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THE ECONOMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH COSTS OF COVID-19 TO IMMIGRANTS

Although the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is not a nationality-based disease, it does affect locals and immigrants differently when it comes to economic and mental health issues. For example, a study based in Canada found that 40% of immigrants reported they had very high levels of concern for their social ties and 43% (of men) said they were unable to meet their financial obligations, while among those born in Canada the comparable rates were 30% and 27% (of men) (The Conversation, 2020). If this is the scenario of a developed and immigration-friendly country such as Canada, then the context might well be worse in countries where immigrants are treated unfairly even before the appearance of COVID-19.

In many instances, immigrants are also excluded from government stimulus packages or financial relief to curb the effect of COVID-19 (e.g., USA; Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Nonetheless, COVID-19-related health treatment, social interaction (immigrants being forbidden to have contact with locals) and working conditions (some countries forcing immigrant workers to work despite lockdown) varies between locals and immigrants in many parts of the world (World Economic Forum, 2020).

There are a couple of explanations on why there is a large gap in relation to economic and mental health issues between locals and immigrants. First, apart from a minority, COVID-19 has resulted in unemployment for thousands of low-skilled immigrants as lockdowns remain in place to curb the virus infection rate in many countries. This economic hardship has become inevitable and there is no sign of revival of the economy in the near future. This has the potential to facilitate further unbearable mental health issues among immigrants. On top of this, there are the knock-on effects to family members who are largely or solely dependent upon the immigrant's income. In an interview with CNN, one immigrant said, *"I'm scared of this coronavirus, because if I catch it I cannot take care of my family"* (CNN, 2020). The economic and mental pressure has already resulted in suicidal deaths of migrant laborers in India (The Indian Express, 2020).

Second, immigrants often journey alone to work in other jurisdictions and leave behind their families in their country of origin. Although low-skilled immigrants do not journey back home frequently, many had planned to reunite with their family prior to the emergence of COVID-19. However, they have now had to halt seeing their family for the foreseeable future. This is even worse in countries that have closed their borders to their own citizens (The Guardian, 2020; AA, 2020; The Edge Markets, 2020).

Third, since the majority of the low-skilled immigrants are from global south region, countries in these particular areas have reported their deficiency in managing the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bangladesh) and infection rates have been rising sharply in recent days at the time of writing (The Diplomat, 2020; The Business Standard, 2020). This has created fear and anxiety among immigrants who have left their family and loved ones in their country of origin. Moreover, some immigrants may have lost their family members already but have been unable to say a final goodbye or attend funerals, which is deemed important in many religious settings. This may result in additional risk and fear among grieving immigrants unable to leave their host countries.

Fourth, immigrants in many countries were already victims of xenophobia, hate, and discrimination from locals prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, but the pandemic may exacerbate the situation (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020). Furthermore, many low-skilled immigrants are also work on the frontline in areas of increased COVID-19 exposure (e.g., cleaners) and are more vulnerable to the virus due to unhygienic and cramped accommodation facilities which in itself may trigger and/or facilitate mental health issues among such individuals.

Fifth, as the lockdown measures have slowed down economic activities worldwide, the overall economy will not recover quickly even when lockdowns are eased. Many immigrants will be first in line to lose their jobs in countries who are drafting policies to terminate foreign workers first if lay-offs are inevitable (International Labor Organization, 2020). Some countries have enacted draconian policies to deport illegal immigrants (e.g., Malaysia) which may also trigger anxiety and fear among both legal and illegal immigrants (The Edge Market, 2020). It may be a difficult and life threatening choice for immigrants to go back to their country of origin where the situation might be even worse than in their host country. Overall, immigrants are likely to bear higher levels of economic and mental health costs than non-immigrants.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic host countries should not turn their back on ensuring the health and safety of immigrants. Immigrants are and will continue to be an important part of many countries' development path and they contribute in many aspects in helping to fight COVID-19 (e.g., frontline doctors and cleaners). Consequently, they deserve equal treatment from their host countries, including their mental and economic livelihoods. It has often been said the COVID-19 pandemic is a 'humanitarian crisis with a public health dimension', and humanity should prevail before race, religion, color, and origin while treating immigrants.

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