



## CHALLENGES FACED BY CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANT WOMEN IN RUSSIA: LEGAL PRECARIETY, DISCRIMINATION, AND EXCLUSION

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### **Abstract**

*Central Asian migrant woman in Russia are facing challenges that shape their well-being and everyday survival. This paper investigates the vulnerabilities of central Asian migrant women in Russia. These vulnerabilities generate psychological distress because of the family separation, thin support networks, hate, xenophobia, racialization, overcrowded housing, and legal precarity. The paper examines how psychological distress is produced through the intersection of gendered obligations, transnational responsibilities, family separation weak social support and isolation, and exploitive and precarious legal systems. By looking at women's lived experiences of hate, discrimination, xenophobia, insecurity and uncertainty article contributes to debate on gendered precarity and migrant mental health.*

### **Introduction**

Central Asian Russian migration corridor is one of the most active migration corridors of the world. Russia is the primary destination for migrants from Post-Soviet Central Asian states. Women constitute a substantial share of this mobility flows, particularly from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Migration from Central Asian states to Russia is still male dominated, but the proportion of women migrating to Russia has increased substantially. Women's migration to Russia is increasingly influenced by the household survival strategies and increasing labour demand for women in Russia's service sector. The increasing number of women migrating from central Asian states to Russia is due to increasing job opportunities in Russian service sector in the recent times. In 2016, women constitute approximately 16 percent of the labour migrant population from Tajikistan, around 18 percent from Uzbekistan and 38 percent from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the analytical integrity accounts of the challenges faced by Central Asian migrant women in Russia.

Along with these opportunities there are challenges like legal challenges, issues of hate and xenophobia, and informality. There are gender specific challenges for example, dealing with the safety concerns, sexual harassment, exploitation, and family responsibilities. Because of the specific role woman plays in the family or in the society like child care or the caregiving, balancing between the traditional family roles and the professional works or the double burden of the family or family responsibilities. She has some unique and different challenges from / apart from the challenges, male is facing. Central Asian migrant woman mostly works in the low wage and informal sectors like cleaning, care work, supply chain, and food service.

Centre Asian migrant women are facing intersecting stressors or the challenges at the individual, community, and structural levels. Together, these challenges lead to psychological distress and overall mental health issues. Individual and interpersonal stressors are gendered vulnerabilities, separation

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<sup>1</sup>Agadjanian, V., Oh, B., & Menjivar, C. (2022). (II) legality and psychosocial well-being: Central Asian migrant women in Russia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1872373>



from loved ones, and low social support. Material constraints are precarious work, poor housing, economic hardship, goal reality dissonance. Structural or the institutional factors are ethnic discrimination, radicalisation, and legal precocity. Individual and interpersonal stressors, material constraints and structural forces together shape mental health risks and the psychological distress.

At the individual interpersonal level challenges among central Asian women in Russia are gendered obligations, family separation, language barriers, childcare strains, and spousal conflicts. There are limited choices or job options, long working hours and overcrowded houses. Gender vulnerabilities come from the expectations of family advancement which includes ceremonial obligations, house building, and children's education. She has to work very hard to meet these expectations and balance her life. Along the tradition roles she has to take care the financial responsibilities of the family. With the changed role arise new challenges there are social, emotional and psychological issues arising at a new place.

### **Family separation, thin support networks, and mental distress**

Separation from the kith and kin and thin social support in Russia leads to emotional stress and anxiety. Qualitative interviews with women from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan identify, persistent worry, a mix of emotional and practical challenges, and separation from loved ones and limited sources of social support in the time of need.<sup>2</sup> In case of emotional stress or hardship, they lack a social support system. And when their loved ones are suffering back home they feel helpless, they cannot do much for them. This creates emotional and psychological trauma for them leading to stress, anxiety and depression. There is a lack of support system, particularly for the newcomer. They don't have co-ethnic ties, difficult to find work, make friendships, and they also face stigmas around discussing mental health. Legal precarity and systematic discrimination deepens mental health issues, stress, anxiety, and increases depressive symptoms. These challenges are amplified by the legal precarity and practical hardship like dealing with a bureaucracy.

### **Legal precarity, insecurity, and limited protective returns to "legality"**

Most of the Central Asians migrants come to Russia as temporary workers. They are required to have temporary work permit or 'work patent'. Pathways securing permanent residence status and naturalization are much more complex and costly and, as a result, many migrants maintain temporary status, often with<sup>3</sup>Legal precarity due to insecure or shifting documentation statuses, complex registration and patent rules, and discretionary enforcement in the hands of the law enforcement agencies produces a persistent condition of insecurity for Central Asian migrants in Russia, with especially acute consequences for women. Even when migrants try to "do everything legally," the practical protections that legality is supposed to offer often remain limited. It hardly matters whether one is legal or illegal, there is always fear of prosecution by the law enforcement agencies. Process of registration and patent is costly and time-consuming, minor bureaucratic errors can lead to fines or

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<sup>2</sup>Agadjanian, V., Oh, B., & Menjivar, C. (2022). (Il)legality and psychosocial well-being: Central Asian migrant women in Russia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1872373>

<sup>3</sup>Agadjanian, V., Oh, B., & Menjivar, C. (2022). (Il)legality and psychosocial well-being: Central Asian migrant women in Russia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1872373>



loss of status, and everyday interactions with employers, landlords, or street-level officials can still be marked by arbitrariness and vulnerability.

### **Housing and workplace challenges: Hard work, long working hours, harsh weathers**

A central Asian migrant faces difficult living and working conditions in Russia, including discrimination, harsh working conditions, and physical violence. Working conditions are hard, and many women were exposed to Russia's cold climate and harsh weather in the open-air bazaars, poorly insulated warehouses. Unskilled positions of immigrant women did not provide any job security. Living conditions for the women migrants are tough in Russia as there are issues of high rent, crowded apartments, low-quality housing, and long working hours.<sup>4</sup>

### **Access to health care: material, legal and practical barriers**

Pervasive discrimination experienced by Central Asian immigrants particularly women, poses unique challenges for their psychological well-being and mental health. Central Asian migrants in Russia experience multiple barriers in accessing medical care services. Migrants experience not having health insurance, not having proper documents, lack of time, financial insecurities, and fear of being discriminated against by Russian doctors. Therefore, they either engage in self-treatment or utilise informal Care.<sup>5</sup>---- in Legality, Racialization, and Immigrants' Experience of Ethno-racial Harassment in Russia highlights the challenges faced by migrant women in Russian public space "In public spaces and at the workplace, in government offices and health care facilities women commonly heard 'Ponayekhali tut!' 'You swarmed' used by local Russians to express their negative attitudes toward immigrants particularly coming from Central Asian."<sup>6</sup>

### **Xenophobia, Racial aggressions, hostility, and discrimination:**

Central Asian migrants particularly from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are facing ethnic profiling, rising xenophobia, and arbitrary harassment. There is Structural racism, biased policing, and legal constraints against the migrants from central Asia.<sup>7</sup> Racism is an integral part of everyday life for most of the Central Asian migrants. Central Asians migrants are stigmatised by various names and slurs as chernye (black), churka (Chinese), and Ponayekhali tut (You swarmed).<sup>8</sup> Through their daily interactions with the Russian natives, police, and authorities, migrants were constantly reminded that they were unwelcome foreigners. In 2024, Russian authorities amended laws to regulate the legal status of foreigners in Russia. It gave police broader authority to expel migrants without judicial orders. A registry of persons with database of migrants with expired permits was created. Since taking effect from February 2025, these changes have prevented hundreds of migrants residing legally in the country from accessing their Russian bank accounts due to technical issues with the registry system. Another legislation adopted in 2024 requires foreign children to prove Russian language proficiency to get admission in Russian public schools. It's a discriminatory and exclusionary legislation. Authorities

<sup>4</sup>Natalia Zotova, Victor Agadjanian, Julia Isaeva, and Tohir Kalandarov, "Worry, Work, Discrimination: Socioecological Model of Psychological Distress among Central Asian Immigrant Women in Russia," SSM – Mental Health 1 (2021): 100011, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2021.100011>

<sup>5</sup><https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-019-00889-3>

<sup>6</sup>Legality, Racialization, and Immigrants' Experience of Ethnoracial Harassment in Russia

<sup>7</sup>(HRW) Ethno racial harassment in Russia;

<sup>8</sup>Migration, Transnationalism, and Social Change in Central Asia: Everyday Transnational Lives of Uzbek Migrants in Russia.....Urinboyev, Rustam



in several regions of Russia after the Crocus City Hall attack have banned migrants from working in various sectors including education, Commerce, retail, construction, and public transportation. Although there is resentment from various stakeholders against the ban on migrants as Russian economy rely heavily on the migrants from Central Asian states.

Qualitative evidences using Socio-ecological models suggest that Discrimination against central Asian nationals increases the psychological distress among immigrant woman. (PMC) This aligns with the findings that the benefit of legal migrants may be limited when there is a persistent othering irrespective of their formal status (PMC). Undocumented migrants or the migrants with lack of stable legal status are more vulnerable. Legal status helps but does not completely done away with or abate structural racism. Russian language proficiency, which is considered a marker of cultural integration into the Russian society, does not seem to shield immigrants from the hate and harassment. It hardly matters whether migrants are legal or illegal the harassment by the police always remains there. While the legal status is significant, but it does not away or even abate ethno-racial discrimination with Central Asian migrants in Russia.<sup>9</sup>

Central Asian migrant women in Russia are facing everyday racism and xenophobia. They are constantly under fear of prosecution whether on the street by the police or at the workplace. This xenophobia is reinforced by ethnic profiling, policing, exclusion, and othering. There is ethno-racial profiling, anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments against the migrants from Central Asian states. Migrants find it difficult accessing housing and are a subject to regular police checks.

Migrant woman faces additional layers of vulnerabilities due to gender and community policing. Reports of the videos featuring honour beating of female labour migrants circulated widely on social media suggests how women can be targeted by the fellow countrymen for perceived moral transgressions.<sup>10</sup> Since majority of the woman working in Russia are undocumented. In the shadow economy, they are further exploited as there is lack of legal protection. Because of the undocumented status, it is difficult accessing the formal legal system for seeking justice. Gabdulhakov notes that women experiences barriers to seeking legal help. They is weak rule of law, sexual violence, shame and uncertain legal status that can prevent speaking out.<sup>11</sup> Central Asian migrant children are also face xenophobia and stigma inside schools. There is migrant phobia, stereotypes, everyday othering and exclusion. Central Asian migrant children cannot easily get admissions in the Russian public school owing to the hate and xenophobia. 2024 legislation has made it further difficult for already marginalised migrant group to get admission as they have to qualify Russian language test for getting admission.

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<sup>9</sup>Agadjanian, V., Menjivar, C., & Zotova, N. (2017). *Legality, racialization, and immigrants' experience of ethnoracial harassment in Russia*. *Social Problems*, 64(4), 558–576. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw042>.

<sup>10</sup>Gabdulhakov, Rashid. "In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated Vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia." *Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2019): 230–241. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>.

<sup>11</sup>Gabdulhakov, Rashid. "In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated Vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia." *Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2019): 230–241. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>.