

April 2021

Dear friends,

Greetings from Bangkok. I am writing this just before we take a week's break for Songkran, the Thai New Year. Many people in Southeast and South Asia celebrate the New Year in mid-April. The word *Songkran* comes from the Sanskrit word *Sankranti* which means passage, a time for change. Buddhists and many Hindus mark this period as their new year, a new beginning. The *Thingyan* of Myanmar, *Chol Chnam Thmay* of Cambodia, Dai water festival of Yunnan, *Boun Pi Mai* of Laos, *Bisuba Sankranti* of Odisha, *Bohag Bihu* of Assam, *Pahela Baishakh* of West Bengal and *Vishu* of Kerala are different names for essentially the same idea. People mark the passage of the sun from the zodiac sign of Pisces to Aries. Many use water symbolically to cleanse themselves and their houses, bathe the Buddha, water the holy basil plant, splash scented water on each other, visit family and friends and generally have a joyful time.

Thailand celebrates New Year three times in a year; on 1 January, during the Chinese New Year in February and again at Songkran time in April. But this is the second time in a row that the festivities are going to be affected by fear and worry about the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone has some knowledge about the pandemic and the necessary preventive measures now. However, people are also tired and frustrated so are letting go of caution and being careless. Proactive testing is not happening in Thailand and the process of vaccination has been slow. Clusters of community infection are showing up periodically and no one knows when this grim situation will end. The other concern for all of us in this region is the military takeover in Myanmar. More than two months into the coup, the brutal killings of people and other atrocities show no sign of stopping. It is sad and disturbing to know that despite various regional and international mechanisms, no real steps are being taken to address the situation.

The on-going COVID-19 situation has taken its toll on economies and job losses are massive. Those working in the informal economy— workers on daily wages and temporary contracts, both local and migrants - are the hardest hit. Relief packages of states are not reaching many of them. Cross-border migrant workers are eager to go back to the countries where they were working. Indeed, in certain sectors their employers are also eager to have them back. But international travel at the time of a pandemic is difficult and expensive, if not impossible. There is talk of a 'COVID passport', a certification to show that the holder of the document is vaccinated. While the concept is good and the Yellow Fever certification provides a template for it, it would not be easy to implement this idea at a large scale. For working class migrants, this will create one more layer of difficulty. There is currently a lot of misinformation about vaccines and their efficacy. Many countries do not yet have enough vaccines. New mutants of the virus have started spreading and it is not clear whether the available vaccines will protect us from the new strains.

In a situation like this, creation of local employment, raising the standards of

occupational health and safety measures for all workers, bridging the digital divide, addressing the agrarian crises and investing in health, education and social security would be right steps to take. In other words, this is the time for states to start questioning their paradigm of growth-oriented development. The move towards a neoliberal economic paradigm had happened incrementally, often under external pressure. So a turn away from that model will also take time. It is unlikely that the current financial institutions will encourage the states to do so. Will the discontent and protests of large numbers of citizens push states to rethink?

While it is not clear if a large-scale move towards a people- and planet-centred development model will happen anytime soon, there is no dearth of inspiring initiatives at local levels. Whether it is groups of women farmers deciding to engage in collective farming in India, Indonesia and Thailand or a city like Amsterdam embracing the Doughnut economic theory to move towards sustainable development, these are the beacons of hope in this bleak time. Perhaps we do not need to wait for change at a grand scale. Maybe change in many small pockets is something that can happen and keep us going.

Finally, I would like to end by sharing information about [Feminist Fridays](#), an interesting webinar series that GAATW is going to co-host with Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), Solidarity Center, and Women in Migration Network (WIMN). This six-part series of **Conversations about Labour Migration from a Feminist Lens** is an attempt to think through complex issues and build/share knowledge and learn from each other. We will start with a discussion on 'what is a feminist lens on labour migration' and will move on to feminist research, advocacy, organising and media. The final session will be on imagining feminist futures on labour migration. Panellists will come from academia, NGOs including migrant worker led organisations, trade unions and media. The first session is scheduled to be held on 23 April at 1 PM GMT. We hope to see many of you at these sessions.

As always we welcome your feedback and contributions to future issues at borislav@gaatw.org.

International Advocacy Update

Read the complete international advocacy update [here](#). It includes:

The 13th **Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)** summit was held online from 18 to 26 January 2021 under the chairmanship of United Arab Emirates (UAE). Amid the pandemic, GFMD 2020 brought together (virtually) governments, local authorities, business leaders, civil society and youth representatives in a multi-stakeholder dialogue to discuss the responses to COVID-19 and global migration issues. ...

The international community needs to look beyond the criminal justice system and recognize that human trafficking is the result of complex socioeconomic and political factors and address these root causes.

Full statement: bit.ly/3qbm1UU

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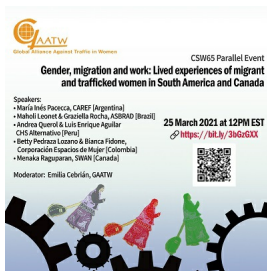


UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

Ahead of the 14th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, GAATW submitted a [written statement](#) where we called for a radical reform of the criminal justice system, so that it works in

the interests of migrants, women, low-wage workers, victims of trafficking and other marginalised groups who, in our experience, fear the police and courts and regard them as instruments of state oppression and not protection. We also called for a shift in anti-trafficking initiatives away from reliance on the criminal justice system and towards social and economic measures in line with states' commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals. As part of the Congress programme, we also

organised a side event titled 'Technology and Human Trafficking'. ...



trafficked women. ...

Commission on the Status of Women

On 25 March the GAATW Secretariat organised a CSW65 online parallel event titled [Women, work and migration: lived experiences of migrant and trafficked women in South America and Canada](https://bit.ly/3M6G5XK). The purpose of this session was to present preliminary findings of two Feminist Participatory Action Researches conducted by five member and partner organisations in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Canada on the topic of social and economic inclusion of migrant and

[Read the complete international advocacy update](#)

News from the GAATW Secretariat

Read all the news from the GAATW Secretariat [here](#). These include:

New Colleagues

The GAATW-IS welcomed two new colleagues to our team. **Sharmila Parmanand** joined us in January in the role of Programme Officer Women, Work and Migration in Asia where she will support two projects involving feminist participatory action research and advocacy on the social and economic inclusion of migrant and trafficked women in South Asia and along the Southeast Asia - Europe migration corridor. Sharmila is from the Philippines but currently working from the UK where she recently obtained her PhD in Gender Studies from the University of Cambridge. **Yap Lay Sheng** joined our team in March as Advocacy and Campaigns Officer. He pursued an MPhil in Inter-Disciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge and previously coordinated research and advocacy work for the Women's Aid Organisation in Malaysia, focusing on labour rights and gender equality.



Women Workers for Change

On International Women's Day 2021, GAATW members and partners launched **Women Workers for Change**, a year-long campaign comprising initiatives based on the starting points that *all women are workers, regardless of the work they do and whether or not they are paid for it*. Participating groups will hold a series of conversations that centre on women's strategies in changing their realities as workers. The campaign will amplify migrant and local voices of women from Asia,

Africa and Latin America; many of them are organised and self-organised groups of sex workers, domestic workers, garment sector workers, women farmers, home-based workers, and entertainment workers. ...

Feminist Fridays: Conversations about Labour Migration from a Feminist Lens

This new webinar series is a collaborative initiative of Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Solidarity Center, and Women in Migration Network (WIMN).

During the course of six sessions, we will think through complex issues and build/share knowledge and learn from each other. We will start with a discussion on 'what is a feminist lens on labour migration' and will move on to feminist research, advocacy, organising and media. The final session will be on imagining feminist futures on labour migration. Panellists will come from academia, NGOs including migrant worker led organisations, trade unions and media. ...

[Read all the news from the GAATW Secretariat](#)

News from our Member Organisations

Read all the news from GAATW members [here](#). These include:

Five New Members Join GAATW

In the first quarter of 2021, we welcomed five new members to our alliance - one from Bangladesh, three from India, and one from the United States. ...



International Women's Day in Latin America

Our members in LAC celebrate International Women's Day with a number of different activities. In Mexico, **Brigada Callejera** organised an [online convening](#) under the slogan 'Neither victims nor victimisers. We are warriors!'. They used the event to denounce the lack of government support for sex workers during the pandemic, and demand better working conditions, access to healthcare and relief support.

AMUMRA and **SINTRASEDOM** from, respectively, Argentina and Colombia, participated in an online convening to commemorate titled 'What is the situation of domestic workers in Latin America?' The discussion was moderated by Yenny Hurtado, president of SINTRASEDOM, and speakers included Natividad Obeso, president of AMUMRA, and representatives from domestic workers organisations and trade unions in Peru, Mexico, Guatemala and the United States. See the recording of the event (in Spanish) [here](#). ...



New FLEX Publications Highlight the Working Conditions of Vulnerable Workers in the UK

Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), UK, recently published three research reports: on the working conditions of workers in the cleaning sector in the UK, and of seasonal workers in the Scottish agriculture sector, as well as one documenting the learnings of FLEX from conducting Feminist Participatory Action Researches ...

TWC2 Calls for Holistic Reforms in Response to Domestic Work Abuse Case

On 25 February, the Singapore public was exposed to the brutal court proceedings of a domestic work abuse case of a Myanmar national by her Singaporean employers. The acts, ranging from starvation, denial of living privacy, physical and emotional abuse, eventually resulted in her death. In **TWC2's** excellent commentary of the issue, our sister organisation called for respect of domestic workers' rights in legislation, for the city-state to transition towards a live-out domestic work arrangement, and for the Ministry of Manpower to implement laws that allow domestic workers to change jobs without requiring the consent of employers.

Read [part one](#) and [part two](#) of the commentary.

SWAN and Sex Workers Project Denounce the Atlanta Massage Shootings

Following [the murders](#) of six Asian massage workers in Atlanta by a young, white man, **SWAN Vancouver** (Canada) and the **Sex Workers Project** (USA), in separate statements, highlighted the intersecting forms of dehumanisation that Asian sex workers experience. SWAN and partners' [joint statement](#) called this violence the result of 'a long history of fetishizing, hypersexualizing and marginalizing Asian women' that make Asian women the target of racialised and sexualised violence. The Sex Workers Project [in their press release](#) reiterate the important point that 'victims of this violence didn't deserve to be humiliated, hurt, or killed during an ordinary

day of work because of what they looked like, where they were from or how they earned a living’.

Employment and Self-Care Support for Entertainment Workers in Nepal

WOFOWON, an organisation that works to protect the rights of women working in the informal and entertainment sectors, has been providing self-defence, computer, cooking, and handicraft classes. Self-defence skills is an important component for women workers in high-risk sectors to defend themselves against violence, while dance classes enabled women participants to engage in different ways of expressions. Cooking and handicraft classes came in handy for women workers who have recently been laid off and are seeking re-skilling and re-employment opportunities.

La Strada International and LEFÖ Campaign on Access to Residence for Victims of Trafficking

On European Day for Victims of Crime, 22 February 2021, **La Strada International** called upon Members of the European Parliament to help improve access to residence for victims of trafficking and labour exploitation. Based on the [REST](#) project (coordinated by **LEFÖ-IBF**), the coalition called on EU member states to simplify procedures, make unconditional, and strengthen support for trafficked persons to obtain long-term or temporary residence. ...

ASTRA and Novi Put Awarded the ‘Child10 Award’ for Their Work on Child Trafficking

[ASTRA](#) from Serbia and [Novi Put](#) from Bosnia and Herzegovina have been awarded the ‘[Child10](#) Award 2021’ together with eight other organisations. ASTRA is commended for ‘providing direct support and assistance, education and raising awareness, advocacy, research, and networking’ for survivors, while Novi Put’s effort in ‘implementing anti-trafficking programs of education and prevention activities among categories vulnerable to human trafficking’ is acknowledged by the award committee. This recognition will provide grants to winning organisations in their fight against child trafficking. Read about the ten winning organisations [here](#).

Support Services for Victims of Labour Exploitation and Gender-Based Violence in Bulgaria

Animus Association published a report on the existing support services for women victims of labour exploitation, human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence coming from non-EU countries. The Report shows that Bulgaria is still a transit country for refugees and asylum seekers as the majority prefer to continue with their journey to other European countries. As migrant women face a number of specific challenges, the identification of *vulnerabilities to trafficking* is more relevant rather than the identification of a trafficking experience. ...

Access to Justice for Bangladeshi migrant workers

A new report by **OKUP** highlights the practical challenges faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers, especially women, in seeking justice through the Bureau of Manpower and Employment (BMET) arbitration and the courts. It is based on in-depth case documentation of 262 women who had experienced exploitation and abuse during recruitment and employment in the Middle East and the documentation of 123 arbitration cases. ...

Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers in Nepal

WOREC, in partnership with the International Labour Organization, published a report on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on domestic workers in Nepal. Many Nepali domestic workers saw their means of livelihoods disappeared as employers callously shunned them as carriers of the virus. On the other hand, those that ‘lived in’ with employers faced even longer hours of work as lockdown necessitated that families be quarantined in their homes. ...

[Read all the news from GAATW members](#)

[We need a different language of migration for a more humane age of post-pandemic mobility](#)

Yap Lay Sheng

In this blog post, GAATW's Advocacy and Campaigns Officer looks at the discourse surrounding international migration as COVID-19 vaccinations accelerate and states reopen their borders. He argues that a harsher securitisation of borders, already prevalent in the language used to make (post-)pandemic travel safe such as 'bubbles' and 'safe zones', does not bode well for migrants. What appears to be a travel regime for frictionless tourism will only increase costliness and compliance procedures and subject migrants to more indignity of travel. We must prioritise the invisibilised dimension of human mobility—labour migration—in the discussions of all post-COVID-19 travels plans.

[Travelling Women, Sex Work and the Rescue Industry](#)

Laura Agustín with Borislav Gerasimov and Sharmila Parmanand

In this video interview, Laura Agustín, author of *Sex at the Margins*, speaks to GAATW about how she got interested in learning more about women who go abroad for work, the ordinary language these women use to describe their experiences vs. the extraordinary language of 'trafficking' that NGOs, media and policy makers use to describe the same thing; the origins and motivations of the 'rescue industry'; the artificial distinction between 'trafficking' and 'smuggling' in international law; and how to ensure that women have good experiences with migration without the negative side effects of calling it 'anti-trafficking work'.

[How we got here: the story of the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking](#)

Joel Quirk and Marjan Wijers

In this interview, Dutch researcher and human rights advocate (and one of the founders of GAATW) Marjan Wijers reflects on her involvement in the field of human trafficking, women's rights and sex workers rights since the 1980s. She describes how the legitimate concerns of advocates like herself with the human rights and working conditions of migrant sex workers in Europe were coopted and distorted by governments and conservative groups into a punitive 'anti-trafficking' agenda. She also reflects on the successes and failures of human rights advocates at the negotiations of the UN Trafficking Protocol, as well as the direction that anti-trafficking work should take two decades after the Protocol was adopted.

[Fashioning justice: A call for mandatory and comprehensive human rights due diligence in the garment industry](#)

Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)

CCC makes a forceful case that non-binding initiatives by garment brands no longer work to deliver human rights justice for garment workers. The social audit system employed by many fashion firms delegates the burden of compliance onto garment suppliers, whereas the crux of the issue is that fashion brands and retailers artificially lower prices for suppliers through their sheer monopoly power. This leads to cost-cutting measures that depress workers' wages, endanger occupational safety, and circumvent compliance with rights and safety regulations. CCC calls for binding rules that hold firms to account for upholding decent work, labour rights and human rights standards across their entire global value chain.

[World Employment and Social Outlook: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work](#)

International Labour Organization

The ILO has called for regulations to catch up with the rapid adoption of digital labour platforms. While sanguine about the prospects of expanded forms of employment that these platforms provide, the ILO nevertheless warns of several trends. These include the lack of social protection of contracted workers, the lack of bargaining powers of non-unionised workers, the monopoly power of labour platforms against smaller enterprises, and the further exacerbation of digital divides as Global North digital platforms contract low-wage labour from the South. Overall, the paper calls for regulations to correct the classification status of 'gig' workers, ensure algorithmic transparency, enshrine adequate social protection for workers and to

protect workers' bargaining power and access to labour remediation mechanisms.

[Wage theft and pandemic profits: The right to a living wage for garment workers](#)

Alysha Khambay & Thulsi Narayanasamy

A damning report published by Business and Human Rights Resource Centre in March 2021 reveals that the pandemic has made worse the problem of wage theft in the garment industry. As many as 9,843 garment workers face wage theft in eight factories supplying 16 fashion brands including H&M, Nike and Levi's. The report highlights that fashion retailers' supply chain structure, which is reliant on outsourcing of garment manufacturing, creates a system that is shrouded in opacity and allows brands to evade responsibility. It concludes by calling for brands to overhaul their purchasing practices and to pay workers living wages.

[No Borders to Equality: Global mapping of organisations working on gender and migration](#)

Paola Cymant

A report and resource site jointly developed by the Women in Migration Network and Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung provides a useful tool for tracking the state of advocacy in the field migration, highlighting the issues, problems and capacity of organisations working in the field. It also charts a way forward, calling for more alliance building between organisations, adoption of a more intersectional approach, building linkages between migration and other issue areas, as well as centering migrant women's voices in our advocacy work. The overall [resource](#) site provides helpful ways for organisations to connect and build networks.

[Assessing Labor Risk for Workers Migrating from the Philippines to Europe](#)

Verité

In their latest research, Verité highlight the risky pathways of migrations that Filipino workers undertake from their home country to Europe. The report provides a detailed breakdown of problems faced by migrants, including engaging with unlicensed recruiters, being weighted down by heavy debt from personally shouldering the recruitment fees, as well as the risk of wage theft and lax labour standards that they experience for those in the fishing, seafaring, and domestic work sectors in Europe.

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