

Public Fund for Support of Youth and Women “Danko”

EMPOWERING WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS AGAINST SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE CYCLE OF MIGRATION

KYRGYZSTAN

COUNTRY PROFILE

Labour migration is one of the national economic pillars for Kyrgyzstan. Driven by poverty and the lack of decent job opportunities in their home country, foreign employment has become a strategy to secure one's livelihood and contribute to national economic development. Kyrgyzstan is one of the world's top 10 remittance-receiving countries, estimated to have contributed a third of the country's GDP annually and reduced the national poverty rate by 6–7 per cent¹. According to the State Migration Service of the Kyrgyz Republic, 740,500 Kyrgyzstani citizens were registered as migrants in 2018, with the leading destinations being the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. As the feminisation of migration has proliferated, nearly 40 per cent of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia

1 ILO. (2008). Kyrgyzstan: Economic Growth, Employment and Poverty Reduction. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-europe/ro-geneva/sro-moscow/documents/publication/wcms_306632.pdf



are women, mainly working informally in service sectors such as catering, domestic work and textiles industries². Women migrant workers often experience multiple forms of discrimination and stigma, both in the origin and destination countries, leading to sexual and gender-based violence.

2 International Federation of Human Rights. (2016). Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf





The Danko Public Fund for Support of Youth and Women conducted the Feminist Participatory Action Research on women and girls affected by migration. The objective is to explore women's experiences throughout the cycle of migration and identify their human rights concerns. The research was conducted in the Orto-Tokoy village located in Balykchy, one of the origin areas of migrant workers. The data in this study was collected through focus group discussions, interviews and observations between March 2020 and December 2020.



Women migrant workers experience multiple forms of violence and discrimination throughout the cycle of migration

Most women migrants travel through irregular and dangerous channels for their migration journey, leading to an undocumented status. Consequently, they are likely to encounter multiple acts of violence and exploitation such as fraudulent recruitment, migrant smuggling, illegal trafficking, forced labour and other forms of gender-based violence in each migration stage, from the origin area, through transit and to the destination. One case documented in this study illustrates well how women migrants could only depend on the recruiters while the journey to their destination was dangerous and full of uncertainty: "We were sent to the borders in a truck without any documents. The person who sent us promised to provide us all the documents we need, but we were smuggled to Russia into slavery."

The patriarchal structure perpetuates gender stereotypes and social stigma for migrant workers and prevents them from seeking justice

The patriarchal culture in the society has labelled women who migrate overseas for work as being associated with immoral behaviour. The nationalistic Kyrgyz male groups were formed in the name of "Patriots" and identified themselves as the "moral police." They targeted Kyrgyz women in Russia and "punished" the women by humiliating, beating and sexual assault. The process was filmed and circulated on the internet. These aggressive actions and the open assault have terrified the migrant women who face gender-based violence. They tend to be reluctant and afraid to speak up about such incidents as they are often being blamed for dishonouring their families and the nation. The atmosphere of silencing the victim has stopped them from accessing justice and leaves

them enduring long-term trauma and suffering due to the violence they experience.



Precarious working conditions

Around 60 per cent of women migrant workers working in the informal sector with undocumented migratory status are excluded from legal protection, which leads to poor working conditions. It is common to see that migrant women do not have a signed contract with their employer. Most of them only rely on an oral agreement with the employers. Without a contract and legal status, the working conditions of the women migrant workers are very exploitative. Many of them endure excessively long working hours (between 12-15 hours per day) without adequate safety protection. Delays of payment, non-payment of salary and wage deductions are the common forms of labour exploitation faced by Kyrgyz migrant women. Moreover, a gender pay gap is another major challenge for migrant women: one woman shared that her salary was lower than her male colleague, but her workload was much higher. “I received 30,000 rubles (USD 407) per month, and my male colleague had 40,000 (USD 543). My manager told me that I could get more if I spent time with him at night.”



Lack of support and treatment for sexual and gender-based violence survivors

Many migrant women who have experienced sexual abuse have severe and chronic psychological symptoms. The traumatic experience caused them to feel shock, fear, anxiety, confusion, withdrawal and suicidal thoughts. One woman explicitly shared her internal struggles, “I felt dirty and wanted to kill myself.” Even though they were experiencing this great hardship, there was no support system they could rely on after they returned to their home country. Some women shared that they could not afford to go to psychologists, while many of them were reluctant to disclose what had happened to their family members.



WOMEN'S ACTIONS THROUGH FPAR

Building the capacities of Kyrgyz women migrants

Through this research, Danko has conducted a series of training events to build the capacity of returnee women migrant workers and their families on migrant worker's rights and public speaking skills. The involvement of the families, particularly the spouses of women migrants, has significantly contributed to increasing their courage and confidence in engaging in these activities.

Organising and empowering returnee women migrant workers

Danko has organised returnee migrant workers into a collective group, the majority of which are the survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. This newly formed group aims to advocate for their rights and introduce protective measures against sexual and gender-based violence towards women migrant workers. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, this group successfully took the initiative to support their community in the time of crisis by producing reusable cloth masks and serving free meals to those in need in the hospital.

Producing knowledge resources

Danko and its research team produced and disseminated a pocketbook on the rights of migrant workers and information on the migration policy of Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, they have a podcast that tells the stories of women migrants and gender-based violence survivors to amplify their voices and demands.



The Kyrgyz Government should:

- Continue providing and disseminating reliable information regarding the safe and just migration process, i.e., pre-departure, repatriation and reintegration into society programmes.
- Adopt a gender and age responsive approach in the “Concept on State Migration Policy”.
- Develop a legal and regulatory framework to ensure access to health care and essential services for migrant workers and their families, including reproductive and sexual health services especially designed for the survivors of GBV in each migration stage.
- Adopt legislative, policy and other measures to address the obstacles for women migrants to access justice and remedies, including language and information barriers. In addition, the government should provide sufficient and adequate services to facilitate migrants’ access to legal complaint mechanisms to seek legal redress.
- The Consular Services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should improve their services to women migrant workers and disseminating information, namely the new applicable employment rules and regulations within the Eurasian Economic Union, the rights of migrant workers and members of their families, how to access legal and social services provided by the Kyrgyz government and destination countries.
- Strengthen the implementation of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and all recommendations related to the protection of migrant workers issued by UN treaty bodies, particularly the Concluding Observations of the Committee on Social and Cultural Rights and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

About Danko

The Danko Public Fund for Support of Youth and Women, officially registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2000, is dedicated to combating legal illiteracy and violence against women and youth and protecting and representing their interests.

Email: danko.bal@mail.ru
 Address: Sayakbai Karalaev str, 1, Balykchy city, Issyk-Kul region, Kyrgyzstan.
 Phone: +996394451400
 :+996553946172



About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region’s leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women’s human rights and Development Justice. This FPAR is part of APWLD’s Migration Programme. APWLD worked with and supported seven partner organisations from six countries to conduct Migration FPAR in Asia and the Pacific between 2019 and 2021.

Email: apwld@apwld.org
 Website: www.apwld.org

This publication was produced with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Foundation for a Just Society (FJS). Its contents are the sole responsibility of APWLD and Public Fund for Support of Youth and Women “Danko”.

