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POLICY BRIEF

Women Migrant Workers from Central Asia to the Russian Federation: Trends, Challenges and Prospects



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Women migrant workers from Central Asia to the Russian Federation: Trends, challenges and prospects

The Russian Federation remains a key destination of migrants. In 2024, the Russian Federation hosted 7.6 foreign born people, among them 3.8 million women and 3.7 million men[1]. However, these numbers are taken from censuses and reflect long-term trends. Particularly in North and Central Asia, they also capture those repatriated from the newly independent States of Central Asia.

Temporary labour migration from Central Asia has become a crucial trend over the past decades. While the labour migration of men has been a global trend for the past century, the number of women migrating for work has increased significantly in recent decades. Among migrants in the Russian Federation, many women migrate in search of work, but they also to accompany their migrant worker spouses. Women migrants often face specific vulnerabilities throughout the migration process.

Objective 7 of the Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration (GCM), specifically calls for addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration. Related provisions in the GCM emphasize the importance of integrating gender dimensions into migration governance and committing to the "empowerment of all women and girls" involved in international migration. They call for the development of migration policies that take into account the "specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women, girls and boys". Further, objective 1 calls to "collect and utilize accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies".

To develop evidence-based policies that address the specific vulnerabilities of women migrants, it is essential to gather data and information on their unique characteristics, including the sectors in which they work.

The present policy brief draws from an unpublished working paper entitled "Women Labour Migrants from Central Asian Countries in the Russian Federation: Current Trends", commissioned by ESCAP (Florinskaya, 2025). The working paper drew from data from a range of resources, including official sources from the Russian Federation and international sources, including from the country of origin in North and Central Asia. The analysis further draws from surveys conducted by Rosstat, the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, as well as surveys by the author.

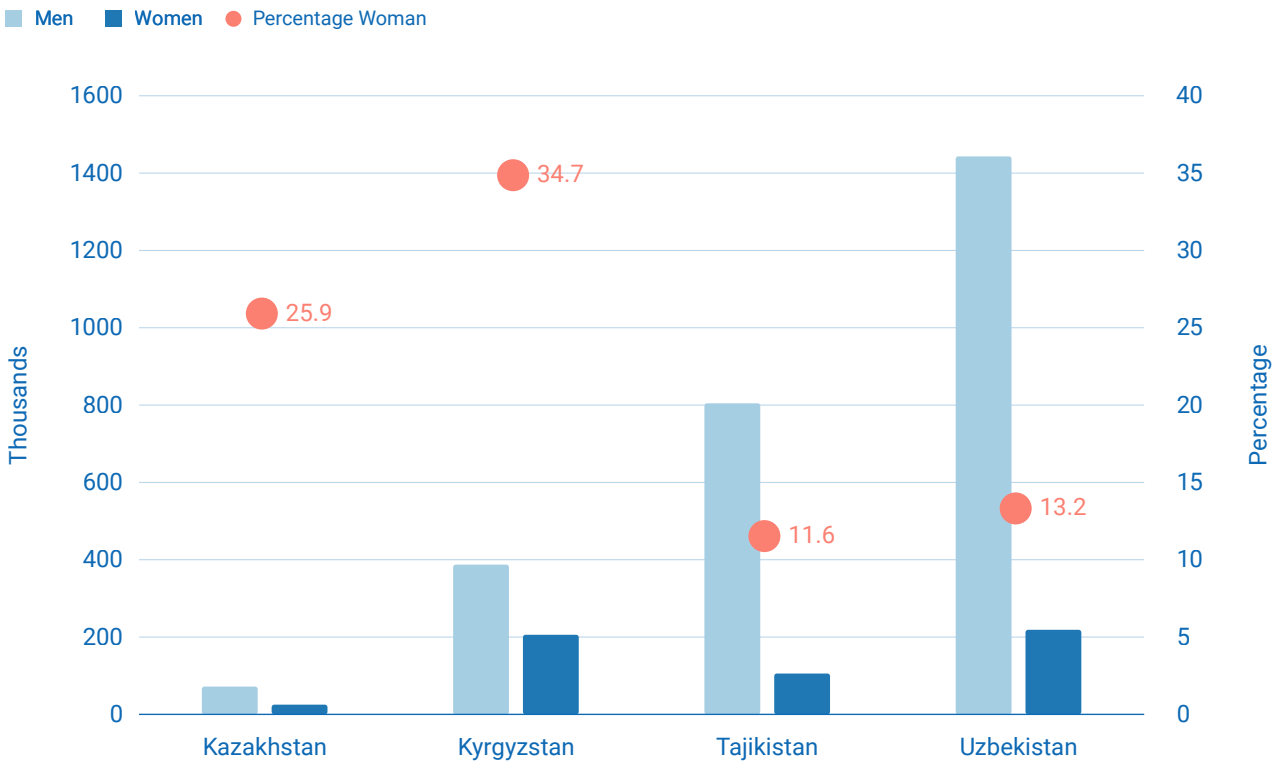
Trends on women migrants to the Russian Federation

Official data from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, which are publicly available, show that the total number of entries of migrant workers to the Russian Federation has been increasing since 2021, after a low in 2020 resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (Florinskaya 2025).

Data disaggregated by sex on the number of women and men entering the Russian Federation for the purpose of work were made available only for 2019 and earlier. Data show that numbers and proportions of women have not changed significantly between 2017 and 2019, but there was a slight downward trend.

1 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024.

Figure 1 Number of female and male migrants from Central Asian countries, registered with the intention to "work", and share of women, 2019



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, received upon request in March 2020.

Overall, women from Central Asian countries accounted for approximately 70 per cent of all women migrant workers to the Russian Federation in the pre-COVID-19 period. According to data for 2017–2019, women from Uzbekistan formed the largest group of women migrants in absolute terms, reflecting the country's overall leading role in labour migration to the Russian Federation (Figure 1). Kyrgyzstan, ranked second in absolute numbers for women labour migrants.

Among migrants from Kyrgyzstan, 34.7 per cent are women, representing the highest proportion of women migrants. This is followed by Kazakhstan with 25.9 per cent. The proportions of women are 13.2 per cent and 11.6 per cent for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively (Figure 1). These numbers are also confirmed by comparing them to data from countries of origin, such as administrative data on migrant worker outflows, where available. Differences in the proportion of women can largely be attributed to socio-cultural factors, including traditional attitudes toward the mobility of women, which differ significantly between Kyrgyzstan and both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Uzbeks and Tajiks are traditionally sedentary peoples, whereas Kyrgyz have nomadic roots and have transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle more recently.

Although many migrants in the Russian Federation are not officially registered for work, the proportion of unregistered women is even higher than that of men. As a result, women often remain invisible in official statistics, suggesting that the actual number of women migrants in the Russian Federation is higher than officially reported (Florinskaya, 2025).

Surveys conducted in the Russian Federation over different years generally show a slightly higher proportion of women migrants than official statistics. For instance, a 2017 survey by the National Research University Higher School of Economics indicated that 30 per cent of working or job-seeking migrants were women, which may be due to their greater accessibility for surveys and willingness to engage with interviewers. Women are often employed in the service and trade sectors, requiring better command of the Russian language, and tend to be more communicative and less likely to reside in closed migrant enclaves. A 2022–2023 survey by the same university among over 3,000 migrants in Moscow found that women accounted for 28 per cent of respondents. Another survey by the Institute of Social Analysis and Forecasting at the Sakharovo Multifunctional Migration Centre showed that women made up 23 per cent of respondents in the Moscow region, with 20 per cent among those specifically seeking employment.

Despite variations across surveys, the overall pattern of several surveys confirms that the share of women in labour migration from Central Asia is significantly lower than that of men, with Kyrgyzstan having more than twice the proportion of women migrant workers compared to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Florinskaya, 2025).

Employment of women migrants from Central Asia in the Russian Federation

The employment status of migrants in countries of destination differs significantly between men and women. Measures to facilitate access to labour markets may have different impacts on women and men, often making it easier for men while creating additional challenges for women.[2] The introduction of organized recruitment schemes for employment in large companies, such as those in the construction and industrial sectors, primarily benefits men. Women, who are often employed in small enterprises or domestic settings, are placed in a more vulnerable position, particularly when organized recruitment is the main channel for accessing the labour market. Various barriers make it difficult for migrant women to search for formal employment and often push them into informal employment. As a result, many women enter lower-skilled migration pathways.[3]

According to ILO data, in the Russian Federation in 2021, 79.9 per cent of women migrant workers were employed in the services sector, 14.2 per cent in industry and 5.9 per cent in agriculture. In contrast, 56.4 per cent of male migrant workers were employed in services, 35.6 per cent in industry (including construction) and 7.9 per cent in agriculture. The distribution of women migrant workers by sector has shifted in recent years, with declines in employment in agriculture and industry and a rise in the services sector. Among men, employment in agriculture has decreased, while the share in services has grown; employment in industry has remained stable.[4]

The Higher School of Economics (HSE) in the Russian Federation has conducted several surveys on sectors of employment of migrants, including in 2011 (8,500 migrants) and in 2017 (8,600 migrants)[5] and again in 2022/2023. The 2017 survey database allows for a comparison of the employment patterns of women migrants from different Central Asian countries, based on responses from 1,052 employed women (see Figure 2).

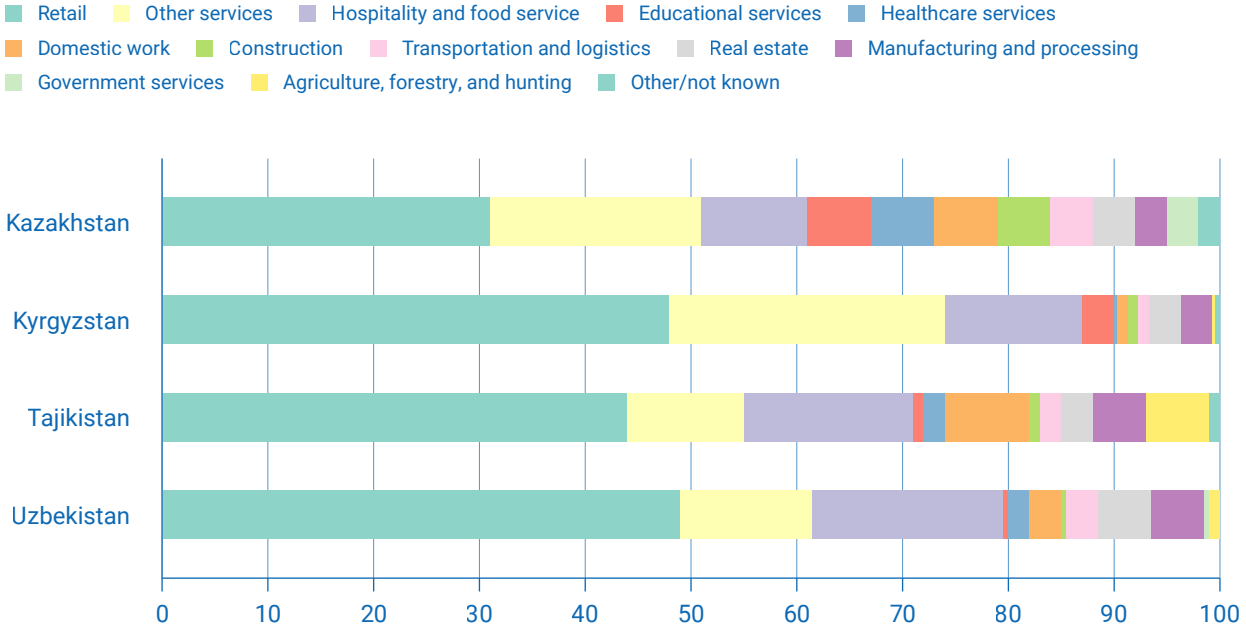
2 IOM (2024). World Migration Report 2024: Chapter 6.

3 IOM (2024). World Migration Report 2024: Chapter 6.

4 ILO (2021). ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology. Third edition. Geneva: ILO.

5 Mukomel, V.I. (2017). «Migrants in the Russian labour market: employment, mobility, intensity and labour remuneration», Statistics and Economics, No. 6, pp. 69–79. Available at: https://doi.org/10.21686/2500-3925-2017-6-69-79.

Figure 2 Main sectors of employment in Russia of women migrant workers arriving from Central Asian countries, by percentage



Source: Research Institute Higher School of Economics survey, 2017.

The data show that women migrant workers were mainly employed in the service sector, particularly in retail, hospitality, and food services (Figure 2). Nearly half of women migrant workers from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan worked in retail, with 44, 48, and 49 per cent respectively. The proportion of women employed in hospitality and food services is highest among those from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (18 and 16 per cent), while the proportion of women in domestic work is highest among those from Tajikistan (8 per cent). Employment patterns for women from Kazakhstan are different, with a more equal distribution across sectors and higher proportions in health and education. However, the total number of women migrant workers from Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation is small.

The employment profile of women migrants from Kazakhstan differs most significantly from the others, with higher representation in public administration, health care, and education. This likely reflects a different occupational structure, with a higher proportion of skilled and educated migrants. Women from Kyrgyzstan show high levels of employment in trade and services, possibly linked to their better command of the Russian language, which is important in these sectors.[6] The employment profiles of interviewed women from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are largely similar. However, a distinct feature is that women from Tajikistan are employed in agriculture, a sector virtually absent among women from other countries.

The survey also provides insights into the formal nature of employment among male and female migrants from Central Asia. Overall, there was no significant difference between the sexes: 38 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women reported working on the basis of verbal agreements. Among women migrants, informal employment was most prevalent

6 Rocheva, A. and Varshaver, E. (2017). "Gender dimension of migration from Central Asia to the Russian Federation", Asia-Pacific Population Journal, vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 87–136. Available at: **https://doi.org/10.18356/e617261d-en**.

among nationals of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with 43 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively, reporting that they worked without formal arrangements. The share was lower among Kyrgyz migrants, at 35 per cent (Florinskaya, 2025).

Although focusing exclusively on Russian households, further information on women migrants and men's employment can be obtained from the results of the Rosstat Migrant Labour Survey. This survey has been conducted every 5 years since 2014.[7] In 2019, more than 130,000 households were surveyed, covering individuals aged 15 and older. The results of the sample survey (ITM-2019) were extrapolated to the entire population living in private households across the country.

In 2019, over 23 million migrants were employed by Russian households, most of them men. About half a million of them were women. Nationals of Central Asian countries accounted for 47 per cent of foreign workers hired by households.

Among women migrant workers employed as wage workers in Russian households, the majority worked as cleaners and housekeepers (47 percent),[8] while others were employed in construction[9] (20.2 per cent) or care work for elderly and sick family members (19.2 per cent) (Table 1). Among male labour migrants, construction was by far the most common sector of employment, followed by land cultivation.

Table 1 Structure of employment of foreign nationals engaged by households in the last year, by type of work performed, men and women, thousand and per cent, 2019.

	Men		Women	
	Number (thousands)	Percentage	Number (thousands)	Percentage
Construction, repair of apartments, houses, cottages, outbuildings	1615,9	69,3	110,2	20,2
Cultivation of crops, land cultivation, horticulture, animal husbandry, fishery	322,4	13,8	19,1	3,5
Transportation services	243,0	10,4	0,8	0,1
Ensuring safety, security	3,9	0,2	0	0,0
Cleaning, au pair services, housekeeper services	19,9	0,9	255,9	47,0

7 Rosstat. Sample observation of migrant labour, conducted as part of the sample labour force survey. The population survey is carried out in all regions of the Russian Federation at the same household addresses and within the same timeframe as the sample labour force survey. The most recent such survey was conducted in 2019 (ITM-2019). Available at: **https://rosstat.gov.ru/free_doc/new_site/imigr18/index.html**.

8 The duties of a housekeeper are broader than cleaning. They may include grocery shopping and other household services.

9 First and foremost, this involves the construction of summer houses and the repair of apartments.

	Men		Women	
Cooking services, chef	0,9	0,0	16,3	3,0
Childcare, babysitting services	1,1	0,0	19,7	3,6
Services of home teacher, tutor	3,3	0,1	10,9	2,0
Care for elderly or sick family members	2,6	0,1	104,7	19,2
Other works and services	119,8	5,1	7,3	1,3
Total	2332,8	100	544,9	100

Source: Data from the Sample Survey of Migrant Labour, Rosstat, 2019.

Motivation of women to migrate

Norms on the role of women and men in countries of origin influence individuals at all stages of the migration process and shape decisions about whether to migrate or stay. In most Central Asian countries, men are traditionally viewed as primary breadwinners, while women are seen as caregivers, making them more likely to remain at home. However, several factors are leading to an increase in the number of women migrants contributing to their families' financial support. These include the expansion of the service and domestic work sectors, growing migrant networks in destination countries, increased spatial mobility in countries of origin, rising migration of men followed by female family members, and broader access to migration-related information through social networks.. A 2023 survey of labour migrants in Moscow found that, on average, women from three Central Asian countries were considered essential income earners in four out of five cases, with their work being critical to their families' survival.

The causes of women's migration have become increasingly diverse, with primary objectives including securing their families' financial well-being and accumulating savings. These motivations are accompanied by aspirations to gain work experience, provide better education for their children, and expand their horizons. Migration can also be a means for women to avoid problems at home, such as forced marriages, abusive husbands, or violence by extended family members.

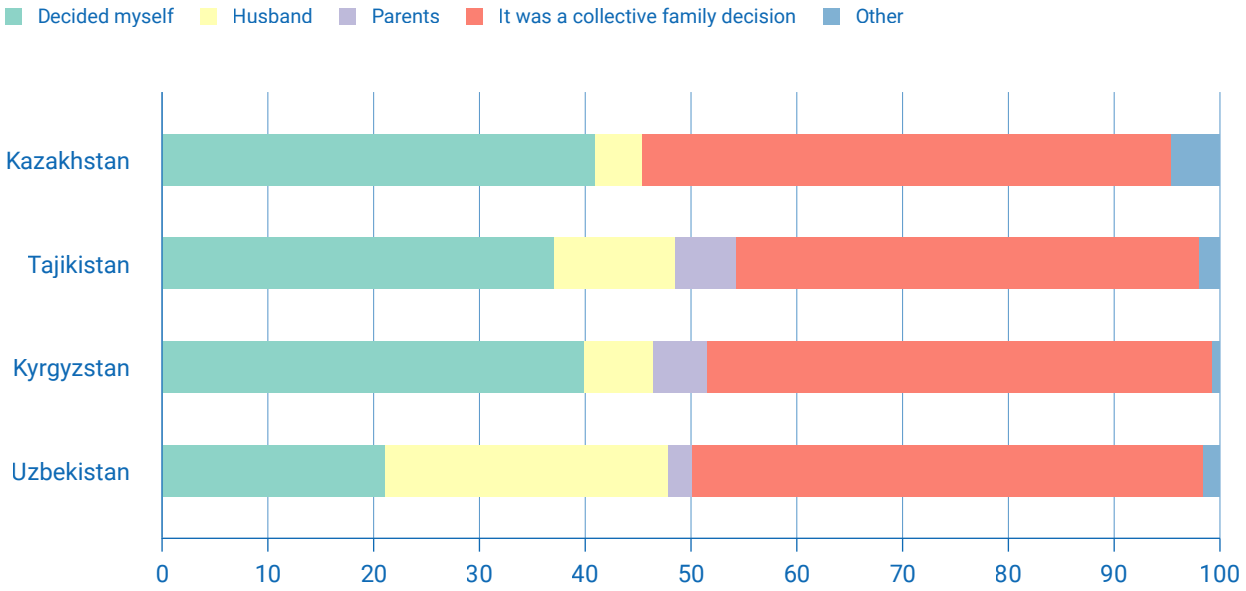
Surveys and interviews conducted by IOM in countries of origin provide insights into the motivations and factors influencing migration decisions[10]. For example, a survey of migrants returning to Kyrgyzstan identified higher income as the main motive for labour migration, along with easier access to employment, prior work experience in the destination country, and the presence of friends. Factors contributing to the growth of women's migration from Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation include the simplification of labour migration procedures between EAEU member states, high unemployment and low wages in Kyrgyzstan, family reunifications, and entry bans for male migrants who had previously violated migration laws (Florinskaya, 2025).

According to a 2010 survey of women migrants in Moscow, more than one-third (37 per cent) of the

10 IOM. Migration Situation Report. Kyrgyzstan, December 2023. Mobility Tracking Matrix (MTM). 26 April 2024. **https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1321/files/documents/2024-04/compilation_report_dec_2023.pdf**.

women reported making the decision to migrate independently. For 45 per cent, it was a joint family decision; 14 per cent said the decision was made by their husband, and 3 per cent said it was made by their parents, most often by their father. Among migrant women from Central Asia, responses varied by country of origin, although the proportion who described the decision as a joint family matter was similar across all four countries. The patterns in Uzbekistan differ, with the lowest proportion of women deciding independently (21 per cent) and the highest proportion where the husband decided (27 per cent) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Responses to the question "Who made the decision about your departure for work?", by percentage



Source: Survey of women migrants, 2010. Centre for Migration Studies.

Challenges faced by women migrants from Central Asia

Analysis of qualitative surveys generating sex-disaggregated data reveals that men and women experience migration differently at every stage. Women migrants are generally less autonomous in deciding to migrate, more frequently employed in low-skilled jobs, earn lower wages, and are more often engaged in informal work. They tend to have less access to financial and digital services and possess fewer skills in using them, leading to a higher likelihood of returning to their countries of origin without achieving their initial migration goals. The higher proportion of women working informally and with irregular status influences their perception of their situation in the destination country, with regularized migration status being associated with a more positive perception of rights and freedoms and lower levels of depression. Women migrants with irregular status are more vulnerable to abuse at the workplace (Florinskaya, 2025).

Surveys have also shown that migrant women also

experience greater social isolation, especially those employed in domestic work or as accompanying spouses. Health problems are more common among women migrants, at times linked to difficult working conditions and migration-related stress. Many migrant women from Central Asia only seek medical care during pregnancy, childbirth, or emergencies due to high costs and limited insurance coverage. They often lack time and are unfamiliar with the medical system in the destination country. Despite these challenges, some positive changes are occurring, with some authors emphasizing the potential benefits of migration for women, including greater autonomy and independence (Florinskaya, 2025).

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, women migrants from Central Asia face various challenges and vulnerabilities at all stages of the migration process. Women migrants, equally to men, often work and contribute to the economies of both their countries of origin and destination. Migration can also serve as a means of empowerment for women. To address the specific vulnerabilities of women migrants from Central Asia, the following recommendations are made:

- Encourage the collection and publication of sex-disaggregated data in countries of origin and destination to inform policymaking to address the specific vulnerabilities of women.

- Strengthen pre-departure training with components that specifically focus on the needs of women, including information on health services, such as sexual and reproductive health-care services, mental health services, and others.

- Raise awareness including among women migrants on the benefits of formal employment and raise awareness among women from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on how to obtain patents

- Provide support to women migrants throughout the migration process, in cases of abuse or other violations, and offer reskilling and upskilling opportunities

- Expand safe and regular migration pathways for women migrants

- Offer gender-responsive reintegration to women migrants in their countries of origin.

References:

Florinskaya, Yuliia (2025). “Women migrants from Central Asia in the Russian Federation. Key trends and challenges”. Working paper prepared for ESCAP, unpublished.