

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON MIGRANT WORKERS WORLDWIDE

Mary Mee-Yin Yuen ♦

Abstract

This article examines the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers worldwide. Given their special working conditions and living environment, migrant workers in different contexts are exposed to more vulnerable situations. Here, first, the general trend of migrant workers under COVID-19 is delineated. Second, the vulnerable situations of three migrant groups, namely the male construction workers, the female domestic helpers, and the farm workers, from different parts of the world are examined in order to illustrate their dilemma and difficulties. Third, ethical and theological reflections are offered. Finally, based on certain researchers and international organization's observations, some policy responses are suggested.

Keywords: COVID-19; Construction Workers; Female Domestic Helps; Migrant Workers; Protection for Migrant Workers; Solidarity; Farm Workers.

Introduction

In the past one and a half year (since early 2020), almost every country in the world experienced the impact of Corona virus (or COVID-19). No matter one is rich or poor, old or young, male or female, he or she may have the chance of getting infected by this

♦**Mary Mee-Yin Yuen**, is Professor of Social Ethics at the Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy in Hong Kong. She is also a researcher and editor at the Holy Spirit Study Centre, also based in Hong Kong. She received her Ph.D. in interdisciplinary studies (Christian ethics and Chinese social thought) from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, USA. Her licentiate of sacred theology (social ethics) and MA in theology (ethics and social theory) are from the Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University, USA. She is the author of *Solidarity and Reciprocity with Migrants in Asia: Catholic and Confucian Ethics in Dialogue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Email: mymyuen@gmail.com

widely spread virus. Daily news informed us the total numbers of aggregated confirmed, active confirmed, recovered, and death. Which countries are the most seriously affected? What new measures do individual countries employ? When can the business open again? When can we go back to normal life?

People are not numbers. All people being affected, including the neglected groups deserve our attention. Among them, migrant workers who are non-residents or non-citizens of the country or the city where they work may face a more vulnerable situation. In the way the government and people of a country or a city treat the most vulnerable and the outsiders reveals how civilized it is.

At a time of pandemic, keeping social distance and staying at home to work or to rest, in order to avoid personal contact, are common practices for many people. However, these measures are difficult to be implemented among the migrant workers, given their special working and living environment. In this article, first, I will discuss the general trend of migrant workers under COVID-19. Second, I will examine the vulnerable situations of a few migrant groups, namely the male construction workers, the female domestic helpers, and the farm workers, from different parts of the world, to illustrate their dilemma and difficulties. Then, I will offer some ethical and theological reflections.

1. COVID-19 and Migrant Workers

The 2019 Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has an unprecedented impact on economies and businesses, resulting in one of the largest global recession in recent history. As the global economy is in recession, many migrant workers face job insecurity and unemployment, resulting in lower or lost income. International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 93 per cent of the global workforce is living in countries with recommended or required workplace closures in January 2021.¹ Migrant workers represent 4.7 per cent of the global labour force, comprising 164 million workers, with nearly half being women.² They make important contributions to societies and economies, and serving on the front lines doing essential jobs in health care, transport, cleaning, services, construction, and agriculture and agro-food processing. ILO estimates 11 million migrant women are in domestic work, many in home care jobs.

¹ILO Monitor, *COVID-19 and the World of Work*, 7th ed., Geneva: ILO, 2021 January.

²International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology*, Geneva: ILO, 2018, ix.

Migrant workers form a significant part of the workforce in many counties, and COVID-19 exacerbates the difficult situation migrants are already experiencing. Most migrant workers are concentrated in sectors of the economy with high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work, characterized by low wages and lack of social protection, including in care work which in many countries is largely carried out by women migrant workers.³ Migrant Workers is a particularly vulnerable population during this pandemic due to their substandard living and working conditions. Additionally, discrimination and stigma promote inequality in health, undermine trust in public health professionals, and reduces the opportunity for cohesion with the host community, further increasing their vulnerability.⁴ Measures introduced in different countries to limit the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, also affects migration and mobility. These measures impact labour migration and the recruitment of new and returning existing workers.

2. Specific Groups of Migrant Workers

Several groups of migrant workers are highlighted in this section, and their situations are examined.

2.1. Male Migrant Workers in Big Cities

Some developed countries employ low-wage foreign workers from less developed countries, working in industries like construction and manufacturing as it is difficult to recruit workers from the local labour force. For example, Singapore is home to more than 300,000 low-wage foreign workers from countries like India and Bangladesh. Their right to live in Singapore is tied to their job and their employer must provide accommodation to them, mostly living in “purpose-built dormitories.”⁵ They commute from their dorms in packed vans

³International Labour Organization, “Protecting Migrant Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *ILO Policy Brief*, April 2020. Also see Laura Addati, et al., *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2018.

⁴L. Guadagno, *Migrants and the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Initial Analysis*, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020, 28. <https://bit.ly/3kwnnPO>

⁵There are 43 “purpose-built dormitories” nationwide in Singapore. As of April 25, 24 of them have become quarantine areas. “Specially-built dormitories” are established in accordance with the 2015 Foreign Employee Dormitories Act to manage large dormitories with more than 1,000 people. Most of the dormitory residents are Work Permit holders. There is no academic requirement and monthly salary is less than SGD 2,000. See Chen Guang-ming, “Why is the Large-Scale Migrant Dormitory under Singaporean Management Still a Breach in Epidemic Prevention?” *Opinion*, 27 Apr, 2020. <https://opinion.udn.com/opinion/story/11635/4522236>

to building sites where they work and take breaks alongside men from other crowded dorms. In pre-COVID times it was normal for up to 20 men to share a room in a dorm. At the time of pandemic, these are perfect conditions for the virus to spread. In April 2020, hundreds of new COVID-19 cases were being discovered among migrant workers each day when the cases amongst the local communities were under control.

Communication scholar Mohan Dutta points out that COVID-19, much like any other pandemic, is a pandemic of inequality. He claims that the idea of reporting two different numbers of infected cases in Singapore make the inequalities even more evident. It can be considered as an example of “othering.”⁶

With the outbreak of infected cases in the migrant workers’ dormitories, about 10,000 healthy migrant workers in essential services were taken out to other accommodation. This is to keep the workers working and the rest were trapped in the dorms. Some were not even allowed to leave their rooms. Infected workers were gradually removed, isolated and treated.

The lockdown experiences and the treatments towards the local residents and migrant workers in Singapore were in stark contrast. For Singaporean citizens, shopping was allowed, daily exercise was encouraged and every type of outlet offered delivery. However, migrant workers were truly locked down, with only basic meals delivered to them. While experts say it is reasonable to cordon off specific areas to evoke an outbreak, they also say the conditions in the dorms are ripe for future transmission. The ventilation is not always good, and bathrooms are shared among a dozen or more. These are conditions that “will always pose a risk of outbreaks,” said Raina Macintyre, a professor of global biosecurity at the University of New South Wales in Australia.⁷

The Maldives, famous for tourism, is another Asian country which employs large number of migrant workers in the construction and tourism industries. It has the largest proportion of migrant laborers in South Asia, roughly a third of the resident population. At least 60,000 are undocumented workers. The majority is men from Bangladesh, others come from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, and the Philippines. The migrant workers face a range of entrenched abuses

⁶Yvette Tan, “Covid-19 Singapore: A ‘Pandemic of Inequality’ Exposed,” *BBC News*, 17 September. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54082861>

⁷Bloomberg News, “Singapore’s Coronavirus Curbs are Easing, but not for Migrant Workers Living in Dorms,” *South China Morning Post*, September 9, 2020.

from employers, including deceptive recruitment practices, wage theft, passport confiscation, unsafe living and working conditions, and excessive work demands, which indicate forced labour and violate domestic and international standards. The spread of Covid-19 and the lockdown to contain it has exacerbated these conditions, as workers face job loss, unpaid leave, reduced salaries, and forced work without pay. Shayna Bauchner, Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch pointed out that the government's failure to effectively regulate recruitment and employment practices puts already vulnerable migrants into abusive situations and then traps them there.⁸

Living in congested shared accommodations with limited access to water, sanitation, and health care has sharply increased the risk of contracting the virus that causes Covid-19. In one shared accommodation block in the capital, Malé, a group of 95 migrant workers tested positive for the virus. Since the onset of the pandemic in the Maldives, there have been increasing reports of discrimination and stigma against migrants. When workers started protesting because of unpaid wages and lack of access to food and other essential supplies due to the lockdown, the authorities called migrants a threat to national security and began cracking down on their basic rights. In July alone, the Maldives police detained more than 80 migrant workers for joining protests. Many have been deported, some without receiving the salaries they were owed.

2.2. Female Foreign Domestic Helpers

Different from the construction workers who live in the dormitory, domestic workers face other difficulties. While individuals with economic security can use technology to work from home, many domestic workers have been forced to stay in home quarantine with employers. Others have been fired unexpectedly, unable to return home or inform their families of their whereabouts. In certain cases, workers' rights are being further constricted by employment contracts, which essentially give employers full discretion over workers' movements amid the pandemic.

For example, in Hong Kong, according to the Standard Employment Contract (ID407) for foreign domestic workers, the worker should work and reside in the employer's residence as stated in the contract. Due to fear of migrant domestic workers being

⁸Human Rights Watch, "Maldives Covid19 Exposes Abuse of Migrants," 25 August 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/maldives-covid-19-exposes-abuse-migrants>

potential virus-spreaders, some sections of the Hong Kong public appeal to domestic workers to stay home during rest days and avoid gatherings on Sunday. Some domestic workers reported that they were stalked by individuals, whose photos were being taken by strangers and felt harassed and intimidated by police force that were enforcing policies on distancing and mask-wearing.

On Sundays and holidays, Hong Kong police patrolled areas frequented by domestic workers, issuing fixed penalties (from HK\$2,000 to HK\$5,000 or USD250 to USD 650) to enforce social distancing measures during the Covid-19 outbreak. However, their monthly minimum salary is only HKD 4630 or USD 560. Some domestic workers felt they were being singled out:

I feel very angry that the Hong Kong government intentionally mobilizes police and other authorities to target the migrant domestic worker community. It is a shame that, instead of providing us with some space to rest, they want to project us as the Covid-19 spreader and treat us as though we are criminals.

Given their already deprived condition, the domestic workers are under severe pressure. The Mission for Migrant Workers published a press statement on August 14, 2020 to express their concern. It states that “Singling out one community, especially those already vulnerable even before the pandemic, will never bring us closer to win against the threats of Covid-19...Social solidarity, not social separation due to paranoia and prejudice, is needed.”⁹

Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Hong Kong’s largest independent trade union (disbanded in October 2021) also wrote to the Equal Opportunities Commission in April 2020 to alert attention to domestic workers. The federation received cases related to dismissals, unreasonable work and hygiene demand imposed on the domestic workers, e.g. an Indonesian domestic worker is ordered to clean toilets 15 times a day. Many are rejected to go out or to have day-offs.¹⁰

Surveys by migrant workers groups show that more than half domestic helpers claimed they worked more in the past months than

⁹Mission for Migrant Workers, “Social Solidarity is Much Needed. Treat Migrant Domestic Workers Fairly and with Respect,” Press Statement, 14 August 2020.

¹⁰Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, “Migrant Workers speak to Equal Opportunities Commission: The plight of migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic,” 17 April 2020. <https://en.hkctu.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-speak-equal-opportunities-commission-plight-migrant-domestic-workers-during>

at any other time. Their role in battling Corona virus crisis should be recognized indeed.

Edwina Antonio, executive director of Bethune House, a temporary women's shelter, and "home" to many migrant domestic workers who have nowhere to go, points out that there has been an increase in the termination of contracts of migrant workers since the spread of Corona virus. Courts are closed, leading to delays in the resolution of cases. The workers are unable to go back home to see their families, so a temporary shelter for them to stay is very much needed. Bethune House provides a safety place for domestic workers to stay when their contracts were terminated without reasonable cause or when they were abused by their employers. It offers refuge to dozens of distressed workers at a time.¹¹

Recent trends also reveal unsettling problems migrant domestic workers have faced for decades. These include long working hours, language barriers, limited local support networks and little access to social protection. Additionally, women—who make up about two-thirds of the world's migrant domestic worker population—are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Unfortunately the pandemic has left the already vulnerable migrant worker population facing rising levels of discrimination and financial hardship.

2.3. Migrant Farm Workers

Many migrant agricultural workers work in farms or processing plants to earn a living. In the USA, ninety percent of the migrant farm workers are Latinos. Garcia has worked at an almond processing plant in California for more than 16 years. He worked shoulder-to-shoulder with more than two dozen workers in an area that was shut down after nearly everyone tested positive for COVID-19. He tested positive on June 16 and quickly spread the virus to his mother and other family members. Garcia's symptoms were mild and he recovered, but his mother died. Latinos make up 39% of the state population, but they represent 57% of Corona virus cases in California and 46% of deaths.¹²

Farm workers, who endure extreme heat and pesticide exposure daily, have to do tiresome work for long hours, often shuffling to and from the fields in clusters, then going back home to close quarters. Very often, they work more than eight hours a day

¹¹"Covid-19 brings new challenges for charity helping migrant workers in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, 17 July 2020.

¹²Nadia Lopez, "Essential and Vulnerable: COVID-19 Takes Hard Toll on California's Migrant Farm Workers," *USA Today*, Sept 3, 2020.

standing next to a dozen co-workers without masks or gloves and in cramped quarters. California's \$50 billion agricultural industry depends on migrant workers, about 60% of whom are unauthorized to legally work in the US. Considered essential workers by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, their undocumented status disqualifies them from unemployment benefits, access to health care services and safety net programs put in place to help residents during the pandemic. They also do not receive family sick leave if exposed to the virus.

3. Theological and Ethical Reflections

From the above examples, we can see the vulnerable situation of the migrant workers. Poor and disenfranchised populations around the world have borne the brunt of the Corona virus pandemic, highlighting wide social and economic inequalities that existed long before Covid-19. Their identities as migrants, low income class, live-in worker or living in dormitory without a home lead them to face multiple marginalizations based on ethnicities, class, citizenship, and sometimes gender. While the migrant workers contribute to the city they work for, the government and its people may not appreciate them by providing a decent living environment and just remuneration.

3.1. Identifying Our Neighbour

The situation of the migrant workers shown above urges us to think about the question "Who is my neighbour?" in the gospel, posted by the lawyer who wanted to know who was covered by the love command. Jesus wanted to widen his perception and replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan and the injured stranger (Luke 10:25-37), challenging the lawyer and us about the meaning of being a good neighbour. We live with the migrant workers in the same society. It seems we are very close but yet so far. In this parable, Jesus tells the lawyer and also to us that being his disciples, we must become neighbours to the despised stranger.

The Christian commandment "love your neighbour" in the gospel, challenges the usual notion of neighbour. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes that to be a Christian is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbour, not the one I encounter in my journey but the one in whose journey I place myself. The neighbour is the one to whom I draw near, and I am an agent of history.¹³ In this story, we

¹³Gustavo Gutierrez, "Towards A Theology of Liberation," ed. and trans. Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 74.

can see that the world with its arrangement of insiders and outsiders was subverted by God's reign. The Samaritan surpassed the care that would be appropriate for a fellow countryman to aid this stranger, who might belong to his ethnic group's worst enemies.¹⁴ The Samaritan was moved in his inmost heart by compassion because he saw someone got hurt but no one cares about him. His compassion was no fleeting sentiment; it looked ahead to the victim's continuing needs. We can see that what love requires is not merely this or that deed of love but one's very self in the concreteness of one's heart. This compassion becomes a way of seeing, of perceiving. We have a new model for looking at others.

To be the neighbour of the migrant workers, we should treat them with care and hospitality, like Jesus who welcome guests to those from the margins of the society. To welcome the migrants, we need to open ourselves and to learn their situations from their perspectives, affirming each one of them as a person with dignity and value. In the Catholic tradition, the Church has a particular concern for the poor and the powerless with a criticism of the systems that leave them vulnerable, in order to fulfil the principle of the universal destination of goods and the goal of common good. Option for the poor involves an experiential aspect and a political aspect, and that both are important. The experiential aspect means a deliberate, personal choice to experience the world of the powerless, poverty, alienation, or mistreatment. This stance is rooted in compassion. The political dimension refers to the willingness to take action to overcome systemic injustice. Social teachings give us the principles and direction in understanding the social situation that people face and what values we should treasure.

3.2. Nurturing the Virtue of Solidarity

To put these principles and direction into practice, we need to nurture the virtue of solidarity. At a time of worry about an uncertain future, about jobs that are at risk and about other consequences of the current pandemic crisis, in his Easter *Urbi et Orbi* Message 2020, Pope Francis claims that this is the moment of unity, urging people to reject selfishness and division. He states that this is not a time for indifference, self-centeredness, division and forgetfulness, because the whole world is suffering, especially the most vulnerable, living in the cities and peripheries of every part of the world should not be abandoned. He also prays for the displaced

¹⁴William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, New York: Continuum, 2000, 90.

people, asking for protection to migrants and refugees who are living in unbearable conditions. Pope Francis encourages political leaders to work actively for the common good, to provide the means and resources needed to enable everyone to lead a dignified life and, when circumstances allow, to assist them in resuming their normal daily activities.¹⁵

In the Catholic social teaching tradition, solidarity is both a moral virtue and social attitude, helping us to have the conviction of unity and interdependence of all human beings. It concerns with relationships and mutuality, bringing together elements of love and justice. It moves us to see the other as ourselves—members of the human family. This awareness directs us to work for the common good of all.¹⁶ With solidarity, we would promote the dignity and affirm the human rights of the migrant workers through various means including advocacy. We would support just remuneration and fair implementation of laws and policies that stipulate their rights, especially at a time of pandemic.

In the newly promulgated social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis points out the importance of creating concrete opportunities for migrants to live with dignity in the countries of origin. But at the same time, he states that “we need to respect the right to seek a better life elsewhere. In receiving countries, the right balance will be between the protection of citizens’ rights and the guarantee of welcome and assistance for migrants.”¹⁷ He gives some concrete suggestions. Among them are: to assure lodging, security and essential services; to offer opportunities for employment and training.¹⁸

3.3. Policy Responses¹⁹

In the face of the current COVID-19 impacts on migrant workers, overall labour demand for migrant workers is contracting in some sectors while expanding in others such as health care and

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Easter Urbi et Orbi Message 2020*, 12 April 2020. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html (accessed 25 April 2020).

¹⁶John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern, 1988), no. 38; Marie Vianney Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty? Or the Virtue for an Interdependent World?*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999, 106.

¹⁷Pope Francis, Social Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 38-40.

¹⁸Pope Francis, Social Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 130.

¹⁹ Suggestions in this section are taken from: International Labour Organization, “Protecting Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *ILO Policy Brief*, April 2020; International Labour Organization, “Social Protection for Migrant Workers: A Necessary Response to the COVID-19 Crisis,” ILO Brief, 23 June 2020.

seasonal agriculture. Since many of the jobs available are temporary, informal or unprotected work, monitoring the social and economic impacts to migrant workers are important in addressing their specific vulnerabilities, and protecting their rights.

Moreover, gender-sensitive, rights-based policies and measures can help to prevent human and labour rights abuses in the immediate term, reduce the recovery cost for businesses, when the economy will rebound, and preserve the livelihood and social benefits of migrant workers and their families in the medium-to-long term. It is suggested that in the short term, countries should seek to ensure that all migrant workers and their families have access to health care and income protection; suitable working and living conditions, including compliance with occupational safety and health standards; and relevant information on COVID-19. In the medium-to-long term, countries should focus on developing and strengthening universal and inclusive national social protection systems, including social protection floors, and on establishing social security and labour agreements. It should ensure that women and men have access to coverage despite their often-informal employment status.

Furthermore, since migrant workers are often over-represented in some of the sectors hardest hit by the crisis, such as hospitality and domestic work, they also face more health-related risks. Protecting the health and livelihoods of migrant workers will also ensure the public health and well-being of local populations. Countries can better protect the health and safety of all workers by including migrant workers in national responses to COVID-19. In order to build sustainable, socially responsive and widely accepted social protection schemes and systems that are inclusive of migrant workers, it is imperative to ensure social dialogue and workers' representation, such as through workers' organizations.

Therefore, three areas of action are identified by International Labour Organization: migrant workers' inclusion in national COVID-19 responses; bilateral cooperation between countries of origin and destination; and social dialogue and full involvement of employers' and workers' organizations in the development of COVID-19 responses.

Conclusion

Poor and disenfranchised populations, especially the migrant workers, around the world have suffered under the pandemic. The wide social and economic inequalities that existed long before Covid-

19 have been exposed. Their identities as migrant, low income class, live-in worker or living in dormitory without a home lead the migrant workers to face multiple marginalizations based on ethnicities, class, citizenship, and sometimes gender. While the migrant workers contribute to the social and economic development of the cities they work for, the government and its people may not appreciate them by providing a decent living environment and just remuneration. They face specific challenges in accessing labour rights, social protection, including health care and income insecurity, making them more vulnerable to the health and socio-economic impacts caused by COVID-19.

With the biblical story of the Good Samaritan and the injured stranger and the virtue of solidarity in the Catholic social tradition, loving our neighbour with care and hospitality is highlighted. Pope Francis' exhortation on unity, urging people to reject selfishness and division is a good reminder to all of us. To put this spirit into practice, individuals and the governments should support policies that can protect migrant workers concretely.