

COVID-19 Protection Policies and Social Safety Nets Must Be Accessible to Indonesian Migrant Workers and Their Families

Now considered the worst global crisis since World War II (ILO, April 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is causing widespread devastation for the health and job security of workers across the globe. Increasingly, the plight of migrant workers has attracted attention from the global community. Since the beginning of the epidemic, the ILO has been prominent in highlighting the additional layers of vulnerability facing migrant workers and those in the informal sector, compared with other segments of the global workforce. These layers include greater risk of contracting COVID-19, bearing the stigma as carriers of the virus, losing work and being ignored in social protection policies. Furthermore, UN Women have emphasised how vulnerabilities are exacerbated for female migrant workers, particularly those employed in the sectors of industry/factories, health care and public service. They argue that the prevalent gender-related risks within these sectors are often forgotten or considered non-existent.

Indonesian migrant workers became the first Indonesian citizens to experience the risks and impacts of the virus prior to its arrival on home soil. This was particularly the case for those already located in the initial epicentres of the outbreak in East and Southeast Asia, as well as those employed as crew members on international cruises. Unfortunately, however, the Indonesian government's responses to these geographic and socio-economic risks facing their citizens abroad have largely been disparate. Whilst the government was quick to evacuate and quarantine Indonesian students in Wuhan, they appeared to ignore the requests of migrant workers in Hubei Province to also be evacuated. This move has been broadly criticised as differential treatment reflecting discriminative policy.

The direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers are numerous and complex. Two major direct impacts have been 1) changes to, or the cessation of, work due to large-scale mobility restrictions (lockdown) which have been implemented in many host countries, and 2) the strengthening of racist and xenophobic sentiment placing foreigners as second-class as they seek protection from, and treatment for, COVID-19.

These impacts have been felt in Malaysia, for example, where Indonesian migrant workers have been affected by the Movement Control Order (MCO). Many of the more than 1 million Indonesian workers in Malaysia (including undocumented workers) have lost work and are seeking some form of daily or weekly wage. They face hardship in trying to abide by the MCO whilst meeting basic needs. Being stuck in Malaysia without official documents or work has led many to put health risks aside, board illegal vessels crossing the Malacca Strait and return to Indonesia, defying strict health protocols in the region designed to limit cross-border infections. For those still in Malaysia who have not (yet) returned to Indonesia, the outlook is bleak as they face potential food insecurity and limited support as a result of the MCO designed to stem the spread of COVID-19 in Malaysia.

The upcoming *Lebaran* holiday (Muslim celebration marking the end of Ramadan; 23-24 May 2020) adds another layer of difficulty for all parties involved in protecting vulnerable groups. It is predicted that this year, as is usually the case, there will be a mass exodus of Indonesian migrant workers back to their home towns. According to the Agency for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BP2MI), the number of workers expected to return home is around 38,000. It is believed that for a large portion of these workers, their contracts have finished or have been shortened as a result of COVID-19. This mass movement of people exacerbates the risk of infection for migrant workers beyond their usual work environments and poses significant threats to the receiving home communities. With this in mind, it is vital that comprehensive policy action is taken to not only anticipate this but also mitigate the worsening of an already serious situation in Indonesia.

So, in marking World Labour Day (1 May 2020), Migrant CARE is urging the Indonesian government not to forget the vulnerabilities migrant workers face when developing and implementing social safety net schemes and social protection policies in response to COVID-19. The Indonesian government must prioritise fiscal stimulus and macro-economic policies which are effective in meeting the needs of workers, particularly the poor, women and other marginal groups. Furthermore, the Indonesian government and House of Representatives must cease discussions on drafting the *Cipta Kerja* Omnibus Law and focus more seriously on the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, the Indonesian government must also urge the host countries of migrant workers not to discriminate or criminalise undocumented workers, and to focus more diligently on their protection from the spread and the impacts of the virus.

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Wahyu Susilo

Executive Director Migrant CARE

Translated by: Rebekah Smith