

# Editorial: Labour, Migration, and Exploitation during COVID-19 and Lessons (Not) Learnt

*Annalee Lepp and Borislav Gerasimov*

## Abstract

This Editorial introduces a Special Issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* on COVID-19 and its impacts on labour, migration, and human trafficking. It outlines some of the main challenges that internal and cross-border migrants faced during the pandemic, including closures of workplaces, deportations, lack of access to healthcare and social support, increasing xenophobia and racism, and more. It then presents a summary of the articles contained in the Special Issue and concludes with some broad reflections on the lessons (not) learnt from the pandemic.

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On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Over the subsequent two and half years, the world experienced successive waves of COVID-19 outbreaks and, in response, most governments imposed a range of measures to limit the spread of the virus, including the closure of or adaptations in workplaces and schools, shelter-in-place orders and physical distancing guidelines, restrictions on gatherings and domestic and cross-border movements, and mandatory quarantines for those allowed to enter the country. Amid this public health crisis, internal and especially cross-border migrant workers in both places of destination and origin were disproportionately affected in virtually all aspects of their lives.

While it is difficult to describe the full scale of the pandemic's impact or generalise its effects across all countries and regions of the world, it is still possible to provide a snapshot of some of the critical issues that emerged across selected geographical spaces in specific periods—all of which exposed how pre-existing structural vulnerabilities, precarities, and inequalities were exacerbated by the global public health crisis. This is what this Special Issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* does, with a focus on the interface between COVID-19, migration, labour, and

exploitation. Below, we briefly outline some of the many challenges that migrant workers faced. Then, we introduce the articles in this Special Issue and conclude with some general observations about lessons (not) learnt during the pandemic.

## Labour Migration Scenarios Under COVID-19

With respect to internal migrants, some of the most compelling stories in the first months of the pandemic surfaced in India when the Prime Minister gave a four-hour notice of a twenty-one-day nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020, which was then consecutively extended to 30 May. Rajan and Bhagat describe the widespread panic that ensued among the approximately 140 million inter-state and intra-district migrant workers, largely concentrated in low-wage temporary, informal, and casual employment in such sectors as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction, domestic and service work, as well as brick-kiln and textile production:

The [...] national lockdown [...] sent panic among migrant workers who feared being stranded with no livelihood at the destination and without a way back home. The scenes of utter despair at New Delhi's busy Anand Vihar Inter-State Bus Terminal, where thousands of migrants thronged for days to board a bus or train home, were broadcast around the world. Similar scenes were seen in places like Mumbai as well, as panic took hold during the continued lockdown. Many migrants felt they had no choice but [...] to travel by foot, with tragic consequences [...].<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S I Rajan and R B Bhagat, 'Internal Migration and the Covid-19 Pandemic in India', in A Triandafyllidou (ed.), *Migration and Pandemics: Spaces of solidarity and spaces of exception*, Springer, Cham, 2021, pp. 227–248, p. 232, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2_12). Some scholars note that stories about the struggles of Indian internal migrant workers during COVID-19 tended to focus on migrant men and invisibilised or trivialised the experiences of women migrant workers, primarily due to the assumption that the latter migrate solely as 'part of marriage or associational migration'; the struggles of trans and queer communities were 'totally absent from the COVID-19 narratives.' See S I Rajan, P Sivakumar, and A Srinivasan, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and Internal Labour Migration in India: A "Crisis of Mobility"', *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 63, 2020, pp. 1021–1039, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00293-8>; K Saldanha, C D'Cunha, and L Kovick, 'India's Internal Migrants and the First Wave of COVID-19: The invisibility of female migrants', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 51, issue 2, 2023, pp. 116–122, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2023.02.001>.

As various scholars have noted, the Indian government did introduce a series of assistance measures, including for internal migrant workers, and receiving and sending state governments, NGOs, and humanitarian organisations, in the face of a ‘massive logistical challenge’, worked to provide stranded, transiting, or returning migrant workers with basic necessities (in the form of shelter homes and relief camps, food, etc.).<sup>2</sup> This unprecedented public health and humanitarian crisis, however, exposed the extreme vulnerability of this segment of the Indian labour force. For example, those who remained in large urban centres faced loss of or reduced income and were at high risk of infection due to congested living conditions; those who returned to their home villages were scapegoated as potential carriers of infection and targeted by police and locals; and ‘in the absence of proofs of identity and residence, internal migrants are unable to claim social protection entitlements and remain excluded from government-sponsored schemes and programs.’<sup>3</sup> Finally, as Rajan and Bhagat emphasise, even though internal migrant workers’ casual, informal work is essential to India’s urban and rural economies, ‘their welfare has often been relegated to the periphery of policy discussions’ and they ‘are precluded from the country’s already flimsy welfare mechanism’, which has resulted in calls for inclusive migration policies, particularly in relation to access to social protections, housing, and healthcare.<sup>4</sup>

Transnational migrant workers, and especially those working in low-wage and informal sectors, were profoundly affected by restrictions on cross-border movements combined with the closure of or limits on access to workplaces. Those who were stranded and unable to return to their home countries had to contend with various challenges, including layoffs, wage theft, visa issues, limited or no access to social security and healthcare, the inability to send much needed remittances to their families, and COVID-19 related stress.<sup>5</sup> Others lived in

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<sup>2</sup> R Suresh, J James, and B R S.j, ‘Migrant Workers at Crossroads – The Covid-19 pandemic and the migrant experience in India’, *Social Work in Public Health*, vol. 35, no. 7, 2020, pp. 633–643, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2020.1808552>; Rajan and Bhagat, pp. 231–242.

<sup>3</sup> Suresh *et al.*, pp. 638–639. As Rajan *et al.* stress, ‘Many migrants remain excluded from various government schemes due to their “neither here, nor there” status’, p. 1036. See also A Dhillon, “‘They are Invisible’: The migrant workers struggling in the wake of India’s Covid response”, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/nov/23/india-migrant-workers-work-unemployment-jobs-covid-pandemic>.

<sup>4</sup> Rajan and Bhagat, p. 239. See also Rajan *et al.*, 1034–1039.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Migration Data Portal, *Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic*, IOM GMDAC, Berlin, 11 July 2023; ILO Brief, *Experiences of Migrant Workers during COVID-19 in ASEAN Countries: Rights at work, migration during the pandemic, and remigration plans (Second assessment)*, June 2021, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_816428.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_816428.pdf).

precarious conditions in labour camps or cramped dorm-like accommodations without proper hygiene or the capacity to properly socially distance; hence, they were at very high risk of infection.<sup>6</sup>

Migrant domestic and care workers, the vast majority of whom are women, faced specific challenges, including increased labour demands and loss of freedom. In Canada, for example, the Landed Status Now Working Group of Migrant Rights Network documented the experiences of migrant care workers mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Kenya, and Jamaica, most of whom had been issued employer-restricted, 24-month renewable work permits as temporary foreign workers. Many of the approximately 25,000 documented and undocumented migrant care workers in Canada live in the employer's home to care for children or sick or elderly people and attend to household tasks. Based on a survey of 201 migrant care workers, one in three temporarily or permanently lost their jobs, which meant not only loss of income but also loss of housing which required them to find temporary housing or move into shelters. Like domestic workers in the United States and some European countries,<sup>7</sup> they cited difficulties accessing the available income supports. Those who continued to work indicated they experienced enormous labour intensification and longer work hours; wage theft in that they were not paid for overtime hours; stress related to possibly falling ill, family separation, and uncertainty about their status; and employer surveillance of and control over their movements, which was interpreted as racist treatment of them 'as vectors of disease'. For example, they reported being prohibited from leaving their employer's home to buy groceries, access healthcare, meet friends, and send remittances overseas. If they were permitted outside, they were not to use public transit but, in many cases, had to rely on other unaffordable modes of transportation.<sup>8</sup>

Other international migrant workers 'voluntarily' returned or were forced to return to their home countries. For example, after extensive petitioning by Indian migrant workers, especially those stranded in the Persian Gulf countries, and after pressure from the migrant-hosting governments in the region, the Indian government launched a massive evacuation programme in May 2020. By mid-

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<sup>6</sup> A Cornwell, 'Gulf's Migrant Workers Left Stranded and Struggling by Coronavirus Outbreak', *Reuters*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-gulf-workers/gulfs-migrant-workers-left-stranded-and-struggling-by-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKCN21W108>.

<sup>7</sup> A Rosińska and E Pellerito, 'Pandemic Shock Absorbers: Domestic workers' activism at the intersection of immigrants' and workers' rights', in Triandafyllidou, 2021, p. 123–144, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2_7).

<sup>8</sup> Landed Status Now Working Group of Migrant Rights Network, *Behind Closed Doors: Exposing migrant care worker exploitation during COVID-19*, October 2020, [https://migrantrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Behind-Closed-Doors\\_Exposing-Migrant-Care-Worker-Exploitation-During-COVID19.pdf](https://migrantrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Behind-Closed-Doors_Exposing-Migrant-Care-Worker-Exploitation-During-COVID19.pdf).

December, over 3.8 million Indian nationals had been repatriated from the Gulf countries and other parts of the world, including Canada, the United States, and Europe. However, especially for low-income and undocumented Indian migrant workers abroad, the cost of return was prohibitive, and undocumented migrants who remained were excluded from economic and social security provisions due to their irregular status.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, by 16 January 2021, the Philippine government had repatriated over 400,000 Philippine migrant workers.<sup>10</sup>

In May 2020, the UN Network on Migration called on governments to ‘suspend forced returns during the pandemic, in order to protect the health of migrants and communities, and uphold the human rights of all migrants, regardless of status’.<sup>11</sup> While some countries, including Sweden, Australia, and Poland, carried out deportations and forced returns of migrant workers, in June 2020, Human Right Watch focused its attention on the situation in the United States. It stressed the substandard and inhumane conditions in both public and private immigration detention centres, the high number of transfers from one detention facility to another, and the elevated rates of COVID-19 infections and transmission among detainees. It also highlighted the 232 deportation flights to Latin America and Caribbean countries, with ‘some migrants deported to Mexico, Haiti, El Salvador, and Guatemala’ testing ‘positive for the Covid-19 virus.’ As Nicole Austin-Hillery, the US program director of Human Rights Watch, stated, ‘the US has continued deportations with little regard for the consequences .... With these reckless deportations, the Trump administration is contributing to the spread of Covid-19 and endangering public health globally’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> S I Rajan and H Arokkiaj, ‘Return Migration from the Gulf Region to India Amidst COVID-19’, in Triandafyllidou, 2021, pp. 207–225, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2_11).

<sup>10</sup> ILO Brief, *Experiences of Migrant Workers During COVID-19 in ASEAN Countries*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Network on Migration, ‘Forced Returns of Migrants Must Be Suspended in Time of COVID-19’, 13 May 2020, [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/network\\_statement\\_forced\\_returns\\_-\\_13\\_may\\_2020.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/network_statement_forced_returns_-_13_may_2020.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘US: Suspend deportations during pandemic – Forced returns risk further global spread of Virus’, 4 June 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/04/us-suspend-deportations-during-pandemic>. See also J N Stefanelli, ‘Detained During a Pandemic: Human rights behind locked doors’ and W Liao *et al.*, ‘The House Is On Fire but We Kept the Burglars Out: Racial apathy and white Ignorance in pandemic-era immigration detention’, in R Koulisch (ed.), *Crimmigration in the Age of COVID-19*, MDPI, Basel, 2023, pp. 125–159, <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-0365-6425-8>. For deportation policies in Australia and New Zealand, see H McNeill, ‘Dealing with the “Crimmigrant Other” in the Face of a Global Public Health Threat: A snapshot of deportation during COVID-19 in Australia and New Zealand’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 71–83.

At the same time, many home countries were ill-prepared and often lacked the resources and logistical capacity to manage the reintegration of a surge of returnees, especially as governments were already contending with an unprecedented public healthcare crisis. Key challenges included establishing and maintaining reception centres and quarantine facilities, providing emergency financial assistance, housing, healthcare, and other social supports, as well as absorbing returnees into the local labour market. In some cases, migrant workers relied on the efforts of local and regional governments, diaspora associations, trade unions, as well as community and humanitarian organisations to assist in addressing reception and reintegration demands. Upon return, migrant workers were often stigmatised as carriers of the virus. As a result, 'local and national authorities face[d] the twin challenges of taking steps to prevent transmission by returning migrants and at the same time working with local communities to combat exaggerated fears and resulting stigma attached to returnees'.<sup>13</sup>

While the dynamics identified above clearly highlighted the vulnerability and precarity of migrant workers, the pandemic also generated temporary recalibration of what constitutes 'essential work'. In some cases, this included recognition of the indispensable contributions of migrants to national economies, especially in the agricultural and food production and distribution sectors, as well as in health and other care work. For example, during the pandemic and in keeping with its anti-immigrant and xenophobic policies, the right-leaning Polish government kept its borders firmly closed for asylum seekers from, for example, the Middle East, Afghanistan, and African countries, and those who illegally crossed the border were placed in detention centres. However, it instituted various measures to facilitate the entry of temporary economic migrants from Ukraine and other neighbouring countries for seasonal work in the agricultural sector.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, other European countries similarly scrambled to hire tens of thousands of migrant agricultural workers for the peak harvest season. As one Romanian human resources expert stated, '[migrant workers are] unappreciated and disregarded. I believe their value to the economy will become evident'.<sup>15</sup> In Canada, 'the entry of seasonal agricultural workers [beginning in April 2020] was facilitated as an exception because their admission was *economically essential*' as the security of the country's domestic food supply relies heavily on racialised, low-paid, and highly

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<sup>13</sup> C le Coz and K Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock* (Policy brief), Migration Policy Institute, Brussels, February 2021, p. 6, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/rewiring-migrant-returns-reintegration-covid-19>.

<sup>14</sup> W Klaus, 'The Porous Border Woven with Prejudices and Economic Interests: Polish border admission practices in the time of COVID-19', in Koulis, 2023, pp. 7–19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10110435>.

<sup>15</sup> M G Barberá, 'Western Demand Wins Romanian Workers Coronavirus Travel Waiver', *BalkanInsight*, 14 April 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/14/western-demand-wins-romanian-workers-coronavirus-travel-waiver>.

precarious migrant workers from Mexico, Jamaica, Guatemala, Thailand, the Philippines, India, and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

In short, as Triandafyllidou pointed out, ‘the pandemic has subverted our dominant understandings of desired, valued, and unwanted migration as those migrant workers previously considered “disposable” like farmworkers, domestic and care workers, courier employees, and platform workers suddenly became “frontline” essential workers, much needed, while previously valued and desired highly skilled migrants have been temporarily neglected’.<sup>17</sup>

## Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobic Nationalisms

In May 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared on social media that ‘#COVID19 does not care who we are, where we live, or what we believe. Yet the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering .... We must act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate. That’s why I’m appealing for an all-out effort to end hate speech globally.’<sup>18</sup> According to a Human Rights Watch report in the same month, some government leaders, journalists, and social media commentators persisted in referring to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ (or some variant of it), which contributed to an escalation of racist discrimination, harassment, violence, and hate against Asians and people of Asian descent who were cast as enemies of public health in such countries as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Spain, Australia, Russia, Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, etc. In addition, the report noted that ‘several political parties and groups in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, France, and Germany ... latched onto the Covid-19 crisis to advance anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories’

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<sup>16</sup> A Macklin, ‘(In)Essential Bordering: Canada, COVID, and mobility’, in Triandafyllidou, 2021, pp. 23–43, p. 35, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2_2). See also L F Vosko *et al.*, *COVID-19 Among Migrant Farmworkers in Canada: Employment strain in a transnational context*, ILO Working paper 79, 20 September 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/working-papers/WCMS\\_856495/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/working-papers/WCMS_856495/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>17</sup> A Triandafyllidou, ‘Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception: Migration and membership during pandemic times’, in Triandafyllidou, 2021, pp. 3–21, p. 5, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2_1). See also B Anderson, F Poeschel, and M Ruhs, ‘Rethinking Labour Migration: COVID-19, essential work, and systemic resilience’, *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 9, 2021, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00252-2>.

<sup>18</sup> Social media post on Twitter (now X), Antonio Guterres, 7 May 2020, retrieved 6 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1258613180030431233>.

to demonise foreigners, including migrant workers, more generally.<sup>19</sup> In May 2020, allegedly in an attempt to stem the spread of COVID-19 but in the context of rising xenophobia against refugees, including Rohingya, the Malaysian police raided apartments in one neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur and rounded up 600 undocumented migrants and refugees and placed them in detention centres.<sup>20</sup>

Elene Lam *et al.* document how anti-Asian sentiments within the context of COVID-19 intersected with other forms of discrimination, such as racial profiling and over-policing, experienced by migrant Asian massage workers in New York City and Toronto. Prior to the pandemic, these workers, whether they provided sexual services or not, had already been subjected to aggressive law enforcement surveillance, investigations, and interventions in the name of combating ‘sex trafficking’ and rescuing ‘victims’. Such measures have included harassment, intimidation, raids and forced closures, fines, arrest, detention, and deportation. In the context of COVID-19, however, ‘new racial anxieties around the coronavirus as an Asian disease have been mobilized by the state to further cement the justification of policing Asian migrant workers along the axes of health, migration, and sexual labor.’<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Southeast Asian domestic workers interviewed by an NGO in the United Kingdom said they faced racism because they were Asian. One woman shared that she ‘received racism because Covid was discovered in China. So some people said, “You’re an Asian and you are the reason why we have a pandemic”’.<sup>22</sup>

In anticipation of future global health emergencies, the WHO is currently in the process of drafting and negotiating an international pandemic accord (the WHO CA+) with its 194 member states. The accord draws on the lessons learnt during

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘COVID-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide: National action plans needed to counter intolerance’, 12 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>. See also Human Rights Watch, ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic: Three years in’, 7 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/feature/2023/03/21/the-covid-19-pandemic-three-years-in>.

<sup>20</sup> Z. Peter, ‘Malaysia Rounds Up Hundreds of Undocumented Migrants Amid Coronavirus Fears’, *VOANews*, 3 May 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-malaysia-rounds-hundreds-undocumented-migrants-amid-coronavirus-fears/6188630.html>.

<sup>21</sup> E Lam, E Shih, C Chin, and K Zen, ‘The Double-Edged Sword of Health and Safety: COVID-19 and the policing and exclusion of migrant Asian massage workers in North America’, *Social Sciences*, vol. 10, issue 5, 2021, pp. 157–173, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10050157>.

<sup>22</sup> M Stateva and B Gerasimov, *Heroes, Victims, or Slaves? Workers!: Strengthening migrant and trafficked women’s rights to inclusive re/integration in Southeast Asia and Europe*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2023, p. 29, <https://gaatw.org/publications/SEA-Europe-Research.pdf>.

the COVID-19 pandemic to create a framework for global collaboration. Although primarily health-focused, it does include acknowledgement that ‘all protections of rights, including but not limited to, provision of health services and social protection programmes, are non-discriminatory and take into account the needs of people at high risk and persons in vulnerable situations’ (Article 14. 2 (a)). The list of vulnerable persons includes Indigenous peoples, persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, stateless persons, persons in humanitarian settings and fragile contexts, marginalised communities, and others.<sup>23</sup> The accord is scheduled to be presented to the World Health Assembly in 2024, but it is not yet clear whether and to what extent member states will support ‘The world together equitably’ principles embedded therein.<sup>24</sup> In addition, as GAATW reminded us on 1 May 2021, we need to create a more caring world of work: ‘During the pandemic, our physical, health, nutritional and even emotional needs are met by a constantly available stream of workers who care for us—[from] domestic workers, cooks, [app-based and food delivery workers,] childcarers, [and] home tutors to workers who continue to churn out essential household goods—many of whom are low-wage, migrant workers. Many of these workers, in their ceaseless provision of care for us during the pandemic, have no equivalent “caring” services at their disposal’.<sup>25</sup>

## This Special Issue

While the articles in this Special Issue do not cover all of these aspects of the pandemic’s impact, they focus on the experiences of migrants in various geographical contexts, the challenges they faced, the failure of governments to address them, and how migrants coped with their often-dire situations. Many authors also reflect on some of the lessons learnt from this unprecedented global public health crisis and make recommendations for future policies and actions. In effect, the pandemic, and especially government and social responses and actions to mitigate it, exposed and exacerbated existing social inequities and labour precarity.

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<sup>23</sup> World Health Organization, ‘Zero Draft of the WHO CA+ for the Consideration of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body at Its Fourth Meeting,’ 1 February 2023, pp. 8–9 and 21. [https://apps.who.int/gb/inb/pdf\\_files/inb4/A\\_INB4\\_3-en.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/inb/pdf_files/inb4/A_INB4_3-en.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> World Health Organization, ‘Countries Begin Negotiations on Global Agreement to Protect World from Future Pandemic Emergencies’, News release, 3 March 2023, <https://www.who.int/news/item/03-03-2023-countries-begin-negotiations-on-global-agreement-to-protect-world-from-future-pandemic-emergencies>.

<sup>25</sup> GAATW, ‘Who Cares for Our Workers?’, 30 April 2021, <https://gaatw.org/events-and-news/68-gaatw-news/1100-who-cares-for-our-workers>.

The first five articles present the findings of empirical research with different groups of migrants and the challenges they faced because of COVID-19. **Laurie Berg and Bassina Farbenblum** examine the Australian government's policies towards temporary migrant workers during the pandemic. They describe how, in 2020, migrants were told to 'go home' because the government wanted to prioritise Australian citizens. However, as the country reopened by 2022 and faced staff shortages across multiple sectors, they were told to 'come on down' and 'join our workforce'. Based on the results of an online survey of more than 6,100 temporary migrants, the paper presents the hardships they endured during the pandemic and their frustration with Australia's commodified approach to their labour. The authors conclude on a hopeful note that the new Labor government may change the country's migration policies to address widespread exploitation.

The same commodified approach to temporary, low-wage, migrant workers is also evident in the next article, by **Lola Abdukadyrova and Olga Studenko**. It describes the experiences of Kyrgyz women working in Russia before and during the pandemic, based on surveys and interviews with 298 women. Often working without formal contracts, the women were already subjected to non-payment of wages, sexual harassment by employers, and violence by their co-nationals before the pandemic. COVID-19 lockdowns and closures of businesses exacerbated this situation as migrant workers were the first to be laid off. This left many unable to buy food or pay rent, leading to various physical and psychological problems. The authors conclude with recommendations to government institutions and civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Russia to ensure the protection of the rights of Kyrgyz women migrant workers.

Next, **Yvonne Su** examines the impact of COVID-19 on the working conditions of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Brazil. She outlines how, for her research participants, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's dismissive attitude towards the virus as 'a little flu' and the country's inefficient health and social responses were exacerbated by rising xenophobia and homophobia over the previous several years. Based on surveys with 56 LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the city of Manaus, Su highlights respondents' loss of income and increased vulnerability to labour exploitation. Her analysis shows that these issues were more pronounced among transgender and *travesti* respondents who experience added precarity due to their gender identity. She concludes by calling for greater attention to the needs of LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender and *travesti*, in post-pandemic recovery.

Brazil's inefficient pandemic response is also highlighted in the article by **Angelo Martins Jr, Larissa Brito, and Thiago Pizzo Scatena**. They examine the devastating impact of the pandemic on the lives and working conditions of 25 women internal migrant sex workers in the city of Ribeirão Preto. As the widespread desperation led to an increase in the number of sex workers, and fear of the virus caused many clients to stop using their services, the women struggled to earn sufficient money to support themselves and their families in

their hometowns. They also described deteriorating physical and psychological wellbeing and increased violence and stigma. The authors argue that the government must recognise sex workers as workers and afford them social and labour rights.

The challenges faced by internal migrant sex workers during the pandemic are also the subject of the article by **Seun Bamidele**. He interviewed fifteen women sex workers who were living in the New Kuchingoro camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Abuja, Nigeria, and three key informants from NGOs working with them. Like the research participants in the other articles, the women reported reduced income, difficulties securing enough food, medicine, and basic necessities, and deteriorating mental health. At the same time, Bamidele highlights sex workers' resilience in dealing with these challenges through engaging in mutual support and, where possible, other kinds of work. He calls on the Nigerian government, NGOs, and aid agencies to provide more targeted assistance to IDPs in the country.

The next article, by **Muiread Murphy**, examines the impact of COVID-19 on victims and survivors of human trafficking for labour exploitation, as well as groups at risk, from the perspective of professionals working with them. She interviewed 65 labour inspectors, law enforcement officers, government officials, and NGO and trade union representatives in 23 European countries. Respondents highlighted the increased precarity brought on by the pandemic, the reduced services available to trafficked persons, and the limitations on professional duties due to lockdowns and other restrictions. Murphy concludes by calling on European governments to address the root causes of human trafficking for labour exploitation and increase the resources of government and non-government organisations supporting victims.

**Corinne Schwarz, Hannah Britton, Eden D. E. Nay, and Christie Holland** then turn our attention to the COVID-19-related messaging produced by anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights NGOs. They analysed 139 communications materials published by 36 prominent organisations between March and May 2020. They found that some organisations used the pandemic to highlight structural root causes and macro-level harms, and the need to address these through collective action. Others positioned their organisational representatives as 'essential workers' and heroic rescuers. The authors argue that these different communication styles mirror broader anti-trafficking approaches and call for intervention strategies that address precarious labour along multiple vectors.

The two short articles that conclude the issue focus on the experiences of NGOs providing services to sex workers and survivors of trafficking. **Olaya García-Vázquez and Carmen Meneses-Falcón** focus on the NGO *Hermanas Oblatas*, which works with women in sex work and survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Based on conversations with the NGO's social workers in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, they describe the challenges that women

experienced—with migration documents, income, housing, social relationships and more—and how the NGO addressed these challenges.

Similarly, in the second short article, **Mariah Grant** describes how sex workers in the United States were excluded from the government's COVID-19 relief support. In this situation, her organisation, the Sex Workers Project, and other sex workers' rights NGOs, mobilised funds from donors and the community to meet sex workers' urgent needs. Grant adds that while meeting basic needs became a priority, sex worker organisations also won important advocacy victories.

## Conclusion

The articles in this Special Issue contribute to the growing body of research on the impacts of COVID-19 on migration, labour, and exploitation. They provide compelling evidence that temporary, migrant, low-wage, and informal workers bore the brunt of these impacts and were at the greatest risk of violence, homelessness, and exploitation, as well as infection with the virus and psychological distress. A common thread that runs through many of the articles is that these were caused by governments' unwillingness to offer these workers financial assistance, such as unemployment benefits, support for rent and utility bills, or free healthcare. The most obvious conclusion is that, in the face of crises, governments must provide assistance to all people within their territories, regardless of occupation or migration status.

As we write this Editorial three and a half years after the start of the pandemic, and four months after the WHO declared COVID-19 no longer 'a public health emergency of international concern',<sup>26</sup> we would like to share some broad reflections on the themes raised in this issue and beyond.

For a brief period in 2020, it seemed like there was widespread agreement on several socioeconomic and political issues that we and many other academics, feminists, and human rights advocates had known for years: that temporary, informal, and migrant workers are essential to the functioning of society and the economy, yet utterly underpaid, unappreciated, and exploited; that healthcare systems are severely underfunded; that women bear a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work; that gender-based violence is a hidden pandemic; that there is

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<sup>26</sup> World Health Organization, 'Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic', WHO, 5 May 2023, [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic).

a grotesque gap between the haves and the have-nots (or, those who can work from home and those who cannot); and that, when willing, governments can muster vast amounts of money to provide financial support to people in need.

The stark visibility of these issues made us hopeful that, once the pandemic was over, humankind would, to use just three of the many optimistic projections at the time, '[not go] back to normal, because normal was the problem',<sup>27</sup> 'break with the past and imagine [the] world anew'<sup>28</sup> or 'remake society and build a better future'.<sup>29</sup> Even the International Monetary Fund, a stalwart of neoliberalism and austerity, saw the pandemic as an opportunity 'to build fairer societies and economies by investing in people, [...] spending better on schools, training, and reskilling, [...] expanding social programs [...] to reach the most vulnerable, [...] and empowering women by reducing labor market discrimination.'<sup>30</sup>

By mid-2021, it was clear that the new normal would look very much like the old one, with expressions like 'vaccine apartheid' and 'COVID passport' becoming illustrative of the old divisions between the global North and South, and between the wealthy and mobile versus the poor and immobilised. By early 2022, the 'pent-up demand' of wealthy consumers led to a 'cost of living crisis' of rising food and energy costs around the world, exacerbated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This, in turn, brought on further pain for working-class families and increasing costs for debt servicing of lower and middle-income countries. As the world went from one crisis into another, against the backdrop of the worsening climate crisis, it seemed like our political leaders had not learnt the lessons from COVID-19 that we would have liked them to.

Yet, even as this bird's eye global view of the world during and after COVID-19 is grim, we would like to end this Editorial on a positive note. In some cases, the pandemic did bring about positive policy changes. For example, Thailand allowed 1.6 million undocumented migrant workers to regularise their status

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<sup>27</sup> S Pantuliano, 'Covid-19: 'We won't get back to normal because normal was the problem'', ODI, n.d., retrieved 6 September 2023, <https://odi.org/en/insights/covid-19-we-wont-get-back-to-normal-because-normal-was-the-problem>.

<sup>28</sup> A Roy, 'Arundhati Roy: "The pandemic is a portal"', *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

<sup>29</sup> P C Baker, "'We Can't Go Back to Normal': How will coronavirus change the world?", *The Guardian*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/how-will-the-world-emerge-from-the-coronavirus-crisis>.

<sup>30</sup> K Georgieva, 'Beyond the Crisis', *Finance and Development*, June 2020, pp. 10–11, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/06/turning-crisis-into-opportunity-kristalina-georgieva>.

during the height of the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> Belgium decriminalised sex work largely due to the realisation that sex workers had been excluded from COVID-19 support.<sup>32</sup> Canada provided a pathway to permanent residency for asylum claimants on the frontlines of the pandemic.<sup>33</sup> There have undoubtedly been many other human rights-focused policy changes around the world.

Perhaps more importantly, we were encouraged by the increased sense of solidarity, shared humanity, and mutual care that we witnessed. People showed appreciation for healthcare workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 battles. Many brought food to sick or elderly neighbours and community members. Some employers continued paying their domestic workers' salaries, even when the latter could not come to work; others paid for their migrant workers' healthcare costs or quarantines.<sup>34</sup> As Lam *et al.* noted in relation to sex workers, 'an outpouring of mutual aid support—through cash aid, housing support, and free grocery delivery—has sustained migrant Asian massage and sex workers throughout the pandemic'.<sup>35</sup>

We also saw immense mobilisation among feminists, civil society, and human rights advocates who came together, across continents, time zones, and language barriers, to strategise for short- and long-term solutions to the crisis. What is more, they were often joined by community leaders and low-wage workers in remote areas, thanks to the wider accessibility of new communications technologies. It is our hope that collective visions of a 'new social contract' in the post-COVID-19 world that these mobilisations shaped will still come to pass.

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<sup>31</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, 'How to Expand and Diversify Regularization Mechanisms and Programs to Enhance the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe González Morales', 20 April 2023, <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/53/26>, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> J Gill, 'How COVID-19 Helped Sex Workers in Belgium Make History', *Reuters*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/belgium-sexwork-decriminalisation-idUSL5N2X54FF>.

<sup>33</sup> Government of Canada, 'Pathway to Permanent Residency Recognizes Exceptional Service of Asylum Claimants on Front Lines of COVID-19 Pandemic', 14 August 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2020/08/pathway-to-permanent-residency-recognizes-exceptional-service-of-asylum-claimants-on-front-lines-of-covid-19-pandemic.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Stateva and Gerasimov.

<sup>35</sup> Lam *et al.*, p. 171.

**Annalee Lepp** is Associate Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Victoria, Canada. She is a founding member of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) Canada, which was established in 1996, and a member of GAATW's Board of Directors. Since 1997, she has been involved in various collaborative research projects that examine Canadian state policies and practices as they relate to trafficking in persons and irregular cross-border movements as well as the impact of anti-trafficking policies on sex workers' rights in Canada. Email: [alepp@uvic.ca](mailto:alepp@uvic.ca).

**Borislav Gerasimov** is the Editor of *Anti-Trafficking Review*. He has previously worked in various roles at women's rights and anti-trafficking organisations in Bulgaria, the Netherlands, and Thailand. He has also volunteered for organisations supporting Roma youth, LGBTI people, people living with HIV/AIDS, and sex workers. Email: [atr@gaatw.org](mailto:atr@gaatw.org)