

# Migrants face “double threat” amid Coronavirus pandemic

By **Jacqueline Skalski-Fouts** - October 18, 2020



As an economic recession looms, migrants vulnerable to poverty, facing conflict, displacement, or unsafe working and living conditions require greater economic support as unemployment rises, access to PPEs, and legal assistance.

Migrant workers have been at the forefront of the world economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, as essential workers. Yet, at the same time, this comes with risk.

In the United States, **migrant workers** labor in the fields of California’s Central Valley, the state’s wine region, as fires burn along the West Coast, turning the air red and hazardous.

In the farms of Almería, Spain, Moroccan **migrant farmworkers**, have complained about the “severe” lack of personal protective equipment, like masks and hand sanitizer, to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Within the EU, Spain has one of the highest proportions of migrant workers, where at least 25% of the country’s agriculture is carried out by non-citizen migrants. Similarly, 30% of agricultural workers in the United States are undocumented and around 3.9-4.1 million workers in the EU are undocumented. Yet these workers play an important role in the national and world economy and are now facing the dangers of the pandemic head-on.

**Migrants are more vulnerable to the effects of economic recessions**

Like migrant workers, refugees and displaced people are especially vulnerable to the effects of closures and health concerns associated with the pandemic. Migrants are facing what the International Rescue Committee refers to as an "unimaginable double emergency." Facing conflict and displacement, migrants must also face a worldwide pandemic and the effects of an economic recession.

With closures, many who struggle to afford basic living are at high risk of losing their jobs and are ineligible for government financial support.

Coronavirus shutdowns have devastated small businesses in countries throughout the world and are expected to result in "severe" economic downturns. As a result, 1.06 million people are expected to be at risk of poverty by the end of the year. Among those are migrants and refugees, who are "particularly vulnerable" to the effects of the crisis as they make up a large percentage of informal sector workers.

Recent studies estimate the number of informal workers in Morocco is around 2.4 million (more than a third of Moroccan workers) and is expected to increase as consumers lose their jobs and companies seek cheaper goods and services. During closures, many informal workers were unable to find clients or reach areas of work due to lack of transportation.

While in Morocco, the labor market and the private sector have been heavily impacted by closures, those most impacted are workers employed in the informal sector where 66% have already lost their jobs. The Moroccan government has tried to cushion the effects of income loss, particularly for informal workers, but as of mid-July, has only reached 19% of households. Much of this aid does not reach immigrants, especially those that are irregular or undocumented.

### **One solution is to provide greater access to legal aid**

Most immigrants will not return home, as evidenced by past financial crises. Instead, facing poor economic prospects at home, many are migrating north to Europe. In recent months, Tunisia has seen an increase in the number of migrants heading to Italy, six times the number who emigrated last year.

But with traditional land migration routes closed, more migrants are turning to sea routes and trafficking, which so far has resulted in more than 675 fatalities this year.

Human Rights Watch has warned of the complications the Coronavirus pandemic can bring. Migrant workers often face unsafe working and living conditions, which can make them more vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

Kavita Datta, who studied Bulgarian migrants in London during the 2009 recession, suggests that there are only two solutions: one is to reduce migration; the other is to provide more legal access and a wider understanding of migrants' rights within the country so as to reduce the chances of exploitation.

In a webinar hosted by the Migration Policy Centre, guest speaker Andrew Geddes calls for a new debate on immigration, suggesting the need for governments to reinvestigate current

policies such as responsibility-sharing and legal pathways.

Much of the blame falls on North African emigration countries, like Libya and Morocco, where a majority of irregular migrants travel through to Europe. The UK government’s recent plans to reduce migration include building off-shore detention centers in countries like Morocco, a similar plan the Australian government used in Papua New Guinea, which has been criticized by the United Nations and other human rights groups.

But rather than taking a detention-centered response to increased migration, legal aid organizations and migration assistance programs take a more humanitarian-centered approach, which may more efficiently reduce irregular migration.

Moroccan organizations like *Droit et Justice* and the student-run *Clinique Juridique de la Faculté de Droit (CJFD)* at the University Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah in Fes are doing just that. CJFD is supported by the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative and the National Endowment for Democracy and implemented in partnership with the High Atlas Foundation. There, law students provide legal aid to migrants as part of a multidimensional approach to reducing European-bound migration while promoting human rights, social integration, and entrepreneurship training. This way, traditional emigration hubs become places of support and encourage more-permanent stay.

In response to COVID-19, volunteerism and community solidarity around the world has increased. This provides the basis for greater support of migrant protection and inclusion programs. Emigration countries should increase partnerships between governments and community-run social organizations in order to reduce the number of migrants risking dangerous migratory routes, exploitation, or poverty.

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