

# THE UNEQUAL PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WOMEN IN MILAN, ITALY

Monica Trentin

PhD candidate in Global Health, Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Medicine at  
CRIMEDIM, Università del Piemonte Orientale, Novara, Italy

This study is conducted in collaboration with EMERGENCY and DARE NGO and it is part of a larger project titled "Being a migrant woman during disasters: a mixed-methods study exploring multidimensional inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Italy"



## BACKGROUND

During the COVID-19 pandemic **migrants** and **women** were at increased risk of adverse consequences. Because of the **intersection** of these two vulnerability factors, migrant women were supposedly more vulnerable compared to migrant men and non-migrant women. This study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women living in Milan.



## METHODS



Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. Migrant women recruited through three third sector organizations providing healthcare and social support in Milan (North-West of Italy). Data collection: Sept 2023 - Jan 2024. Data analyzed inductively.

## DISCUSSION



- 1) The main impact is economic, driven by precarious and gendered employment rather than the pandemic itself.
- 2) Some challenges were common among migrant women regardless of their country of origin, legal status or length of stay in Italy.
- 3) Despite the challenges they faced, migrant women did not perceive themselves as particularly vulnerable, neither in comparison to migrant men nor to non-migrant women.
- 4) In vaccination campaigns, a "one size fits all" approach is inadequate. Effective public health interventions must be tailored to individuals' conditions. In this case, the requirement for vaccination to resume social activities prompted migrant women to get vaccinated.
- 5) Migrant women generally lean towards and have more trust in NGOs rather than in the national healthcare system.

## RESULTS



We interviewed **19 cisgender migrant women** coming from: **Colombia** (n=1), **Costa Rica** (n=1), **Ecuador** (n=1), **Georgia** (n=2), **Morocco** (n=3), **Peru** (n=4), **Philippines** (n=1), **Romania** (n=3), **Ukraine** (n=2), **Uruguay** (n=1). Ages spanned from **27 to 80**, with a median age of 43. At the start of the pandemic, 12 were **undocumented** migrants, 4 were **documented** migrants, and 3 had Italian **citizenship**.

Most had informal jobs (e.g., cleaners, baby-sitters, caregivers), and were severely impacted by restrictions. 11 out of 19 experienced financial constraints. They frequently sought support from NGOs and churches.

Italian COVID-19 media coverage caused anxiety. Some were "news addicts", others avoided them because news made them sad. Many complained of unclear information.

Their mental health was compromised by concerns for family in their home countries and fear of dying from COVID while distant from their children and parents.

Regardless of their religion, many embraced the arrival of the pandemic as the will of God.

Many distrusted primary care physicians and the healthcare system overall. Almost all had a general practitioner.

Several participants suffered from being confined at home and appreciated social media because it allowed them to remain in contact with their kids, relatives and friends.

Overall, migrant women didn't see themselves as harder hit by the pandemic than migrant men.

Most interviewees expressed conspiracy theories and vaccine skepticism. 17 out of 19 interviewees vaccinated against COVID, but only 7 of them did so willingly. Most of them opted for vaccination only because it was necessary to return to work and use public transportation.

Many complained of mask use, which reportedly caused allergies.

Migrant mothers didn't mention childcare stress but focused on homeschooling issues and kids' lack of outdoor activities.

11/19 contracted the virus at least once. DIY remedies to protect themselves against COVID were often reported.

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