

International
Labour
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ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers

Results and Methodology

Executive Summary



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Second edition (reference year 2017)

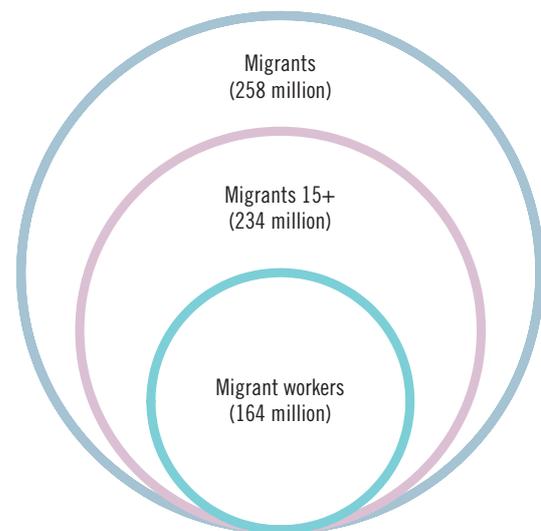
Executive Summary

The ILO estimates that 164 million people are migrant workers

Based on figures for 2017 provided by the United Nations/ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA), which are adjusted for the number of refugees, there are 258 million international migrants, 234 million migrants of working age (15 and older)¹ and 164 million migrant workers worldwide. For the purposes of this report, the term “international migrants” refers to persons who are foreign-born (or foreign citizens when place-of-birth information is not available), while the term “migrants of working age (15 years of age and over)” is a subset of international migrants. The term “migrant worker”, on the other hand, refers to international migrant individuals of working age and older who are either employed or unemployed in their current country of residence. Overall, migrants of working age constitute 4.2 per cent of the global population aged 15 and older, while migrant workers constitute 4.7 per cent of all workers. In destination countries, the higher share of migrant workers among the global workforce than among the global population of working age is due to the higher labour force participation rate of migrants (70.0 per cent) compared to non-migrants (61.6 per cent).

The previous ILO global estimates on international migrant workers (ILO, 2015), which were also based on UN/DESA estimates and for which the reference year was 2013, reported that there were 232 million international migrants, 207 million migrants of working age and 150 million migrant workers, suggesting increases from 2013 to 2017 of approximately 11 per cent for international migrants, 13 per cent for migrants of working age and 9 per cent for migrant workers. The substantially higher number of international migrants in 2017 could be attributed to migrant population growth.

Global estimates of the stock of international migrants and migrant workers, 2017



Among migrant workers, 96 million are men and 68 million are women

Men constitute a larger proportion of migrant workers. In 2017, the stock of male migrant workers was estimated to be 95.7 million, while the corresponding estimate for female migrant workers was 68.1 million, or 58.4 and 41.6 per cent, respectively, of all migrant workers. The larger presence of men among migrant workers is likely explained by their larger share among international migrants of working age (54.2 per cent compared to 45.8 per cent for women) and their higher labour force participation (75.5 per cent compared to 63.5 per cent for women).

Moreover, between 2013 and 2017, the share of men among migrant workers increased from 55.7 per cent to 58.4 per cent (ILO, 2015), which is consistent with the increased share of men among migrants of working age from 51.9 per cent in 2013 to 54.2 per cent in 2017. At the same time, the share of women among migrant workers fell from 44.3 per cent to 41.6 per cent over the same time period.

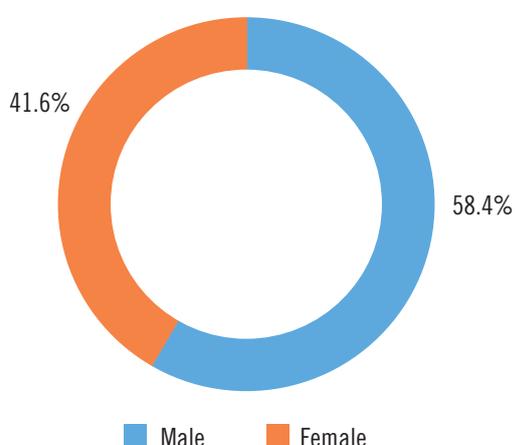
¹ For the purposes of this report, the number of migrants of working-age have been adjusted by applying a correction factor in order to reduce definitional differences of 'international migrant' used among countries. For more information, see Part II of this report.

The higher proportion of men among migrant workers may also be explained by other factors, including the higher likelihood of women to migrate for reasons other than employment (for instance, for family reunification), as well as by possible discrimination against women that reduces their employment opportunities in destination countries. Societal stigmatization, the discriminatory impacts of policies and legislation and violence and harassment not only undermine women’s access to decent work but can also result in low pay, the absence of equal pay and the undervaluation of female-dominated sectors (ILO, 2018a).

Migrants tend to have higher labour force participation than non-migrants

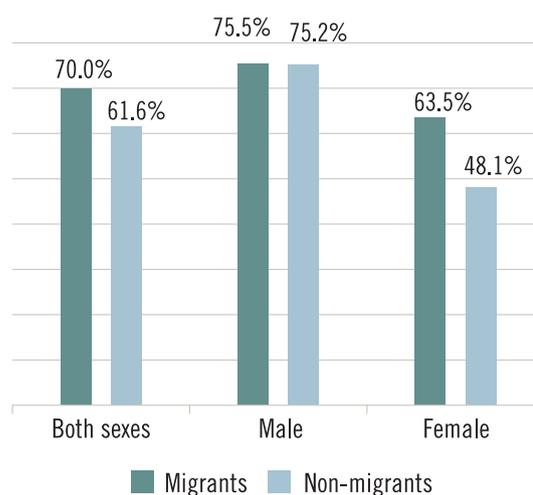
Migrants of working age have higher labour force participation than non-migrants of working age, primarily due to the significantly higher labour force participation rates of migrant women compared to non-migrant women. While the participation rates of male migrants and non-migrants were both at par in 2017 (75.5 per cent and 75.2 per cent, respectively), a gap of 15.4 percentage points was found between the participation rates of migrant and non-migrant women (63.5 per cent and 48.1 per cent, respectively).

Global distribution of migrant workers, by sex, 2017



Compared to the 2013 global estimates, the migrant labour force participation rates of both men and women were lower in 2017. More precisely, the participation rate of migrant men fell from 78.0 to 75.5 per cent, while that of migrant women fell from 67.0 to 63.5 per cent (ILO, 2015). Over the same time period, approximately similar reductions were observed for the non-migrant population (both men and women). These findings coincide with the general global trend of falling labour force participation, which is likely the result of various demand and supply-side factors, ranging from changes in technology, international trade and demographics to labour market and immigration policies (ILOSTAT, 2018).

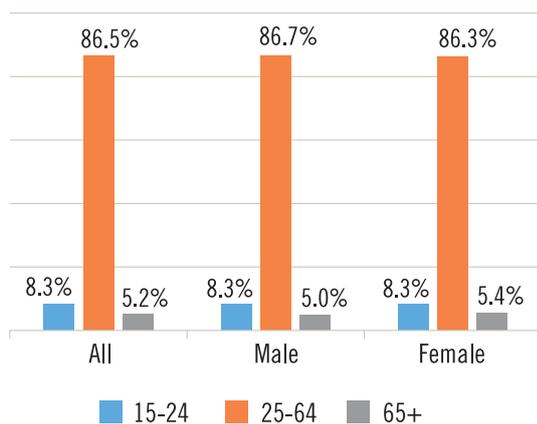
Global labour force participation rates of migrants and non-migrants, by sex, 2017



Prime-age adults (ages 25-64) constitute nearly 87 per cent of migrant workers

When disaggregating migrant workers by age group, it is found that while youth workers (aged 15-24) and older workers (aged 65 plus) constitute 8.3 per cent and 5.2 per cent, respectively, of migrant workers, prime-age adults constitute 86.5 per cent. This age composition holds for male and female migrant workers alike. The fact that the overwhelming majority of migrant workers consist of prime-age adults suggests that some countries of origin are losing the most productive part of their workforce, which could have a negative impact on their economic growth. On the other hand, destination countries benefit from receiving prime-age workers as they are increasingly faced with demographic pressures. It is important to note, however, that the emigration of prime-age individuals may provide a source of remittances for countries of origin (ILO, 2016a).

Global distribution of migrant workers, by age group and sex, 2017



Migrant workers are concentrated in high-income countries

Of the 164 million migrant workers worldwide, 111.2 million (67.9 per cent) are employed in high-income countries, 30.5 million (18.6 per cent) in upper middle-income countries, 16.6 million (10.1 per cent) in lower middle-income countries and 5.6 million (3.4 per cent) in low-income countries. As a proportion of all workers, migrant workers constitute 18.5 per cent of the workforce of high-income countries, but only between 1.4 to 2.2 per cent of the labour force of lower-income countries. The relatively large proportion of migrants in the workforce of high-income countries may be a result of (a) the higher concentration of migrants in those countries and (b) the substantially higher labour force participation rate of migrants in those countries, estimated at 71.9 per cent compared to 58.1 per cent for non-migrants.

Furthermore, it is found that the overall gender composition of migrant workers in high-income countries is in accordance with the overall gender composition of migrant workers across the globe. In low-income and lower middle-income countries, this composition is more in favour of men. Findings also show that migrant women, compared to their male counterparts, have lower labour force participation rates and a larger variation in participation rates by country income group. The former may possibly be the result of women's higher likelihood of being tied-movers and their relatively higher barriers to mobility. On the other hand, the larger variation in participation may likely be the result of the selective nature of migration.

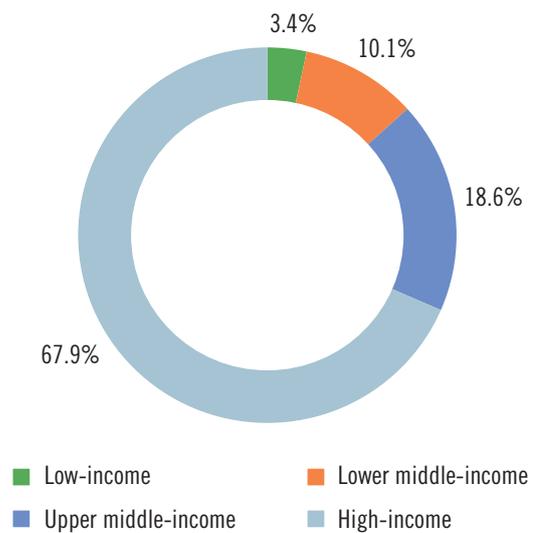
In contrast to the conclusions drawn for high-income countries, labour force participation rates for non-migrants are higher than those of migrants in low-income countries (75.2 per cent versus 68.5 per cent, respectively). This can be potentially attributed to more pervasive informal employment among migrants (OECD/ILO, 2018).

Considering this overall gender composition, young and older female migrant workers are slightly more likely to be found in low-income countries than their male counterparts. In addition, it was found that prime-age adults are more likely to migrate to higher-income countries than to lower-income ones, possibly as a result of higher employment opportunities in the former. This conclusion was also drawn for prime-age male and female migrant workers.

From 2013 to 2017, the concentration of migrant workers in high-income countries fell from 74.7 to 67.9 per cent, while their share in upper middle-income countries increased, suggesting a shift in the number of migrant workers from high-income to lower income countries. This growing number could possibly be attributed to the economic development of some lower income countries, particularly if these countries are in close proximity to migrant origin countries with close social networks between migrant origin and destination countries (OECD/ILO, 2018).

Over time, the share of migrant workers in the labour force of destination countries has increased in all income groups except for lower middle-income countries. In high-income countries, falling numbers of migrant workers were observed simultaneously with a higher share in the labour force as a result of the sharp fall in the labour force participation of non-migrants, due to a variety of factors such as changes in demographics, technology, immigration policies, etc.² Stricter migration policies in high-income countries and stronger economic growth among upper middle-income countries may also contribute to the trends observed.

Migrant workers, by income level of countries, 2017



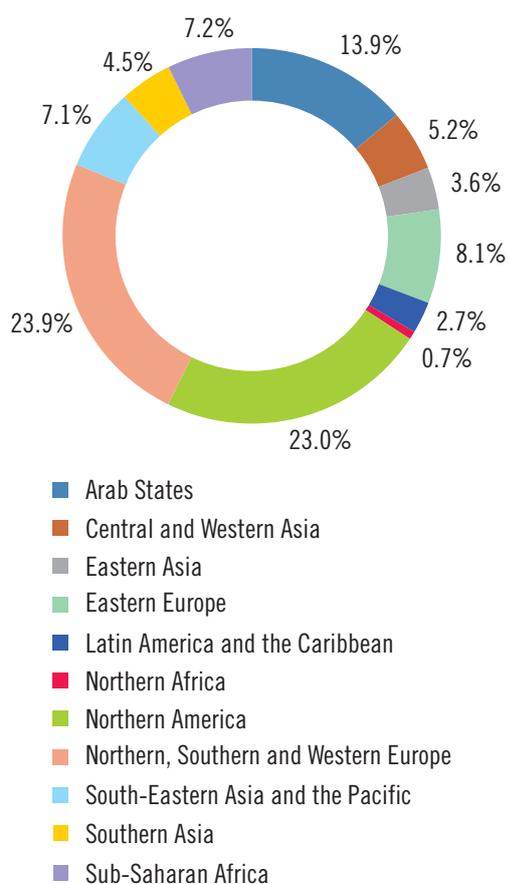
Migrant workers are geographically concentrated

60.8 per cent of all migrant workers are found in three subregions: Northern America (23.0 per cent), Northern, Southern and Western Europe (23.9 per cent) and the Arab States (13.9 per cent). The other subregions that host non-negligible numbers of migrant workers (above 5 per cent) are Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, and Central and Western Asia. The lowest number of migrant workers is hosted by Northern Africa (less than 1 per cent).

The subregion with the largest share of migrant workers as a proportion of all workers is the Arab States (40.8 per cent), followed by Northern America (20.6 per cent) and Northern, Southern and Western Europe (17.8 per cent). Other subregions with significant numbers of migrants in the labour force include Eastern Europe (9.1 per cent) and Central and Western Asia (11.1 per cent).

² However, caution should be exercised in making comparisons across years by country income group, because countries in a given income group may change over time, which may partly explain the observed trends.

Distribution of migrant workers, by broad subregion, 2017



In 9 out of 11 subregions, the labour force participation rate of migrants is higher than that of non-migrants. The largest difference is in the Arab States, where the labour force participation rate of migrants (75.4 per cent) is substantially higher than that of non-migrants (42.2 per cent), followed by Northern, Southern and Western Europe (17 percentage point difference). These estimates are slightly lower than those found in 2013.

The shares of migrants in each region's workforce in 2017 were estimated to be very similar to 2013 levels, with at most a 1 per cent increase in all regions, except for the Arab States and Northern, Southern and Western Europe (5.2 and 1.4 percentage points, respectively). The demand for (male) workers in the Arab States explains the sharp increase in the share of migrant workers in this region. Many of these workers are manual labourers, located mostly in the construction sector (ILO, 2016b; ILO, 2017). However, possible other reasons for the increase in the high share of migrant workers may include the increasing demand for domestic workers, both male and female, as well as for migrant workers in the hospitality sector.