citizens, or deported.

³¹ V V Kozhenov, A A Grebenyuk, and A S Maksimova, *Features of Socio-economic Adaptation of Labour Migrants from Central Asia in Russia*, Sam Poligrafist, Moscow, 2022; US Department of State, '2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Russia', Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia>.

Even more severe was the impact of the financial consequences of the pandemic. Quarantine measures resulted in mass layoffs of workers, and migrants were among the first to be fired. The suspension of business activities forced owners to reduce their expenditures by dismissing staff, and informally employed low-skilled migrants were fired or sent on unpaid leave on a massive scale. One woman shared,

The pandemic played such a cruel joke on us. All the time they [employers] make some adjustments in accordance with the rules, how to work, the health and epidemiological service comes very often. And because of this, when the staff is reduced, yes, it will be necessary to reduce the number of employees, they start with migrants, they are the first to be fired. Therefore, I am very afraid of this situation. There were times when I was fired, and my relatives called from home, [saying] 'will you send money? Right now, we need to pay for the kindergarten, and pay some fees to the school'. But I can't send it to them. Every month I give them most of my salary, but I didn't have it now. That's a big fear.

According to the focus group data, an employer could send 20–25 people per day on unpaid leave or fire them. Twenty per cent of survey participants were either fired or forced to suspend their labour activities for the quarantine period. As one domestic worker said, 'Everything was fine until there was a pandemic; when the pandemic began, I was asked to leave for Kyrgyzstan. But they could not put me on a plane, they needed some kind of permission to fly, and the planes did not fly yet.'

The absence of formal employment contracts made it impossible for migrants to claim any compensation for the loss of their jobs, thus leaving them with a meagre livelihood during the pandemic. As fifty per cent of survey respondents noted, their income was significantly reduced to the minimum necessary to cover daily expenses. At the same time, the price of essential goods, including foodstuffs, rose sharply. Many Kyrgyz women could not afford to buy enough food and often went hungry. One-third of the participants noted that they were forced to seek humanitarian assistance from members of the diasporic community, charity organisations, and acquaintances. One woman said, 'It was very difficult. ... Products have risen in price. ... We were left in such a vacuum, there were days when we went hungry. But our wealthy compatriots distributed humanitarian aid. It was very difficult during the pandemic.'

Hunger affected not only those who lost their jobs but also those who continued to work as domestic workers. In addition, sometimes these women found themselves in even more dangerous conditions. As one interview participant who worked as a nanny noted, 'We were not allowed to eat after 7 pm, and the owner even offered me sex in exchange for extra food'. The housing situation also worsened,

the cost of rent rose, but migrant women did not always have the means to pay rent, which led to the risk of being evicted and left homeless. Thus, 30 per cent of the focus group participants reported their fear of being left out on the street. To find a livelihood, about 16 per cent of the survey respondents turned to relatives for help, and 21 per cent found other informal and odd jobs.

Even greater issues for Kyrgyz migrant women during the pandemic were their psychological situation and mental health. In addition to the fears related to the lack of money, migrant women's psychological state was affected by interpersonal conflicts. Many lived in apartments that they shared with another 10–20 people. Isolation and restrictions on going out led to frequent disputes between neighbours, affecting the women's mental health. As one FGD participant in Yekaterinburg said, 'Long quarantine, lack of work and financial cushion brought us additional psychological unrest. This resulted in a constant headache and feelings of anxiety. Our families and children could be left without a livelihood. At this time, we needed psychological support.' Those who lived with family members were not in any better conditions. More than half of the FGD participants and 22% of the survey respondents experienced misunderstandings in the family and were subjected to domestic violence, which intensified during the lockdown.³²

The fear of getting sick and the lack of access to medical services for non-residents infected with COVID-19 contributed to the women's psychological state. Twenty-eight per cent of respondents were worried about getting infected as that would lead to job loss and medical costs. In addition, 40 per cent of survey participants noted that it was impossible for migrants infected with COVID-19 to be hospitalised and receive quality medical care. The pressure on the healthcare system forced it to focus primarily on Russian citizens, and, to a lesser extent, on migrants. Fear of the COVID-19 vaccine, which was mainly Sputnik V, also affected the women's psychological state. Since a significant portion of those who continued to work during the quarantine were engaged in the food industry, they were forced to regularly take PCR tests and even undergo compulsory vaccination; 8 of the 32 FGD participants confirmed cases of forced vaccination. Therefore, the pandemic affected all aspects of Kyrgyz migrant women's lives.

While some of the women were forced to deal with new realities of COVID-19 restrictions and job losses, a group of domestic workers, who made up about a quarter of the survey participants, faced a slightly different situation. A significant number of them continued to provide services at the employers' houses while in isolation from the employers' families. Since most women were employed without

³² A Asanova, 'All-inclusive lockdown', *Novaya Gazeta*, 2 November 2021, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/11/02/lokdaun-vse-vkliucheno>.

a contract, more than 65% of the surveyed domestic workers were completely unprotected and employers violated their agreements. As one online survey respondent noted, 'During the pandemic, it was impossible to leave the house. I, the children, and their parents lived in the same house. After the quarantine, the owners began to work much harder, so I was left without rest and days off'.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the multitude of challenges faced by Kyrgyz women migrant workers in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties encompassed job insecurity, limited work opportunities, lack of social and legal support, as well as mental strain due to lockdowns and the inability to return to their home country. The situation of women migrants from Kyrgyzstan in Russia remains exceptionally precarious. In their pursuit of better livelihoods for themselves and their families, these women had already encountered multiple violations of their labour rights. However, the pandemic exacerbated these even further. A significant number of the women are excluded from the fundamental rights to fair wages and decent working conditions, which are typically provided through formal employment contracts. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced various labour rights violations, including withholding of wages, denial of sick pay and annual leave, discrimination, harassment, and other forms of abuse. These abuses intensified amidst the pandemic and its aftermath. Many Kyrgyz women faced the harsh reality of mass layoffs without any form of compensation, while those who continued to work, especially domestic workers, were often exploited by their employers. Furthermore, the restrictions on movement and lockdown measures imposed in response to COVID-19 exacerbated gender-based violence and harassment. Kyrgyz women migrants not only endured verbal abuse but also faced instances of physical and sexual harassment. Compounding these challenges, the women migrant workers generally have limited awareness of their labour rights and lack knowledge of where to seek support in case of rights violations.

These findings align with previous studies on the circumstances faced by labour migrants from Central Asia in Russia, which indicate that women migrant workers continue to experience legal insecurity, which was further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that the vulnerabilities experienced at work have profound implications for women's lives outside of work. In contrast to global policy instruments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact on Migration, which oblige countries to ensure good living and working conditions for vulnerable groups of people, including migrants, we found that gender roles and gender-based discrimination worsened

among the respondents.³³ As Agadjanian *et al.* point out, migrant women's legal precarity continues and has even deteriorated.³⁴

Based on these findings, the Insan-Leilek Public Foundation, with the support of the international worker rights organisation Solidarity Center, made several recommendations to the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Russia and to NGOs supporting migrant women in Russia. It is crucial that the government of Kyrgyzstan, together with the civil society sector, raises awareness of the laws, rights, and opportunities of migrants, and ensures safe migration processes. Women need to be informed about the benefits of formal employment and should be encouraged to demand a contract with their employer. Such measures must also be implemented in the destination countries, e.g., Russia. Russian authorities also need to perform more labour inspections in locations and sectors where migrants work and fine employers who do not provide contracts that ensure the rights of workers. Government agencies should expand the creation of decent jobs for migrant women by negotiating and contracting with large enterprises to provide formal employment quotas and having direct agreements between countries.

Another way of protecting the labour rights of Kyrgyz migrant women could be trade union membership. The Migrant Workers' Union of Kyrgyzstan, established in 2019, actively operates in Russia, helping to resolve not only issues related to registration but also providing legal assistance in resolving issues with employers. Despite ongoing promotional activities, not all migrant women are aware of this trade union, and an even smaller proportion are members. The role of trade unions, including the Migrant Workers' Union of Kyrgyzstan, in protecting the labour rights of migrant workers should also be strengthened. Migrant women should be informed about the benefits of trade union membership. Furthermore, state and non-governmental organisations should set up crisis centres for migrants that provide various types of assistance such as psychological, medical, or legal aid as well as shelter and recovery. Equal attention should be paid to the pre-departure training of Kyrgyz migrant women, which should include information about defending and asserting their rights.

The pandemic has exacerbated the situation of women migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan in the host country, which affected their quality of life and the protection of their human and labour rights. To ensure that the rights of women workers abroad are respected in crisis situations, government and non-governmental organisations should intensify their efforts to create conditions for safe migration.

³³ T Alon *et al.*, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality*, Working Paper 26947, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26947>.

³⁴ Agadjanian, Menjivar, and Zotova.

Overall, our paper underscores the importance of formulating comprehensive policies that address the multifaceted challenges faced by women migrant workers. By taking these recommendations into account, policymakers can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all migrant workers.

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