



► Promoting balanced media reporting on migrant workers in the Arab States

March 2021

► Introduction

Migrant workers play an essential role in labour markets around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that many migrants are at the forefront of the pandemic, providing essential services including health, cleaning, domestic work, garment sector work, agricultural work and food production.

However, despite these contributions, the pandemic appears to have increased stigma, xenophobia and discrimination. In some cases, migrant workers have been targeted for criticism for allegedly spreading the virus, without regard to challenges they have faced due to lack of access to personal protective equipment or cramped or inadequate living conditions in employer-provided labour accommodation.

Migrant workers have been among the social groups most impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and are suffering disproportionately from its social and economic consequences, including food insecurity; layoffs; worsening working conditions, including reduction or non-payment of wages; increased restrictions on their movements and sometimes forced return to their country of origin.

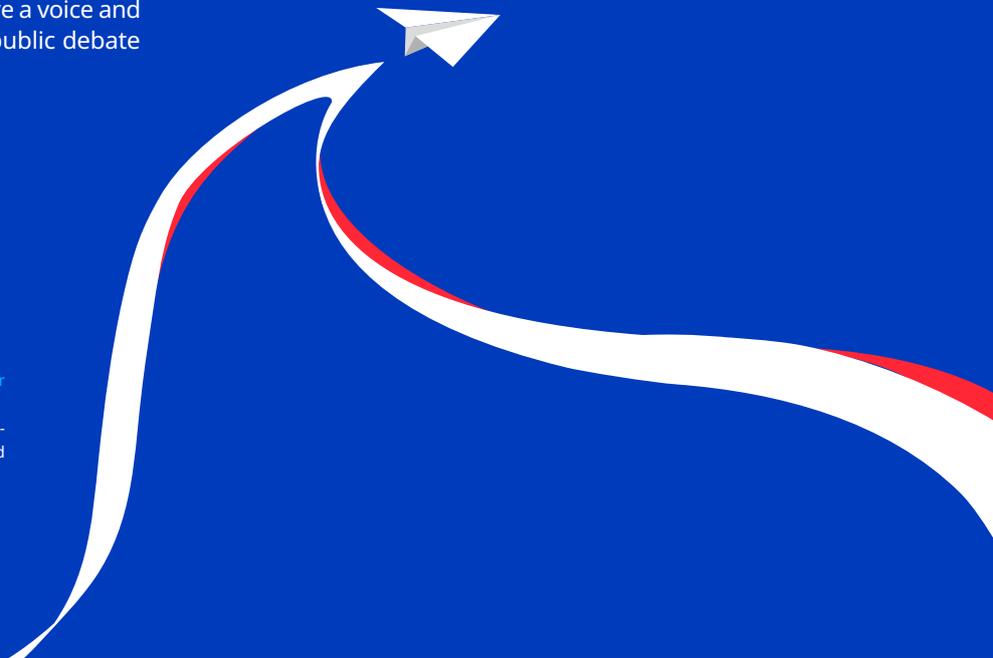
Unlike many migrant workers, journalists have a voice and can therefore expose wrongdoing, inform public debate and participate in shaping opinions.

Journalism can play a decisive role in how migrant workers are perceived by the public. Journalists and editors can ensure balanced and evidence-based reporting on labour migration. Or alternatively, through discriminatory or inaccurate reporting, they can inadvertently normalize – and sometimes fuel – the discrimination, abuse and exploitation of migrants.

The ILO and its partners have been engaging for several years in the promotion of balanced reporting on labour migration in the Arab States and other regions, which has included the development of an ILO Toolkit for Journalists on Fair Recruitment and Forced Labour.¹ To strengthen the knowledge base on how migration is reported on in the Arab States, the ILO commissioned a content analysis of Arabic-language media in Jordan and Kuwait with respect to migrant workers.² This information brief provides an outline of the key aspects of the research, and suggests recommendations to strengthen the inclusion of migrant workers in the media, a priority which is especially relevant within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 ILO, "Media Engagement on Forced Labour and Fair Recruitment".

2 The ILO is grateful to the Maharat Foundation and Migrant-Rights.Org for carrying out the studies in Jordan and Kuwait, respectively.



► Key findings of the media monitoring in Jordan and Kuwait

The media monitoring of select Arabic-language media (including newspapers and TV stations) was carried out for Jordan and Kuwait, and was based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

The below table provides details regarding the analysis periods, types of media and number of entries analysed in Kuwait and Jordan.

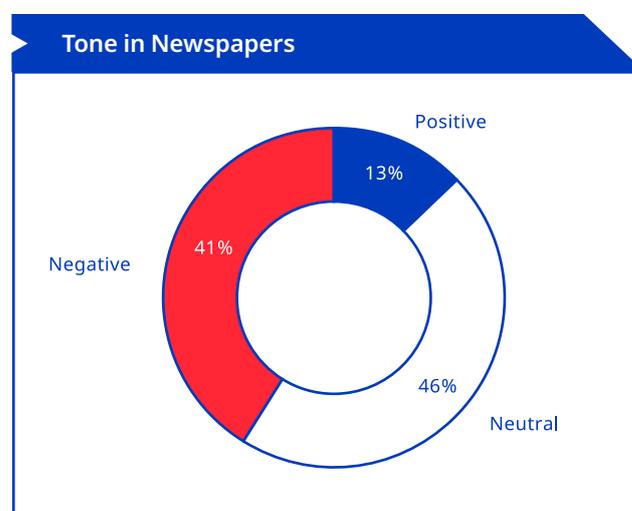
	Monitoring period (No. of entries)		
	Print	TV	Social media
Kuwait	1–31 October 2019 (184)	October 2018 – October 2019 (57)	July 2018 – October 2019 (200)
Jordan	1 June – 31 October 2019 (199)	1 June – 31 October 2019 (9)	vnot analysed

Use of a positive tone when reporting on migration is rare

An analysis of newspapers and TV in both countries showed that – when reporting on migrant workers – the tone is predominantly neutral or negative. Even though differences exist between media outlets, positive stories account for a minority of all stories: 13 per cent for newspapers and 21 per cent for TV.

This tendency is not specific to the Arab States region. Monitoring studies carried out in other regions of the world³ show that neutral and negative representation of migrants and migrant workers outweigh positive ones.

Several underlying factors explain this imbalance in tone, notably which frames (angle or subject)⁴ are most common when writing on migration. Security, economic and legal issues are predominant, and on these topics, a positive tone is rarely used. In the case of Kuwaiti newspapers, economic frames, which account for one-third of the Kuwaiti monitoring, are rather neutral (78 per cent) and mainly refer to Kuwaitization⁵ policies, as well as employment figures, remittances and healthcare fees. Security frames, which account for another third of the Kuwaiti monitoring, are negative (89 per cent) and refer primarily to crimes, “bachelors”⁶ and irregular migration. Socio-cultural frames, which seem to be more balanced in tone, are underrepresented, as they only account for 7 per cent of the Kuwaiti monitoring and 1 per cent of the Jordanian monitoring.



3 A comparative study of news coverage in 16 Western democracies shows that ‘immigration and integration’ is the third most negative topic in political news coverage (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, & Berganza, 2017)”, in Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al., “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review”, *Annals of International Communication Association* 42, No. 3 (2018), 207–223.

4 Each media piece in the media monitoring was analysed to determine its main topic, referred to as the “frame”. Four frames were used for classification purposes: security, economic, social/cultural and legal.

5 Program stressing employment for native workers over foreign workers. Similar programs exist in other countries within the Arab States.

6 “Bachelors” is a common pejorative misnomer referring to male migrants unaccompanied by their families.

Op-eds over-emphasize the negative representation of migrant workers

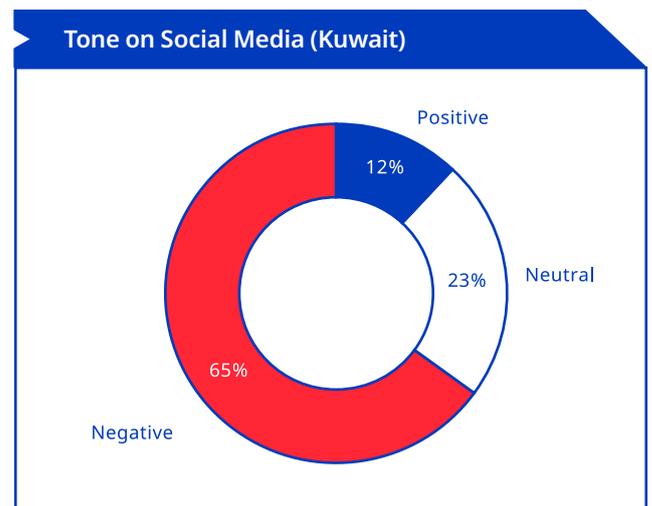
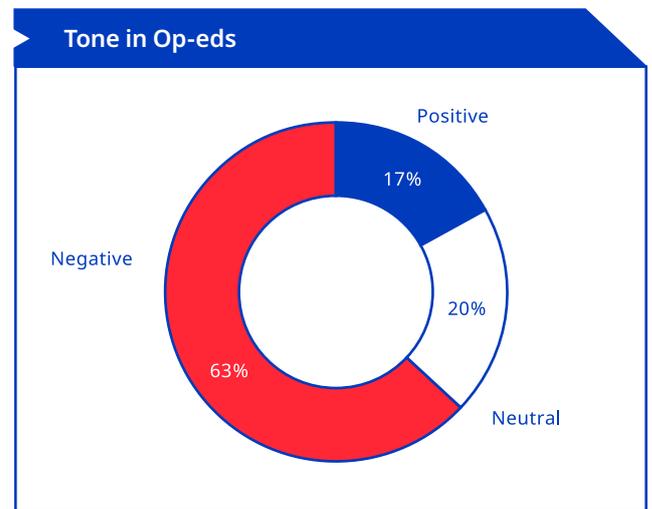
Opinion articles generally tend to be less neutral, as writers will try to express an unambiguous statement on a given topic or call for some legal reform. For readers, the distinction between news and opinion is not always clear ⁷, and can be especially misleading when journalists themselves write opinion articles.

In both countries, the opinion articles appear to have a magnifier effect on the negative portrayal of migrant workers. In the specific case of Jordan, 91 per cent of opinion articles are negative in tone, while the remaining 9 per cent are neutral. These articles predominantly oppose the migration of workers to Jordan, seeking to sway Jordanian opinion on issues pertaining to legislation, access to the labour market or unemployment.

Social media conversations echo traditional media

Social media is very popular in the Arab States, where it has one of the highest penetration rates in the world, especially among the youth. Similar to opinion pieces in newspapers, social media posts tend to have a distorting effect on discussions, accentuating negative depictions of migrant workers.

In the case of Kuwait, two-thirds of the messages analysed expressed a negative sentiment towards migrant workers, with most focusing on security, social and economic issues.



► Sondos Alqattan’s viral post against domestic workers’ rights

In June 2018, Instagram celebrity Sondos Alqattan posted her criticism of what she assumed were the Philippines’ newly reinforced minimum standards, such as a day off and the right to retain one’s passport. These minimum standards had actually already been codified in Kuwaiti law.

Her video went viral globally, resulting in international beauty and cosmetics brands ending their partnership with her and the Philippines Government banning her from recruiting domestic workers. Her response to critics was to release another video defending her stance, in which she urges discussion of “more important issues like Botox” and offers no apology. Alqattan remains a popular influencer.

Though her commentary reflects common discourse on the high costs of recruitment and employers’ self-victimization, Alqattan was widely critiqued globally as well as locally. Meanwhile, other social media influencers have chosen to use their platform to address issues of injustice, xenophobia and human dignity.¹

¹ For example, influencer Ascia Al Faraj has been vocal numerous times on how domestic workers are treated and has also stood up to speak out against racism and the dehumanization of Egyptian migrant workers.

Source: Migrant-Rights.Org, “In Kuwait, the Discourse on Migrant Workers Is Lively and Divided”, 7 August 2018.

Migrant workers' voices are missing

Fairness and impartiality are amongst the pillars of ethical journalism.⁸ In this regard, seeking diversity in sources of information is instrumental in making sure that different sides of a story are represented. Unfortunately, it is a common malpractice when reporting on migration to under-represent the voices of migrants themselves.

The monitoring has revealed that in the case of Kuwait only two texts⁹ included testimony from migrant workers (1 per cent). In the case of Jordan, the situation was worse, as none of the 199 examined texts included the voice of migrant workers. The absence of migrant workers' perspectives deprives audiences of the ability to view topics from multiple angles and also means there are no human stories being told. The lack of migrant perspectives reinforces the idea of migrants as being an issue to be solved or discussed, not as the individuals most affected by the policies and discourse at hand.

The private sector, civil society and academia seldom appear in the news texts as well. On the other hand, voices from the authorities – local authorities, government officials or law enforcement – are overrepresented. In the case of Jordan, these voices were found in 82 per cent of all news texts.

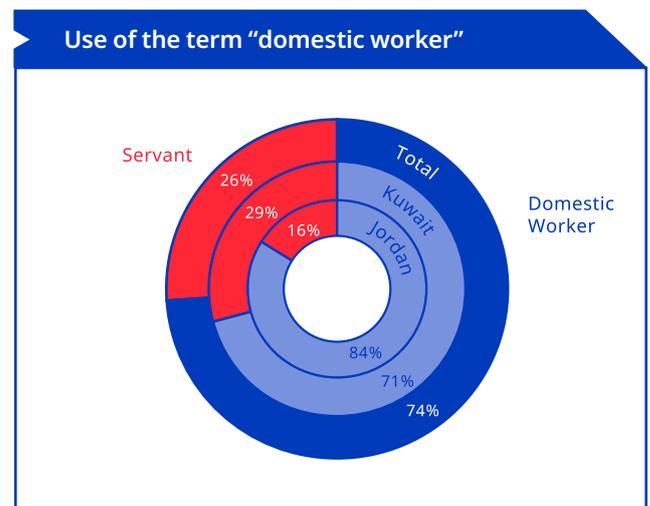
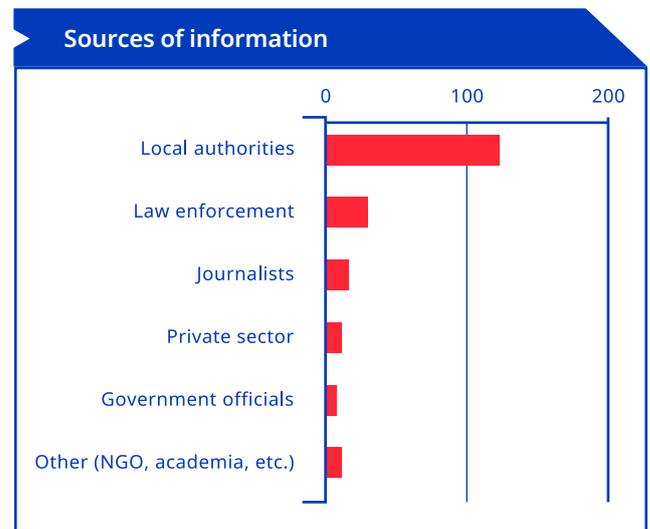
Proper terminology is commonly used

Using appropriate terminology is critical in shaping public discussions on any topic. For this reason, the ILO adopted a specific glossary for Arabic language journalists and communicators.¹⁰

For example, the ILO, civil society organizations and others have been advocating for the use of the term "domestic worker" instead of "servant", "maid" or "domestic helper", because it underscores that domestic work is work, and that a domestic worker has labour rights recognized by the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

The media monitoring provides interesting data in this regard, as in both countries the use of "domestic worker" (العمالة المنزلية) outnumbers the use of "servant" (خادمات). When the data are aggregated, it appears that 74 per cent of news reports use the word "domestic worker" and 26 per cent use the word "servant".

When reporting on "irregular migrants" the situation is more contrasted. Kuwaiti media do not use the term "migrants in an irregular situation" (العمالة غير نظامية), as recommended by the ILO and civil society organizations. Journalists prefer using vocabulary that is less precise about the administrative situation of migrant workers but more common in colloquial discussions, such as "marginal workers" (العمالة الهامشية) in 59 per cent of news reports, "wandering workers" (العمالة السائبة) in 38 per cent of news reports or "transgressing workers" (العمالة مخالفة) in 3 per cent of news reports.



8 Ethical Journalism Network, "The 5 Principles of Ethical Journalism".

9 "Text" within the context of this brief refers to any subject of analysis sampled for this study, whether it be a newspaper article or a television segment.

10 ILO, *Media-Friendly Glossary on Migration: Middle East Edition* (2017).

Common stereotypes about migrant workers prevail

Media stereotypes of migrant workers are a typical feature of current migration reporting and can be found in every media landscape. These stereotypes are not evidence-based and echo clichés that are part of wider discussions within society, often fueled by political discourse. Stereotypes contribute to framing the discussion in simplistic, opposing terms – “us” versus “them” – and represent migrants as threats to national cohesion.

Recurring stereotypes were identified in the monitoring of Jordan and Kuwait’s media, consistent with the dominant frames:

1. Migrant workers have a negative impact on the economy.

In reporting that carries this stereotype, migrant workers are presented as causing unemployment among non-migrant workers, abusing public services and not contributing to the local economy because they send remittances to their countries of origin.

2. Migrant workers are to blame for insecurity.

Headlines of reports on crime are often sensational with semantics that suggest a broader threat, such as the use of words like “besiege” (محاصرة) or “purify” (تطهير). The nationalities of migrant workers involved in criminal activities are also emphasized in the headlines.

3. Migrant workers are responsible for spreading disease.

In Kuwait, stereotypes of migrant workers in the context of public health concerns were present prior to the COVID-19 despite the fact that the country has strict health requirements for incoming migrants. Migrant workers are also often blamed for abusing government healthcare facilities.

Although these stereotypes were evident in the media monitoring, no cases of explicit hate speech were found.

► Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in order to prevent discrimination

Migrant workers are among those most impacted by the pandemic. Many face pressing health, social and economic challenges, such as: limited access to healthcare, loss of jobs and/or income, poor working and living conditions, increased vulnerability due to immigration/employment status and lack of adequate information.¹ Return and voluntary repatriation have been significantly complicated by border closures and the impact of the pandemic on commercial flights, leaving many workers stranded in destination countries.

The decrease in jobs across the Gulf Cooperation Council region due to COVID-19 has been estimated at -13 per cent.² Previous crises have shown that migrant workers are at a greater risk of arbitrary dismissal from their jobs or are more likely than nationals to be subject to deteriorating working conditions, including non-payment of or reduction in wages.

In this context, the United Nations has been raising an alert on the rise of hate speech, stigma, discrimination and xenophobia, all of which disproportionately target migrant workers.³ At the same time, the work of journalists has been made more complex due to travel restrictions and health precautions that hamper access to sources of information.

The shortcomings identified in the media monitoring prior to the pandemic have effectively led to greater risks of discrimination and difficulties for the media to tackle the complex issues affecting migrant workers. Reports looking at the situation of migrant workers in Jordan⁴ and Kuwait⁵ during the COVID-19 responses have identified similar patterns:

- The media in general failed to cover the specific challenges that migrant workers faced during this crisis. Very few media outlets – often in cooperation with grassroots organizations – effectively reported on how the government’s policy response affected migrant workers, and at times, discriminated between migrant and non-migrant workers. Migrant workers, largely without voice pre-COVID-19, remained predominantly invisible in the media landscape.
- Existing stereotypes contributed to further isolating migrant workers, boxing them in simplistic categories as “victims” or “threats”, as was observed in countries outside the region as well.⁶ The categorization of migrant workers is troublesome, as it hampers the understanding of the specific vulnerabilities they may face, such as the withholding of wages, forced labour or human trafficking.
- Social media amplified the negative discourse and occasionally gave way to xenophobic discourse towards migrant workers.⁷ In a time of growing concern about the veracity of information online, social media sometimes participated in spreading rumors and discriminatory messaging. Countering narratives have sometimes challenged the disinformation and racism. However, the general picture is one of polarized discussions with opinions and emotions outnumbering evidence-based discussions formulated on facts.

Sources:

1 ILO, “Social Protection for Migrant Workers: A Necessary Response to the COVID-19 Crisis”, ILO Brief, 23 June 2020.

2 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and ILO, *Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants and Refugees in the Arab Region* (2020).

3 United Nations, “COVID-19: UN Counters Pandemic-Related Hate and Xenophobia”, 11 May 2020.

4 Lidija Sabados, “In Jordan, Migrants Suffer the Most but Are Largely Invisible during COVID-19”, in *Ethical Journalism Network News*, 7 October 2020.

5 Batul K. Sadliwala, “Threats, Victims or Allies? Migrant Communities in Kuwait’s COVID-19 Response”, Middle East Institute, 12 January 2021.

6 Migrant Voice, *Heroes, Threats and Victims: UK Media Coverage of Migration during the First Lockdown* (2020).

7 Migrant-Rights.Org, “The COVID-19 Crisis Is Fueling More Racist Discourse towards Migrant Workers in the Gulf”, 5 April 2020.

► Recommendations for newsrooms, communicators and educators

As the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 worsen, the importance of balanced and quality public debate on migrant workers is critical. Informed by this research, the ILO recommends media and communication professionals as well as educators to:



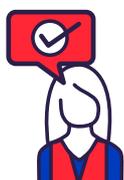
Support the capacity of student and professional journalists and communicators to better report on labour migration and avoid a restrictive framing of labour migration.

Labour migration is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring a good understanding of economic, legal and geopolitical factors. Journalists often cover specific news stories and are therefore ill-equipped to report or investigate labour migration stories in all their complexity. Integrating these issues into journalism and mass communication studies and providing training for professional journalists and communicators is instrumental in improving the quality of public debate. The ILO media toolkit ¹¹ developed by journalists in collaboration with migration and labour experts can be a useful resource in this matter.



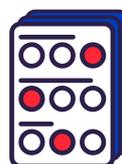
Include migrant workers as sources of information when reporting on migration issues.

Migrant workers' participation in public debate is not self-evident. For many migrant workers, the nature of their employment and language barriers actively participate in their isolation from the rest of society. Proactive strategies to consistently include migrant workers when reporting on issues directly or indirectly affecting them are critical to avoid discrimination, xenophobia and abuse.



Promote the use of appropriate terminology, gender-sensitive reporting, ethical photojournalism and guidelines for reporting on vulnerable sources of information.

Media professionals play a key role in setting linguistic and iconographic standards that are afterwards used by society as a whole. In the case of social media, language, tone and images used in traditional media shape discussions as news reports are often used as primary sources of social media content. If media and communication professionals follow internationally defined standards, they actively participate in influencing the outline of public debate. The ILO *Media-Friendly Glossary on Migration* ¹² can be a useful resource in this matter, and includes guidance on gender-sensitive reporting, photojournalism and working with vulnerable sources.



Adopt media codes related to migration, discrimination and hate speech.

Codes of media ethics exist around the world ¹³, and a number of them contain specific provisions on migration, discrimination or hate speech. These codes can be adopted at different levels (news outlet, union or association, media industry, etc.) and are important in establishing common standards and in upholding ethical and deontological principles.



Encourage academia, foreign missions and migrant workers' representatives to pen opinion articles.

Opinion articles should be representative of society as a whole and give space to a diversity of voices. By encouraging academia, diplomatic representatives and migrant workers to publicly express their opinions, readers and society as a whole can have a better understanding of the contribution of migrant workers to countries of destination and the specific challenges that they might face.



Produce regular media-monitoring studies to map evolutions in public discourse

Consistent research on media reporting helps better understand how the media as a whole covers a specific issue and document changes over time. Articulated with policy analysis, research can track how reporting influences attitudes, behaviours and policy decisions with respect to migrant workers.

¹¹ See: ILO, "Reporting on Forced Labour and Fair Recruitment: An ILO Toolkit for Journalists".

¹² See: ILO, "Media-Friendly Glossary on Migration: Middle East Edition" (2017).

¹³ The *Accountable Journalism database* compiles codes of media ethics from around the world.

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