



International  
Labour  
Organization

Executive  
summary

# ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers

Results and Methodology

- ▶ Labour Migration Branch  
Conditions of Work and  
Equality Department
- ▶ Department of Statistics



# ▶ ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers

Results and Methodology  
Third edition

**Executive summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been having an unparalleled impact on the global economy and the world of work. The ILO estimates that 93 per cent of the world's workers were residing in countries with some form of COVID-19-related workplace closure measures in early January 2021, with many international migrants remaining among the most vulnerable. In many regions, international migrant workers account for an important share of the labour force, making vital contributions to their destination countries' societies and economies, and delivering essential jobs in critical sectors like health care, transportation, services, agriculture and food processing. Yet many migrant workers are often to be found in temporary, informal or unprotected jobs, which has exposed them to an even greater risk of insecurity, layoffs and worsening working conditions. Moreover, the COVID-19 impacts on women migrant workers appear to have intensified already existing vulnerabilities, as they are over-represented in low-paid and low-skilled jobs and have limited access to and fewer options for support services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the magnitude and characteristics of international labour migration. This third edition of the *Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers* takes 2019 as its reference year, predating the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, and it offers a benchmark against which the COVID-19 driven changes can be analysed in future work.

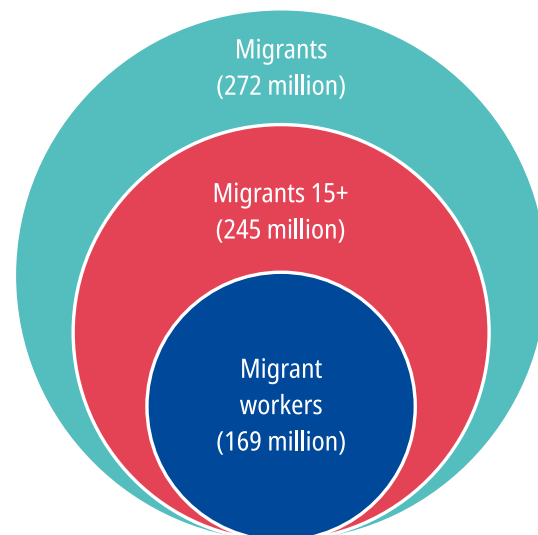
### The ILO estimates that 169 million people are international migrant workers

In 2019, the UNDESA estimated the stock of international migrants worldwide to be 272 million, 245 million of which are working age (aged 15 and over). The number of international migrant workers totalled 169 million in the same year. The 2019 estimate indicates an increase of 5 million migrant workers (3.0 per cent) from the 2017 estimate of 164 million migrant workers, and an increase of 19 million (12.7 per cent) from the 2013 estimate of 150 million migrant workers.

International migrant workers are defined as migrants of working age, who during a specified

reference period, were in the labour force of the country of their usual residence, either in employment or in unemployment. For the purposes of this report, the term "international migrants" refers to usual residents in a given country who are foreign-born (or foreign citizens when place of birth information is not available). The term "migrants of working age" is a subset of international migrants, comprising those aged 15 years and over.

### ► Global estimates of the stock of international migrants and migrant workers, 2019



### International migrant workers constitute 4.9 per cent of the global labour force

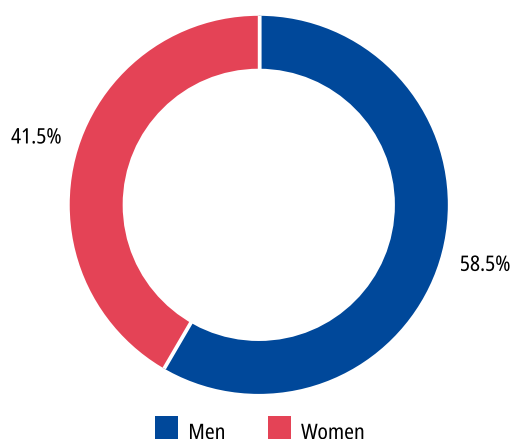
While globally migrant workers constitute 4.9 per cent of the labour force of destination countries, this figure is highest at 41.4 per cent in the Arab States. The labour force participation rate of migrants at 69.0 per cent is higher than the labour force participation of non-migrants at 60.4 per cent.

### Among international migrant workers, 99 million are men and 70 million are women

Women constitute 41.5 per cent and men 58.5 per cent of migrant workers. The smaller share of women migrant workers can be explained by their lower representation among

international migrants (47.9 per cent) on one hand, and their relatively lower labour market participation rate as compared to men (59.8 per cent vs. 77.5 per cent) on the other. Women face more economic and non-economic obstacles as migrant workers, and there is a higher likelihood that women migrate as accompanying family members for reasons other than to find work. They can experience gender discrimination in the labour market and lack of social networks that make it difficult to reconcile work and family life in a foreign country. All of these are possible factors reducing women’s representation among migrant workers.

► **Global distribution of international migrant workers by sex, 2019**



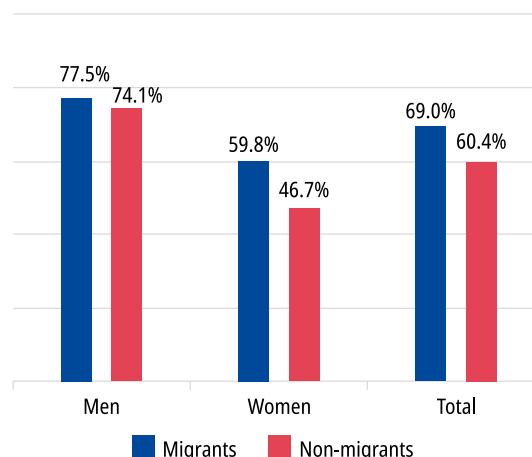
Women migrant’s contribution to the female labour force in destination countries is higher (5.2 per cent) compared to that of migrant men (4.6 per cent) in the male labour force. This has to do with the significantly larger labour force participation gap between migrant and non-migrant women (13.1 percentage points) as compared to migrant and non-migrant men (3.4 percentage points). It should also be noted that the global share of women among migrant workers masks significant differences across geographic regions, with regions such as Northern, Southern and Western Europe having above 50.0 per cent female share among migrant workers as compared to below 20.0 per cent in the Arab States.

**International migrants have higher labour force participation than non-migrants but rates are decreasing for both groups**

Over time, while migrants have tended to have higher labour force participation rates, the rates for both migrants and non-migrants have fallen. In 2013, migrant workers constituted 72.7 per cent of migrants of working age but 70.0 per cent in 2017 and 69.0 per cent in 2019.

The decline in the labour force participation of international migrants is likely to be generated by factors that also affect non-migrant populations. The ILO projects that the general decline in participation rates observed since 1990 will continue until at least 2030. Likely drivers include demographic changes (e.g. aging populations in most high-income countries), technological change, labour market and immigration policies. In the case of international migrants, added factors may include labour market discrimination and barriers to obtaining employment, insufficient language proficiency and challenges related to the limited access to recognition of their skills and qualifications in destination countries.

► **Global labour force participation rates of migrants and non-migrants by sex, 2019**

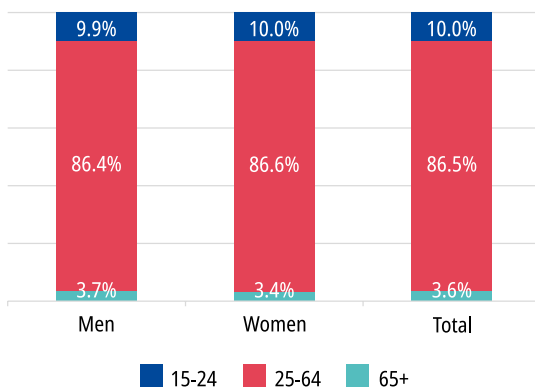


### The large majority of international migrant workers consists of prime-age adults but the share of youth is increasing

Prime-age adults (aged 25–64) constitute 86.5 per cent of migrant workers. The shares of youth (aged 15–24) and older workers (aged 65 and over) among migrant workers are lower at 10.0 per cent and 3.6 per cent, respectively. It should be noted that youth constitute 12.9 per cent, prime-age adults 74.7 per cent, and older workers 12.4 per cent of the working age migrant population.

The share of youth among international migrant workers has increased over time, from 8.3 per cent in 2017 to 10.0 per cent in 2019. In contrast, the share of older workers (aged 65 plus) reduced from 5.2 per cent to 3.6 per cent over the same time period, leaving the share of prime-age adults constant. The heavy representation of prime-age adults can be explained by this age group's better ability to migrate to a foreign country (in terms of financial means and social networks) and their higher potential gains than younger migrants with less years of experience, or older migrants with less remaining economically active years. The increase in youth migration is likely to be the result of high youth unemployment rates in many developing countries and the phenomenon of the “youth bulge”.

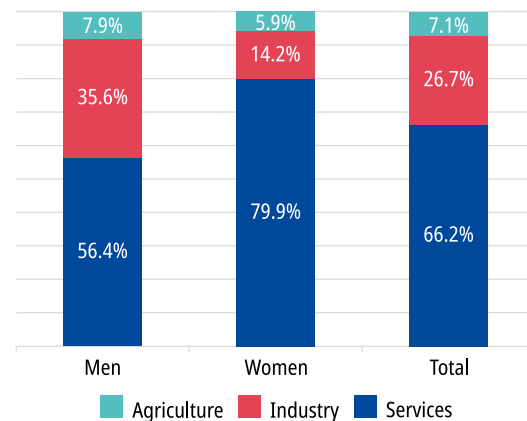
#### ► Global age composition of international migrant workers, 2019



### Most international migrant workers are concentrated in services sector

Sector figures show that 66.2 per cent of migrant workers are in services, 26.7 per cent are in industry and 7.1 per cent are in agriculture. However, substantial gender differences exist within the sectors. In the case of women, 79.9 per cent are in services, 14.2 per cent are in industry and 5.9 per cent in agriculture. Compared to women, the distribution of men migrant workers between industry and services is relatively more balanced, with 35.6 per cent of men employed in industry and 56.4 per cent in services. The remaining 7.9 per cent of men migrant workers are in agriculture. A higher representation of women migrant workers in services may, in part, be explained by a growing labour demand in the care economy, including health and domestic work. These sub-sectors have a predominantly female labour force and rely heavily on women migrant workers. Men migrant workers are more present in industry, finding work in the manufacturing and construction sub-sectors.

#### ► Global distribution of international migrant workers by broad category of economic activity, 2019



A comparison of 2013 estimates to 2019 estimates suggests different patterns of change for men and women migrant workers by category of economic activity. In the case of women, there has been a sharp drop in agriculture (from 11.1 per cent to 5.9 per cent) and a nearly commensurate rise in services (from 73.7 per cent to 79.9 per cent). In the case of men, a decline is detected in agriculture (from 11.2 per cent to 7.9 per cent) and services (from 69.1 per cent to 56.4 per cent), while their engagement in industry rose from 19.8 per cent in 2013 to 35.6 per cent in 2019.

The changes observed in the sectoral distribution of women migrant workers parallel the general trends of women’s falling worldwide employment in agriculture and industry and rising employment in services. In the case of men, the global trends point to a declining employment in agriculture, stagnant employment in industry and rising employment in services. A plausible explanation for the rise in industrial employment for migrant men could be that there is a growing labour demand in this sector in lower-middle- and upper-middle-income countries. The increase in the share of migrant workers in upper-middle-income countries and a drop in high-income countries gives support to this conjecture.

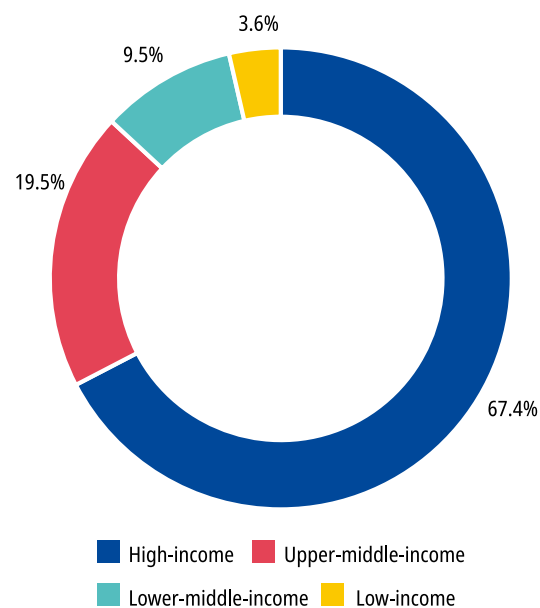
**More than two-thirds of international migrant workers are concentrated in high-income countries**

Of the estimated 169 million international migrant workers, 113.9 million (67.4 per cent) are in high-income countries and 33 million (19.5 per cent) in upper-middle-income countries, so that 86.9 per cent of international migrant workers are found in either of the two country income groups. The rest are in lower-middle-income (9.5 per cent) and low-income countries (3.6 per cent).

Migrant workers make up a substantial proportion of the labour force of high-income countries with migrant men constituting 18.7 per cent of the male labour force, while women 17.6 per cent of the female labour force. In contrast, in low-income, lower-middle-income and upper-middle-income countries the share of migrant workers does not exceed 2.5 per cent.

That the majority of migrant workers are found in high-income and upper-middle-income countries is a regularity observed in previous editions of this report, and, among other reasons, can be explained by the greater employment opportunities in these countries. However, it is interesting to note that the share of migrant workers in high-income countries has fallen from 74.7 per cent in 2013 to 67.4 per cent in 2019, while the respective share in upper-middle-income countries increased from 11.7 per cent in 2013 to 19.5 per cent in 2019. This may have to do with the rising employment opportunities in upper-middle-income countries, demographic changes, as well as evolving migration policies.

► **International migrant workers by income level of countries, 2019**



**Three subregions host the majority of international migrant workers: Northern, Southern and Western Europe, Northern America and the Arab States**

The world’s 169 million migrant workers are distributed amongst the major regions as follows: Europe and Central Asia, 37.7 per cent; Americas, 25.6 per cent; Arab States, 14.3 per cent; Asia and the Pacific, 14.2 per cent; and Africa, with only 8.1 per cent. As regards the origin of international migrants, the Asia and

Pacific region ranks first (being the region of origin for one-third of international migrants), followed by Europe and Central Asia, the Americas, Africa and the Arab States.

The majority of migrant workers are found in three subregions: 24.2 per cent are in Northern, Southern and Western Europe, 22.1 per cent in Northern America and 14.3 per cent in the Arab States. Collectively, these three regions host 60.6 per cent of migrant workers in 2019.

In Northern, Southern and Western Europe, migrant workers make up 18.4 per cent of the labour force. In North America, their share increases to 20.0 per cent. The highest share is observed in the Arab States at 41.4 per cent, which is due to the relatively small population size of this subregion and the substantially higher labour force participation of migrants as compared to non-migrants.

Within these three subregions, men migrant workers are evenly distributed, but women migrant workers are more heavily concentrated in Northern America (24.9 per cent) and Northern, Southern and Western Europe (29.4 per cent). Only 6.0 per cent of women migrant workers are in the Arab States, which could be partially attributed to the limited employment opportunities this region offers to them outside of the care economy (including domestic work).

The importance of the top three regions in terms of the number of international migrant workers they host has not diminished over time. In 2013 and 2017, they were home to 60.2 per cent and 60.8 per cent of migrant workers, respectively.

#### ► Distribution of international migrant workers by broad subregion, 2019

