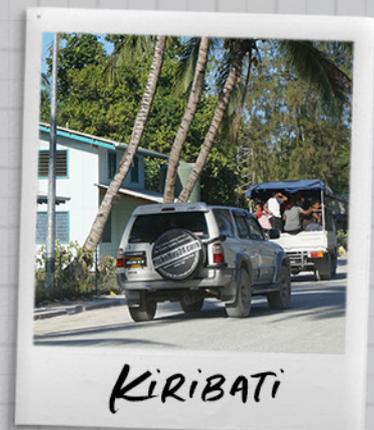


# POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS

IN TIMES OF COVID-19



REGION **ASIA/PACIFIC**



# CHINA

**1.** There are 22 million domestic workers (DW) in China, and more than 90% of them are informally employed without a labour contract and unprotected by Labour.

**2.** COVID-19 added additional precarities to DW's livelihoods: increased losses of jobs and income and increased working hours. Live-in workers' working conditions and mental health also worsened.

**3.** For Domestic workers who are internal migrants, access to social protection is regulated through the "Hukou" registration system. They can only access social protection in their cities of origin, this prevents them from accessing social services in the cities where they work. This left them between a rock and a hard place: to stay put with access to social protection but without work or migrate to cities where there might be work for them, but no social protection.

**4.** The study highlights that care and social protection policies for DWs have remained stagnant and path-dependent during COVID-19, and social dialogue advocating for DW's rights is missing. Demographic changes such as rapid population ageing, and care deficits could also create room for recognizing the value of care work and protecting the work of DWs.

**5.** However, there is some hope: There is a growing demand for informal workers such as delivery workers and DWs. The government is making improvements to establish regulations to formalize the employment relationship of informally employed workers.

**6.** Recent labour changes leading to some formalisation of DW's labour rights could potentially create space for transformative policies to improve labour and social protections of DWs in China. Yet, this formalisation is limited and may not achieve full recognition of all labour entitlements for DWs.





# INDIA

**1.** In the early times of the pandemic, millions of people (primarily workers and internal migrants) were forced to walk thousands of kilometres without state support. A news-based estimate suggests that at least 1,000 migrant workers died on the way back to towns and cities.



**2.** During the pandemic, incomes crashed, job losses and poverty rates increased together with food insecurity and indebtedness. Internal migrant workers, single women, and transgender persons were severely affected. Oxfam International (2022) estimates that more than 120 million jobs were lost, including 92 million from the informal sector in 2020–2021. According to the World Food Program, food insecurity increased, making India home to a quarter of all the world’s undernourished people.

**3.** The policy response from the Indian state included withdrawing rights and welfare while increasing corporate power. Private sector control over labour increased through the undemocratic replacement of all existing Labour laws (35 in total) with Labour Codes that reduce workers’ rights.

**4.** Other measures included the reduction of expenditure allocations in the budgets and subsidies, the weakening of local governments, and the promulgation of Farm Acts that impacted farmers negatively by giving more power to corporations, forcing farmers to trade directly with them, shifting to farming choices and practices that ignore agro-climatic concerns; denying fixed minimum selling prices; among other provisions affecting especially marginal farmers and women.

**5.** Even during this great crisis, there are inspiring progressive practices by women’s and civil rights organisations and NGOs that promote advanced and gender-sensitive practices. The government of the state of Kerala is an example of gender-sensitive practices with a welfare orientation, combined with a decentralised system of governance and a culture of mass participation.



# KIRIBATI

**1.** During the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, hundreds of I-Kiribati seasonal workers were stranded in Australia and New Zealand, unable to return home.

**2.** Workers were under the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) in New Zealand and the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) in Australia. These temporary labour migration schemes are highly regulated, and stringent visa conditions contribute to workers' precariousness, leaving them tied to one employer, with strict rules around movement and working hours being subject to seasonal variability.

**3.** Unable to access any public welfare support, employers, NGO groups, and Kiribati diaspora community groups provided invaluable support to I-Kiribati workers during this time.

**4.** The experience of six I-Kiribati pregnant women seasonal workers revealed some of the long-ignored gendered aspects of seasonal work and the lack of women's access to sexual and reproductive health services while at their jobs, since maternity costs are not covered.

**5.** Pacific labour migration policy remains 'business as usual' as they did not deliver substantial changes in improving the worker's migrant status, labour rights, and the gendered aspects of seasonal work.

**6.** There have been some promising recent developments. Australia's new labour government is announcing reforms to labour mobility in the Pacific, including allowing workers to bring their families with them. It has also announced some permanent migration pathways for seasonal workers, an encouraging sign.





# MALAYSIA



- 1.** Domestic work is a significant source of employment for women migrant workers in Malaysia; this work is characterised by being highly racialised and gendered, with high levels of informality, low wages, and exclusion from labour protection and social protection rights.
- 2.** The already significant precarity of DW's labour standards was further affected during the pandemic. DWs' food and income security were weakened, they confronted income and job losses, and increased exposure to violence.
- 3.** The government's policy responses to the pandemic exacerbated anti-migrant sentiments. It increased biopolitical control via large-scale arrests of undocumented migrants, deportations, and the exclusion of migrant workers from pandemic-assistance plans.
- 4.** Despite the harsh context, MDWs showed great resilience and managed to increase their organisational capacity to demand social security and labour rights using digital platforms. For the first time, they succeeded in getting the government to consider including DWs under the social security protection scheme (SOCSSO) and expanding the Employment Injury Scheme under the national social security scheme to cover MDWs, and a commitment by the Ministry of Human Resources to regulate the domestic work sector through legislation.
- 5.** Some of these positive changes have not yet materialized, but they are opening the path for policy changes that take into account the voices of DWs. This powerful experience was transformative and shows that collective organising is possible even among marginalised communities that face significant structural obstacles in the context of an authoritarian state when innovative organising methods are adapted.

# POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS

*IN TIMES OF COVID-19*

Using a feminist intersectional and interlinkages approach, this project closely examines policy changes that have taken place during the period of exceptionality produced by the pandemic, exploring how they may impact the future.

