

# The Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on International Migration: A Global or a More Bordered World?

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## ABSTRACT

*Introduction: This paper will review the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration through a wide perspective that opens up some critical questions with regard to globalization and global challenges to universal norms and freedoms.*

*Method: This research is based on literature review through qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources—including published reports, surveys, and articles. Studies on how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced migration have mostly focused on some specific effects in particular countries with micro-level surveys. Research papers with a wider perspective that analyse general effects of the pandemic on flows of migration at the macro level, as a global phenomenon, have been relatively in short supply.*

*Results: Although the number of international migrants decreased in general during the pandemic crisis, even such a global calamity that deeply affected billions and killed millions of people all over the world did not prove to have the potential to stop global migration, primarily illegal migration.*

*Conclusion: A more bordered world in the era of globalization is not likely to produce the desired result in mitigating inflows of migration if the West and the Global North do not effectively address migrant-generating root causes.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, International migration, Globalization, Rebordering

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## INTRODUCTION

Human migration is a global phenomenon that massively shaped human history and influenced its social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics. International migration has sharply escalated to unprecedented levels in a growingly globalizing and shrinking world in the last decades. The current UN global estimate reports that the number of international migrants, people who settled in a foreign country temporarily or permanently, reached around 281 million by 2020 [1]. Flows of migration towards particularly the West (distinctly North America and Western Europe) remarkably increased in the recent decade. This paper will go through the general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration

with a reference to some critical questions: Is a lingering blockage of human mobility and migration possible via measures enacted by states driven by even such a global calamity? Can inflows of global migration enduringly decrease or stop without elimination of its root causes? Did the pandemic further exacerbate anti-immigrant and isolationist tendencies, symbolized by far right and populist movements and leaders?

The COVID-19 pandemic, as the most serious global health crisis of the century that led to several million deaths worldwide, has profoundly influenced overall human mobility at local, national, and global level and all kinds and patterns of internal and international migration, which are motivated by economic and educational concerns or forced by political or other vital worries. Due to various restrictive measures by governmental authorities such as closure of public sites, workplaces, and public transport, shift to online education, extraordinary public health directives and quarantine, 'stay-at-home' recommendations, lockdowns, international travel bans and border restrictions or closures, and suspension of issuing visas, the pandemic has had extremely restraining effects on

mobility and migration [2]. The effects of the pandemic on different specific appearances of the migration phenomenon have been pre-eminent focus of the previous research. Amongst numerous examples, I will here touch on some of them just to mention a few.

The pandemic generated negative outcomes on international labor migration from underdeveloped regions to higher-income countries; labor migrants suffered from restrictive measures and bad treatment from authorities in the destination countries [3]. Typical internal labor migration from rural to industrial urban areas, as cities provide job opportunities in manufacturing, turned to a reverse migration to rural areas back due to the business shutdowns caused by the covid crisis [4]. Studies clarified net reverse internal migration rates from metropolitan cities to rural areas and looked through international migrants returning to their home countries because of financial distress and loss of labor associated with the pandemic with examples from specific countries [5, 6].

Studies demonstrated diverse effects of the pandemic on both pro- and anti-immigrant sentiments in different countries [7, 8]. Open borders and cross-border trade exchanges have generally mitigating effects on intercultural prejudices. The outbreak of the covid generated varying effects on open societies, expected to be more tolerant toward diversity; namely reverse effects in attitudes of natives toward particularly Asian migrants. People with Asian origin living in western liberal societies, particularly the Chinese in the US, encountered xenophobic attitudes and discriminatory actions when the pandemic broke out [9, 10]. Loss of jobs and worsening economic conditions during pandemic-induced business shutdowns led to growing antipathy toward the immigrants and refugees in different countries [11]. Throughout history, migrants have been generally blamed for spreading epidemic diseases. Xenophobic sentiments toward out-groups including migrants usually grew in turbulent times of instabilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, an increased trend of discriminatory attitudes toward migrants has been widely reported in the studies. Migrants proved to be direct victims of negative social, political, and economic outcomes, and health risks of the pandemic, as a marginalized group most vulnerable to the unfavorable manifestations and hardships of the crisis [12].

How the pandemic-related measures exacerbated existing inequalities, hardships and challenges experienced by migrants have been researched in the framework of various specific areas in particular countries. To name a few, educational setbacks for migrant schoolchildren are one of the problematic areas among others [13]. Compared to natives, more negative actual or psychological experiences of immigrants and refugees as disadvantageous groups under greater stress factors, having less access to healthcare, excluded from financial support programs, and suffering from other kinds of inequities, further amplified by the pandemic, constitute another troublesome field [14, 15].

An additional field of inquiry widely discussed in the literature covers economic challenges such as negative effects of the pandemic on household economy and worsening economic conditions during the crisis [16], and perceived job insecurity and financial hardships felt more visibly by immigrants [17]. Various problems faced by migrant workers due to the lack of international or regional coordination in tackling the pandemic, and declining inflows of remittances sent by labor migrants to home countries as vital sources of household economy for large masses have been studied as well [18,19]. Impediments to international student mobility and hardships experienced by international students, eroding the prospects for international higher education as a great achievement of globalization, formed a further detrimental effect of the pandemic [20].

### **The Effects of the Pandemic on International Migration**

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated discriminatory attitudes and restrictive policies towards immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in general in the Global North. Health measures enacted by governments, border closures, travel and entry restrictions, overt or covert forms of exclusion of migrants from labor markets, more severe deportation policies, and poor healthcare conditions made migration or seeking asylum much more challenging for people who need to migrate, especially for forced migrants. COVID-19 responses led to human rights violations for forced migrants and refugees. Travel restrictions forced some migrants to take vital risks by attempting to cross dangerous borders. Refugee camps as shelters for those fleeing dangers and risks to their security became crowded sites of health risks during the pandemic. Migrants and refugees were not included in the governmental programs aimed at supporting economic well-being of their citizens. Forced migrants including unaccompanied children are among those most negatively affected by the pandemic-induced measures, as they are vulnerable to various challenges further exacerbated during the crisis [21, 22].

Although the covid restrictions temporarily reduced human mobility, the restraining measures do not have the potential to stop everlasting migration because the root causes and fundamental drivers of migration remain standing in the world. Socio-political prospects such as liberal democracy and freedoms, rule of law, respect for human rights, and good governance in the West have the potential to attract migrants who escape from insecurities and instabilities generated by authoritarian and corrupt regimes. Economic prospects, better living conditions, better education or health standards, and job opportunities are also capable of motivating people to migrate from the underdeveloped world to higher income countries. The brief measures introduced during the epidemic crisis, here today and gone tomorrow, did not eradicate the needs and motives for migration that are too strong among too many in a world troubled by ever-increasing inequalities, rising kleptocracy and authoritarianism, and escalating conflicts and wars.

While restrictive measures and border closures were able to check legal migration, they actually did not halt the flows of illegal migration. Flows of migration, interrupted during early phase of the crisis, resumed as soon as initial lockdowns were lifted. By September 2021, the number of migrants arriving in Europe and seeking asylum surpassed the level before the pandemic [11]. Even when the covid restrictions were the highest during the first year of the crisis, remarkable increases in the number of migrants, trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, have been reported [23]. Harsh measures such as violent policing, pushbacks, and withdrawal from rescue operations led to a border violence with escalating migrant drowning in the Mediterranean Sea [24].

Security is an ontological need for human beings. Basically, the concept of security refers to freedom from threats to life. Additionally, it refers to security of fundamental freedoms, economic and political security, food security, health security, environmental security, and personal and communal security [25]. If people do not feel secure in their environment and not see prospects for a tolerable future for themselves and next generations in their home country, at least some of them are inclined toward migration at all costs. The covid crisis can be a brief interval in legal international migration that is not vitally forced; however, restrictions and physical barriers induced by the covid or other concerns proved unable to stop the onrush of ever-growing flows of forced global migration. The COVID-19 indeed intensified insecurities related to economics, food, health, employment, etc. in the underdeveloped world, a fact that has the potential to trigger growing migration. Deteriorating economic and social conditions throughout the world but especially in the underdeveloped world due to the pandemic generate powerful incentives to migrate. Mobility restrictions can introduce only a temporary decline in strong migratory tendency driven by economic or other factors [26]. Barriers can make people, highly motivated to migrate, just wait for a while but keep an eye open to migrate whenever it becomes possible. The covid crisis revealed unequal capabilities between developed and underdeveloped countries and asymmetric performance in speed and efficiency of their responses to the crisis. Wealthy governments have secured vaccination for their populations much earlier than the underdeveloped world. They also introduced financial support packages to mitigate job losses and income shortages. Poor performance of the weak states, on the other side, led to a further loss of trust among the people in the skills of their governments to tackle the trouble. Existing economic problems and dynamics of insecurity in the underdeveloped and unstable regions are likely to worsen due to the outcomes of the pandemic in the coming years. Thus, the pandemic further revealed the root problems as key drivers for migration such as bad governance and incapability of corrupt regimes in managing the crisis to protect their citizens.

Although migrant-receiving countries tighten border

controls against growing inflows of migration, whether they want a total closure of borders to human influxes or whether a complete shutdown is possible over the long term are questions awaiting answers. Freedom of movement, right to travel, and mobility rights are universal human rights. Protests against nationwide lockdowns during the pandemic demonstrate that people are tending to react against restraints on their mobility. The wide range of exceptions granted by governments to international travel bans during the pandemic crisis prove that a certain degree of international human movement is necessarily required owing to highly intensified interconnectedness between countries in the global era. Numerous kinds of immigrant visa programs provided by different countries also demonstrate that the developed and industrialized countries need laborers in various sectors, and try to attract skilled migrants. Global economy in general and economies of developed countries in particular, and certain sectors and services in societies depend on labor migration. Migrant workers contribute to the socio-economic well-being of both sending and receiving countries. Reduced human mobility is likely to generate remarkable shortages in labor supply for various sectors [27].

#### **Covid-19 Pandemic and International Migration with Regard to Globalization and Universal Human Rights**

Ever-growing and extensive human mobility is one of the remarkable attributes of globalization. Increasing worldwide connectivity and web of networks in the globalized world have made peoples across borders interdependent; and so, ageless human mobility has become a vital part of life for considerable amounts of people in the global era. Global economy, global production, global supply chain and labor market make border closures and national isolation from the rest of the world highly costly for large masses who benefit from cross-border mobility and transactions. The number of people traveling or migrating across borders is continually increasing. Rapid spread of the pandemic throughout the world, for instance, is a result of globalization. Many cities in migrant-receiving countries are becoming more cosmopolitan from year to year with ever-expanding migrant residents with linkages with numerous countries.

Liberal school among international relations theories emphasizes the importance of growing interconnectedness and interdependence in the prevention of conflicts and the maintenance of peace. According to liberal internationalism, the costs of severing highly entrenched transnational ties in the globalized world would be so high. Open societies connected via multiple channels and a global civil society have a mitigating effect on aggressive tendencies. Accordingly, free trade and open borders giving rise to a trading world would have a pacifying effect on hostilities. Increased intimacy, communication, interactions and cooperation would help build up goodwill and mutual trust between groups and societies through a shared

sense of community. Europe, continent of constant wars in the olden days, transformed into an island of peace and stability through integration and abolishment of borders. Furthermore, global challenges increase the need for international collaboration. A norm-driven international society that stand for a worldwide alertness and scrutiny on misuse of power, and a global governance, signified as coordinated responses to global threats by the involvement of non-state actors and civil society in addition to state actors, are possible and achievable. International society of states can evolve into a united global society when societies grow a common consciousness around shared values such as inviolability of human rights and justice for everyone [28].

States, for security concerns, must not bypass peace-oriented norms and shared sense of community based on transnational ties that uphold international cooperation and cordial relations. Actions taken by governments during the time of crises must be consistent with international human rights norms. Migrant rights are human rights as well. Rights relating to equal treatment and non-discrimination, rights to health and to information, labor rights, and non-return to risks of serious harm, are universal norms that apply to everyone, irrespective of their immigrant status. Turbulent times should not lead to a neglect of states' commitments based on international law [21]. Unilateral policies and harsh measures enacted by governments on human mobility and border management without considering universal human and refugee rights raised concerns about a vital need for effective global migration governance including migrant civil society in the globalized world. Global Compact for safe, orderly, and regular Migration (GCM), adopted by the majority of the UN members in 2018, can be a basis and an important milestone for further attempts to build up global migration governance [29].

Rise of nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism as a challenge to liberal international order in the last decade, further exacerbated by 'migration crises of the mid-2010s and the COVID-19 pandemic, foster isolationism and pose a threat against free movement of persons. Prevention of outlaw and rouge states from undermining a law-governed and norm-based international order are vitally important for peace-oriented international community. There is a vital need to develop an efficient and joint strategy by the West, namely the US and the EU, in collaboration with the other democratic countries against challenges to democracy and freedoms in the world. However, cleavages in the uniformity of the West in their stand for the maintenance of a liberal democratic order; attributable to isolationist tendencies and growing opposition to open borders, as in Brexit, Trump's presidency, and cracks in the EU in response to Putin and in migration policies, expose the future of liberal democratic values and achievements of globalization to danger. Politicization of migrant and refugee issues by right-wing parties or securitization of infectious diseases beyond the limits of necessary health restraints may have a negative impact on freedom of movement even in the

EU as a free-travel area. Security concerns aggravated by ever-increasing human mobility drove states to growing watchfulness over the borders, regarded as manifestation of state sovereignty. 'Rebordering', which refers to renewed border surveillance, coercive control, harsh policing, and reinforced protectionist and heightened security measures, aims at keeping the unwanted migrants out. Xenophobia-driven excessive bordering striving for the more fenced and bordered world rises to detriment of the globalization that is signified as borderless world [30-32]. Politicization of the pandemic reinforced existing forms of exclusion and structures of discrimination toward the migrants. Xenophobic narratives provoked by security concerns called for tough measures restricting some civil liberties and led to racialized implementation of regulations that normalized pushbacks, tighter surveillance, policing and criminalization toward the migrants [33-37].

The current pandemic-related coping strategies may harm mental health, such as decreased well-being and increased depression and anxiety symptoms [38, 39]. Also, inactivity due to COVID-19 disease can have a negative effect on physical and mental health and coping with stress and anxiety during isolation time [40]. Besides, there were some negative lifestyle changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic [41]. Furthermore, the fairly big changes in food

Consumption preferences were reported [42]. Also, in another study, there was a significant decrease in family incomes and a significant increase in family expenditures during the pandemic outbreak. Also, Nigerian women entrepreneurs experienced the negative effect of COVID-19 outbreak on their businesses [43, 44].

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a variety of negative effects on living, working, and traveling conditions, more manifestly faced by international migrants. It gave rise to numerous impediments to flows of international migration though on the downward slope as the early extraordinary restraints gradually waned after the initial shock. Although the number of international migrants decreased in general during the crisis [44], even such a global calamity that deeply affected billions and killed millions of people all over the world did not prove to have the potential to stop global migration, primarily illegal migration. The desire for migration at all costs is too powerful among too many in the underdeveloped regions that are vulnerable to instabilities, oppressions, conflicts, and other kinds of troubles as sources of human suffering and insecurities. International migration is an ultimate outcome stimulated by such root causes. As long as these migrant-generating fundamental problems are not efficiently addressed and neutralized via a joint strategy and effective global governance mechanisms led by the West or the Global North, international migration that gained a momentum in the recent decade is likely to accelerate into the future. The prevention of international



migration, especially forced migration, is beyond the bounds of possibility if norms are sacrificed to interests by Western governments, expected to be the guardian of norm-based international order, in a world increasingly threatened by authoritarian and kleptocracy regimes violating universal norms and human rights.

The pandemic, while introducing a limited and temporary suspension in flows of migration during early phase of the crisis, indeed revealed inequalities and imbalances further at international level so as to trigger greater international migration. If the Global North turn a blind eye to the growing global imbalances and if the liberal-democratic world do not stay committed to the promotion of liberal-democratic values and norms opposed to tyrannies, migrant-generating insecurities are likely to accelerate in the world. Isolationist policies in the developed world would not produce the desired result in the long term as long as the fundamental problems remain standing in the rest of the world. Against the global onrush of migrant influxes, tighter restrictive measures and higher walls can be likened to kicking the can down the road and beating around the bush. Since a total isolation from global problems seems impossible in the era of globalization, a more bordered world will not bear fruit if the West does not get to the point by managing a concerted strategy to give a constructive helping hand to the destabilized regions for a higher democratic and human rights standards, and better living conditions.

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