

COVID-19 Briefing Note: Migrant Workers

NB. This Briefing Note should be read in conjunction with the IOM's [COVID-19: Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis.](#)

Context

Around the world, migrant workers (both international and domestic) are one of the groups most affected by Covid-19. In every part of the world, we are seeing examples of migrant workers struggling:

- Of the 100 million internal migrant workers in India, many are [unable to access local state support or to return home](#), and without jobs are struggling to feed themselves
- In Singapore, 20,000 migrant workers are being [quarantined in crowded dormitories](#)
- In Thailand, 300 migrant workers attempting to return home to Myanmar [were arrested and detained](#) before being allowed to cross the border – no more will be permitted to cross
- Migrant workers in the Arab Gulf [are being hit hard by Covid-19](#)
- Migrant workers in the Netherlands are [not being provided with proper PPE and are being discriminated against](#) by businesses employing them to carry out essential work
- Rohingya migrants attempting to reach Malaysia [have been turned back](#), leading to 60 deaths in one boat alone as they were left afloat at sea.
- Women migrant workers are in many cases [least likely to be able to access](#) Covid-19 protection measures

Key risks

- Many migrant workers have been laid off from their jobs (in some cases without any severance pay) but cannot return home due to lack of transport or due to containment policies; they are left without access to money, basic amenities or even food
- Workers are likely to have sent home the majority of any pay they had already received, leaving little with which to support themselves while out of work
 - Unemployed migrant workers are no longer able to send remittances home, causing a loss of income for their families in their home country
- Some employers are not backpaying wages owed to migrant workers who have been laid off
- Workers may not be eligible for national or local government economic support where they are working (e.g. state-provided food), or may be reluctant to access it due to a fear of deportation
- Workers may therefore be particularly desperate for employment – and consequently more likely to be exploited, exacerbating underlying vulnerabilities, whether those are related to gender, ethnicity, caste or any other characteristic

- Migrant workers are more likely to live in overcrowded accommodation, and so will find it much harder to self-isolate or social distance; accommodation may also lack adequate sanitation facilities
- Migrant workers are more likely to be employed in short-term, seasonal or precarious work without adequate sick leave provision, and without being provided with the appropriate PPE
 - Workers in this type of employment may already have been ineligible for social security or unemployment benefits
- In some sectors, e.g. food, escalating demand and rapidly changing supply chains are leading to a significant increase in the need for temporary workers (many of whom may be migrants) and for potentially excessive overtime working
- Migrant workers may be discriminated against by governments, seen as contributing to the spread of Covid-19 and stigmatized or mistreated accordingly

Principles

- All migrant workers have rights at work; all companies should take action to prevent any violation of these rights
- All migrant workers should be informed about their rights and options for exercising them
- All migrant workers should have access to health information (in a language they speak and a format they can access), testing, treatment and care
- All migrant workers should receive wages due to them and, if relevant, any compensation legally owed to them on the termination of their contract
- All migrant workers should have adequate, paid sick leave
- All migrant workers should be provided with essential food and shelter if they are unable to support themselves or return home
- No migrant worker should suffer discrimination, stigma or mistreatment due to their migrant status

Advice

Investigate

- Talk to your suppliers and review your due diligence mapping to understand where migrant workers are particularly present in your supply chains, and in particular to understand how the current context is impacting them (taking into account local legal provisions)
- In the absence of regular on-site audits, contact NGOs and local trade unions to provide a due diligence “information safety net” to augment partial, desk-based self-assessment audit reports
- Investigate the intersectionality of migrant workers’ discrimination, looking at gender, ethnicity, caste, age and other factors in addition to nationality. Many migrants will be suffering compounded discrimination where multiple vulnerabilities are present.

Act

- Ensure your suppliers pay migrant workers all wages due to them
- Ensure your suppliers provide adequate, paid sick leave to all migrant workers they employ
- Ensure your suppliers do not force migrant workers to work or live in unsafe or unsanitary conditions

- Ensure your suppliers provide all migrant workers with sufficient information on their health rights in a language they understand and a format they can access
- Encourage your suppliers to support any migrant workers they have had to lay off where they are not eligible for state support, e.g. through provision of essential food and shelter
- Implement existing ETI guidance, as applicable, on paying suppliers for completed or in-process orders where these have been cancelled – to ensure they are able to continue paying migrant worker wages
- Consider early payments or reduced delay in payments for orders to ease cashflow at this critical time. This can enable employers to do more for their workers, particularly the most vulnerable, and help avoid the need for layoffs
- Consider offering an additional payment for PPE costs as this is a cost of production not factored into many orders and lack of PPE may be most felt by marginalised (migrant) workers

Role of other stakeholders

- If your supplier has an independent, representative trade union that also represents migrant workers, your supplier should engage with that union to understand the needs of any migrant workers they normally employ (or have recently laid off)
- Local NGOs specialised in supporting migrant workers can provide advice and support to your supplier, e.g. by providing a mechanism through which food can be distributed, or by conveying information to workers in their own language
- National governments should provide necessary support to migrant worker (including the most vulnerable, such as women), who are laid off and unable to support themselves – in cases where governments are not doing this, ETI can help coordinate a message from interested businesses calling on governments to do so

Further sources of advice and support

- IOM Covid Portal (<https://www.iom.int/covid19>)
- IHRB Statement (<https://www.ihrb.org/news-events/news-events/statement-covid-19-migrant-workers>)
- BHRRC regularly updated list of reports (<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/covid-19-coronavirus-outbreak/covid-19-coronavirus-outbreak-migrant-workers>)
- Mekong Migration Network Statement (<http://www.mekongmigration.org/?p=8182>)