



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF  
**LABOUR  
RECRUITER  
RAPID  
ASSESSMENT**

Upholding the rights of migrant workers during COVID-19

# INTRODUCTION

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COVID-19 has impacted the world on an unprecedented scale: it has caused a global economic slowdown, resulted in international travel bans and restrictions, and transformed the ways people socialize, work and maintain their health and well-being. As governments try to manage its spread and effect on economies, it is imperative that migrants - regardless of their migratory status - are included in these efforts and recognized as a contributory stakeholder to national strategies addressing the pandemic and future crises.

[The International Organization for Migration](#)<sup>1</sup> (IOM) recognizes that international recruitment agencies can play a key role in supporting migrant workers adapt to crises such as COVID-19 and work collectively with governments, employers and other stakeholders to strengthen their protection abroad and uphold their human and labour rights. **To realize these objectives, it is important to understand how the recruitment industry is responding to the emergency, highlight agency-driven solutions in the field as well as encountered barriers that impede labour recruiters from rendering adequate assistance and protection to migrant workers.**

**As the first COVID-19 multi-country rapid assessment with labour recruiters in the Asia region, the findings in this report provide a snapshot of the pandemic's initial impacts on the international labour recruitment industry in South, East and South-East Asia.** As such, it focusses on the specific situation of labour recruiters with a view to the potential impact on the human rights of migrant workers. This qualitative survey was conducted by IOM in six countries and one special administrative region across Asia

(Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Hong Kong SAR, China), Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam), with the participation of 19 recruitment agencies and three recruitment industry associations from 6-24 April, 2020.

The findings outlined in this report provide key stakeholders in the international recruitment arena - labour recruiters, employers and governments - with a more nuanced understanding of how the recruitment industry regionally has coped with the challenges created by the pandemic, and the role of labour recruiters in addressing and mitigating adverse impacts on jobseekers and migrant workers.

Importantly, the report provides an analysis of gaps and barriers in protection of migrant workers exposed by the pandemic, together with recommendations for key actors to better safeguard migrant workers in times of crisis. The findings will be used by IOM to further assist recruitment agencies at the national level to better mitigate migrant worker challenges during crises while implementing ethical recruitment practices. Through its existing partnerships under [the CREST Initiative](#)<sup>2</sup>, IOM will seek to support multinational companies and employers to cooperate with their partnering recruitment agencies to uphold the rights of migrant workers during and after crises.

As a snapshot study, it provides an initial foundation for further bodies of work to build the capacities of the regional recruitment industry and key stakeholders to better protect migrant workers from the ongoing aftershocks of COVID-19 and future crises. The report supplements existing surveys by IOM and other organizations, highlighting the specific vulnerabilities of migrant workers during COVID-19.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.iom.int>

<sup>2</sup><https://crest.iom.int/>

# FINDINGS

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The key findings are divided into four inter-related parts: 1) pandemic-induced challenges faced by recruitment agencies and 2) by migrant workers, 3) recruitment agencies' responses to these challenges and 4) an analysis of gaps and barriers impeding the protection of migrant workers.

The **common business challenges recruitment agencies faced were delay or postponement of recruitment and deployment processes, cancellation and declines in job-orders and increased financial burdens on the recruitment agencies.** As COVID-19 imperils the global economy with disruptions and reductions in business operations of employers, the imposition of strict restrictions on travel as well as health and safety measures, the demand for migrant workers and recruitment has become severely constrained. With their income severely hampered by the pandemic, recruitment agencies struggle to keep their businesses open, while providing support to migrant workers. This creates additional risks to deprive migrant workers from accessing necessary support services during and after the pandemic.

As such, **recruitment agencies identified common challenges faced by migrant workers during every stage of the migration cycle:** prospective migrant workers unable to complete recruitment processes and travel to countries of destination, migrant workers encountering COVID-19 restrictions starting employment even after arrival in the country of destination, during employment migrant workers face job and wage insecurity and changes in employment conditions along with difficulties returning to countries of origin and barriers to reintegration at communities of origin.

Recruitment agencies have attempted to **assist migrant workers in mitigating such challenges** through several means: active migrant worker monitoring and dissemination of information, negotiating with employers to protect migrant workers from COVID-19, to respect employment conditions and labour rights during the pandemic, and maintain migrant worker jobs and job orders for as long as possible. Extending direct support to migrant workers varies from COVID-19 personal protective equipment, quarantine accommodation, transportation and food.

Recruitment agency associations in countries of origin were reported to have an important role in coordinating support for recruitment agencies to protect migrant workers in conjunction with governments.

Exacerbating the challenges encountered by migrant workers and recruitment agencies, the following **key gaps and barriers in protection of migrant workers were identified:**

- **Recruitment agencies were not adequately prepared for a protracted global crisis.** In general, agencies were found to not have adequate emergency plans and strategies to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on their businesses and migrant workers, especially for prolonged periods. Agencies lack robust management systems to build resilience against crises, especially weak communication lines with migrant workers, employers and other business partners in destinations. This resulted in challenges monitoring migrant workers and extending needed support.
- **Providing remediation for migrant workers in countries of destination was challenging for recruitment agencies** due to skewed power dynamics along with weak communication with employers, despite observed indications of rights violations by the agencies.
- While the pandemic revealed a reliance on government directives to recruitment agencies as well as employers with respect to migrant worker protection, **the support and guidance from governments to migrant workers and the recruitment industry could have been improved.** Collaboration between governments in countries of destination and origin, private sector and civil society to develop inclusive and pro-active COVID-19 policies was largely absent. This impacted the potential for aligning assistance to migrant workers, such as coordinating complex logistical challenges (return and reintegration), and maintaining health protocols (quarantines, social distancing, medical assistance).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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The report concludes with recommendations targeted at key stakeholders in migrant worker protection: recruitment agencies, employers and governments. As such, they speak to the need for both public and private sector stakeholders in international recruitment to maintain protection of and respect for human and labour rights during a crisis.

## EMPLOYERS AND RECRUITERS

For employers and recruiters, the report emphasizes IOM's existing recommendations for enhanced migrant worker protection during COVID-19 provided through the two following guidance documents:

### [IOM Guidance for labour recruiters to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis](#)<sup>3</sup>

The health, wellbeing and safety of jobseekers and migrant workers shall be a priority for labour recruiters during the COVID-19 health crisis. Labour recruiters must exercise their duty of care to respect human rights and meet the basic needs of migrant workers, especially women workers and disadvantaged groups.

### [IOM Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis](#)<sup>4</sup>

All workers should be treated with equality, dignity and respect, irrespective of their gender and migration status. The health, well-being and safety of all employees, including migrant workers, shall always be a priority for employers, in particular during the COVID-19 health crisis. Businesses must exercise their duty of care to respect human rights and meet the basic needs of all employees, especially those related to health.

## GOVERNMENTS

For governments, the below recommendations are based on the analysis of gaps in protection of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, good practices shared by recruitment agencies participating in this survey and recommendations from recruitment agencies themselves:

- a. **DEFINE** clearly legal responsibilities of recruitment agencies during and after the crisis in communication, returns, reintegration, and upskilling. Monitor recruitment agencies in meeting their legal responsibilities to care for migrant workers.
- b. **COVENE** COVID-19 multi-stakeholder feedback sessions to learn of good practices, challenges and opportunities in protection of migrant workers.
- c. **MAINTAIN** updated statistics on migrant workers and returnees to accord appropriate protections and support services.
- d. **DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT** reintegration plans to accommodate mass returns and repatriations during COVID-19 in alignment with [the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19](#)<sup>5</sup>
- e. **EVALUATE** recruitment industry best practices for migrant worker protection and post pandemic monitoring for potential adoption in recruitment regulations.
- f. **PREPARE** a long-term action plan to implement a revised framework for labour migration governance after borders reopen and travel bans lift. Bilateral agreements are important to establish clear labour migration and recruitment processes during and after crises.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://iris.iom.int/covid-19-crisis-response>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/UN-framework-for-the-immediate-socio-economic-response-to-COVID-19.pdf>