

## COUNTRY BRIEFING: PAKISTAN

### COUNTRY CONTEXT

- **There are nearly 8.5 million migrant workers working across different regions of Pakistan, which includes both internal and foreign migrant workers.** Forty-five per cent of these workers are engaged in informal activities including day labourers, construction workers, domestic helpers, factory workers, informal restaurants and beauty salons.
- **The domestic service sector is one of the largest informal employment sectors in Pakistan where there is an absence of labour protections and economic security.** Middle and upper-class households employ women domestic workers, primarily Pakistani domestic workers. However, there are several women workers groups of migrant origin involved in the domestic care industry. Pakistan has become an [employment destination for Migrant Filipino Domestic Workers \(MFDW\)](#), who constitute one of the largest groups among the estimated over [2,000 Filipinos living in Pakistan and of the over 1,000 Filipinos holding a working visa](#).
- **There is low participation of women in the formal sector, a widening gender pay gap, and a concentration of women in low-paid and low-skilled jobs.** This is coupled with a lack of legal protection for women working in the informal sector (agriculture, domestic and home-based work) to whom the federal and provincial labour laws and regulations do not apply. There is also a lack of labour law and social security programmes, such as wage protection and maternity leave, for working women in the informal economy.
- **Pakistan has received a mass influx of people fleeing conflict.** The Afghan community is among the largest among undocumented migrants living in the country ([1.7 million according to recent estimates](#)), followed by combined populations of Bengali ethnic group, and nationals from Bangladesh and Burma.

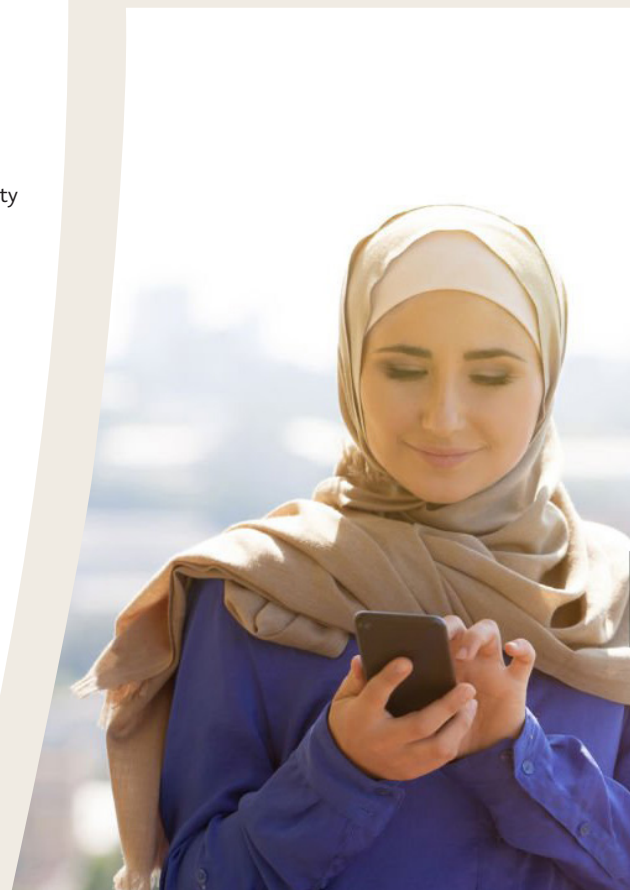
### KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings are based on interviews with migrant women living and working in Islamabad, Pakistan between December 2020 and June 2021. The women interviewed had different skill levels, nationalities and migration experiences. The interviews were held with MFDWs, skilled African migrant women with highly educated backgrounds, an African migrant woman working as a migrant domestic worker (MDW), Global North migrant professionals, and migrant women from Afghanistan, some of whom had entered the country as refugees.

- **Drivers of migration centre around work, education and financial gain for MFDWs, and skilled migrants from Africa and the Global North.** A chief driver behind the decision to migrate among Filipino migrants is financial advancement, with many taking the decision to find employment abroad as MDWs to achieve economic prosperity. For African migrant women there is also a cultural and religious affinity if they came from a Muslim country, demonstrating the role of culture in South-South migration. For all, financial drivers are also coupled with other factors such as leaving personal

### OVERVIEW

The brief focuses on Pakistan and the gendered dynamics of international labour migration as a case study that expands our knowledge of South-South migration and reveals the complexity and context of gendered migration patterns and dynamics. In doing so, this brief aims to advance a gender-sensitive understanding of interactions between economic, social and cultural drivers of migration and displacement. It is a step forward in investigating and acknowledging both migrants' agency and the many ways gender informs experiences of migration and displacement, access to resources and opportunities in Pakistan.



situations behind, following a partner to Pakistan or joining family and networks of friends who have already migrated.

- **For Afghan migrant women the drivers of migration are more diverse but centre around conflict and political and economic instability.** While the conflict in Afghanistan has had varying impacts on the Afghan migrant women, for some it was a key driver for migration. For others economic independence is key, when public facing jobs for women were harder to find in their home country. This was attributed to the extreme limitations of women's rights imposed by the previous Taliban regime connecting back to the country's economic instability.\* The choice of Pakistan as a destination is mainly down to practical considerations for Afghan women, such as the geographical proximity, having relatives and a network already in the country, and the possibility of easily entering the country by land with little or no paperwork.
- **Most migrant women demonstrate agency in choosing to leave their home country and improve their living conditions and economic status.** In addition to this agency in their decision to leave their home country, the MFDWs stand out for their collective activism in a more tangible and institutionalised way than other migrant groups. Filipino workers have formed networks, such as the Progressive Filipino Society Pakistan, which is a network of various categories of Filipino employees working in both formal and informal jobs in Pakistan. This organisation arranges various activities for Filipinos and helps them if they have problems with their employers. This is an example of women's agency and how women can influence their environment through collective action. However, there is a stark absence of unions and other supportive alliances and networks that can fight for the rights of domestic workers in Pakistan.
- **Migrant women generally have a positive experience in Pakistan, and most do not openly report experiencing gender-based violence or discrimination.** While there are instances of sexual harassment, ethnic/gender-based discrimination and clashes of gender norms for the MFDWs who describe greater gender equality in their home country, these were exceptions and not the norm. Nearly all migrants from skilled to those working in domestic settings describe their living and working conditions in positive terms and felt a general level of contentment with their life and job, appreciating their employers and a good salary affording a comfortable standard of living.
- **Patrilocal customs and cultural norms at times lead to discrimination for migrants who marry into Pakistani families.** Migrants who have married Pakistani men view the cultural custom of moving in with your in-laws and becoming a domestic helper as discriminatory. Some experience hostilities from within their husbands' families centred around their agency, profession and income. For many migrant women, the responsibility placed on the bride to provide informal care and housework is a stark cultural difference from their country of origin.
- **MFDWs' legal status is more secure than local domestic workers.** MFDWs obtain work visas and work permits through the hiring agencies, who they describe as supportive with no issues when it comes to visa and work permit renewal. The MFDWs also have written employment contracts with their employers, which puts them in a stronger position compared to local domestic workers who work without any written contractual agreement with their employers. However, while Pakistan has signed an agreement with the Philippines Government for the recruitment of MFDWs, they are still not covered by labour legislation and in some cases their immigration status can be dubious, and contracts are unclear as to whether they include health insurance and social assistance.
- **Afghan migrant women\*, and Afghan refugees face a difficult landscape in gaining legal status and integration compared to other migrant women.** For undocumented Afghan women they have deskilled and feel socially discriminated against with little to no integration into Pakistani society. In addition to this they face a challenging system in relation to their legal status which becomes an obstacle to obtaining a work permit. This has several negative consequences for their economic agency, where they then work informally and illegally with no access to basic entitlements such as health insurance. This leads to increased vulnerability to exploitation and is emblematic of the structural discrimination by the Pakistani government against Afghan migrants and refugees.
- **The urban environment in which the migrants live is relatively accessible and many make use of the city.** Despite the diversity of living and working experiences, including the type of accommodation and living arrangements across migrants and MFDWs, most women said that they move around the city freely, using cars or taxis, that they go to restaurants, malls and markets. For MFDWs their process of getting acquainted with the host country and going out to public spaces is filtered by the family they live with, and, to a certain extent, necessarily hampered by their home-based work. There are exceptions to these feelings of mobility for undocumented migrants and refugees from Afghanistan who feel less able to freely move around and create a sense of home in their host country.
- **The impact of COVID-19 varied according to the type of work migrant women undertook and their legal status.** The impacts of the pandemic ranged from the possibility of loss or severe reduction of income for those with businesses, being forced to stay inside or working remotely, especially for the skilled migrants, and for some MFDWs, the workload increased considerably, whereas for others the situation remained unchanged.

*\*Interviews with Afghan migrants were conducted prior to the 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Government of Pakistan

- **The Pakistani government must re-consider signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.** Becoming a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention ensures Afghan refugees and other refugee communities arriving in Pakistan are given the correct legal status and rights and protections afforded under this status. In addition, Pakistan must develop a national refugee law that ensures the right to work, access to healthcare and education for refugees in Pakistan.
- **ID Cards and the permit system must be made more accessible for migrants living and working in Pakistan.** The Pakistani government should revise regulations and policies in relation to the assignment of ID cards to migrant workers, in conjunction with the third sector and employers, to make the permit system more accessible and inclusive.

### Government of Pakistan and international non-governmental organisations

- **Migrant-centred programmes of support must be introduced and maintained.** Evidence-based and migrant-centred interventions to support the employability and wellbeing of the Afghan community, and other migrant communities in Pakistan need to be strengthened. Economic empowerment, legal protection, job security, access to health and social care should be a central focus of these programmes.
- **The process of sharing data between governments and international humanitarian organisations should be enhanced.** Government departments in Pakistan dealing with migrants should make their data on migrant communities available. In line with this the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and INGOs, can support a clearer picture of the complex reality of migrants in the country using evidence-based data.

### Researchers and academia

- **Bring a gender focus into all research being done on migration and displacement.** More research is needed to understand the conditions and the experiences of women migrant communities

## PROJECT TEAM

Prof Brad Blitz, Amirthalingam Kopapillai, Rajith Lakshman, Madeeh Ansari, Anoji Ekanayake, Dr. Necla Acik, Sobia Kapadia, Charbel Mayda, Caroline Chayya, Quhramaana Kakkar, Abida Kakkar, Zeynep Ceren Eren Benlisoy, Muslih Irwani, Jiyar Aghapouri, Prof. Eleonore Kofman, Ezgi Tuncer Gurka, Cecilia Passaniti Mezzano, Awat MustafaRondik Faris, Kiran Rahim, Sana Tauqeer, Moosarat Qadeem, Aneela Shamshad, Dr. Janroj Keles, Rajith Lakshman, Visaka Dharmadasa, Moosarat Qadeem, Aneela Shamshad, Iram Khan

from refugees to professionals in Pakistan. This is needed both in relation to their social and economic contribution to the host society, as well as in relation to their internal dynamics and further migration aspirations.

- **Further studies should be done on diverse groups of women migrants and their incorporation into the labour market in Pakistan.** There is an assumption that most countries in the Global South are not attractive to regular migrants who choose Pakistan for study, work or to settle with family members. However, this research shows that this is not necessarily the case, therefore a more comprehensive picture of contemporary gendered migrations into the country is needed.

## FURTHER READING

- E Kofman & R Lazzarino, "[Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration: Analytical Snapshot](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).
- E Tuncer & Z.C Eren-Benlisoy, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Skilled Female Migrants in Istanbul](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).
- Lazzarino, R, E Kofman & S Kapadia, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Migrant Women Working in Pakistan](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2024)
- M Irwani, J Aghapouri & E Kofman, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Kurdistan-Iraq](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2024)
- N Bezwan & J.Y Keles, '[Displacement, Diaspora and Statelessness: Framing the Kurdish Case](#)', in T Mayer & T Tran (eds.), Displacement, Belonging and Migrant Agency in the Face of Power (Routledge: 2022)
- R WD Lakshman, R Amirthalingam, A Ekanayake & B Blitz, "[Gender and Displacement in Jaffna, Sri Lanka](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2020).
- Z.C Eren-Benlisoy & E Tuncer, "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Migrant Domestic and Care Workers in Istanbul](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2023).