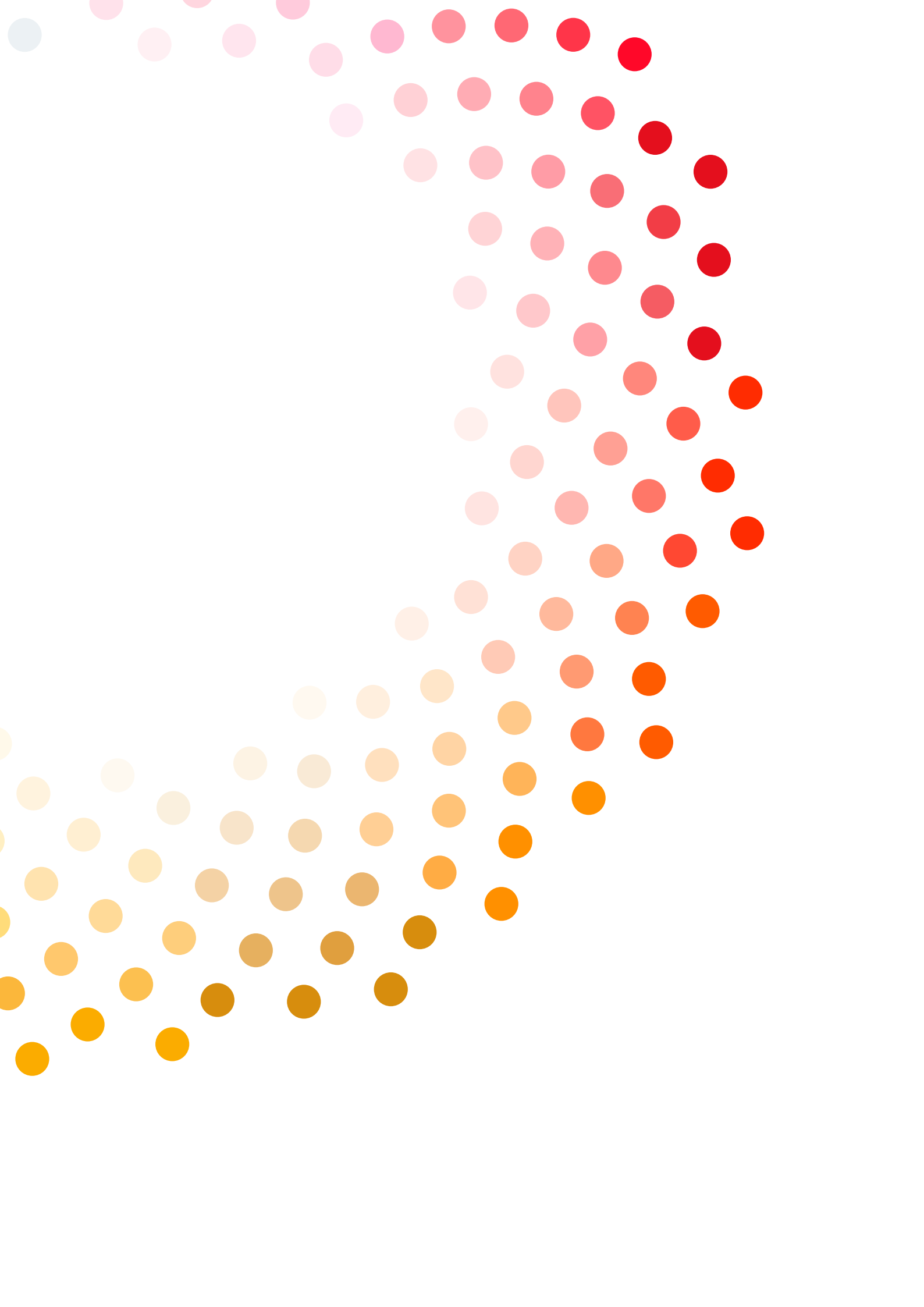# ASEAN

BRIEF: Mobile women and mobile phones:

Women migrant workers' use of information and communication technologies in ASEAN

2020

Spotlight
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*To eliminate violence
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MOBILE WOMEN AND MOBILE PHONES: WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS' USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN ASEAN

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SUMMARY

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are providing women migrant workers across Asia and the Pacific with new opportunities for networking, service provision and financial inclusion. However, challenges such as unequal access and privacy concerns exist (ILO 2018a; 2018b). ICTs have the potential to reduce the time and costs of women's labour migration through faster and more direct connectivity and the fostering of accountability and transparency in the recruitment process. ICTs can provide tools that allow migrant workers to access relevant information to make informed decisions as they search for work opportunities (ILO 2018a). ICTs also have the potential to provide a bridge to safety and essential services for women migrant workers abroad (ILO and UN Women 2020).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region is is heavily reliant on mobile technology, with 44 per cent of the population using the internet, and 90 per cent of those who use the internet doing so through smartphones (Google and Temasek 2017). However, only one third of mobile users access government, non-government organization (NGO) or job services online (Internet Society 2016).

At all stages of migration, obtaining accurate and reliable information can be a major challenge. That challenge can be even greater for women migrant workers, who tend to have less access to education, to resources and to information channels like the internet. Women's access to the internet in Asia and the Pacific is lower than men's, with 39.7 per cent of women using the internet, compared to 47.9 per cent of men (ITU, 2017).

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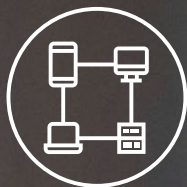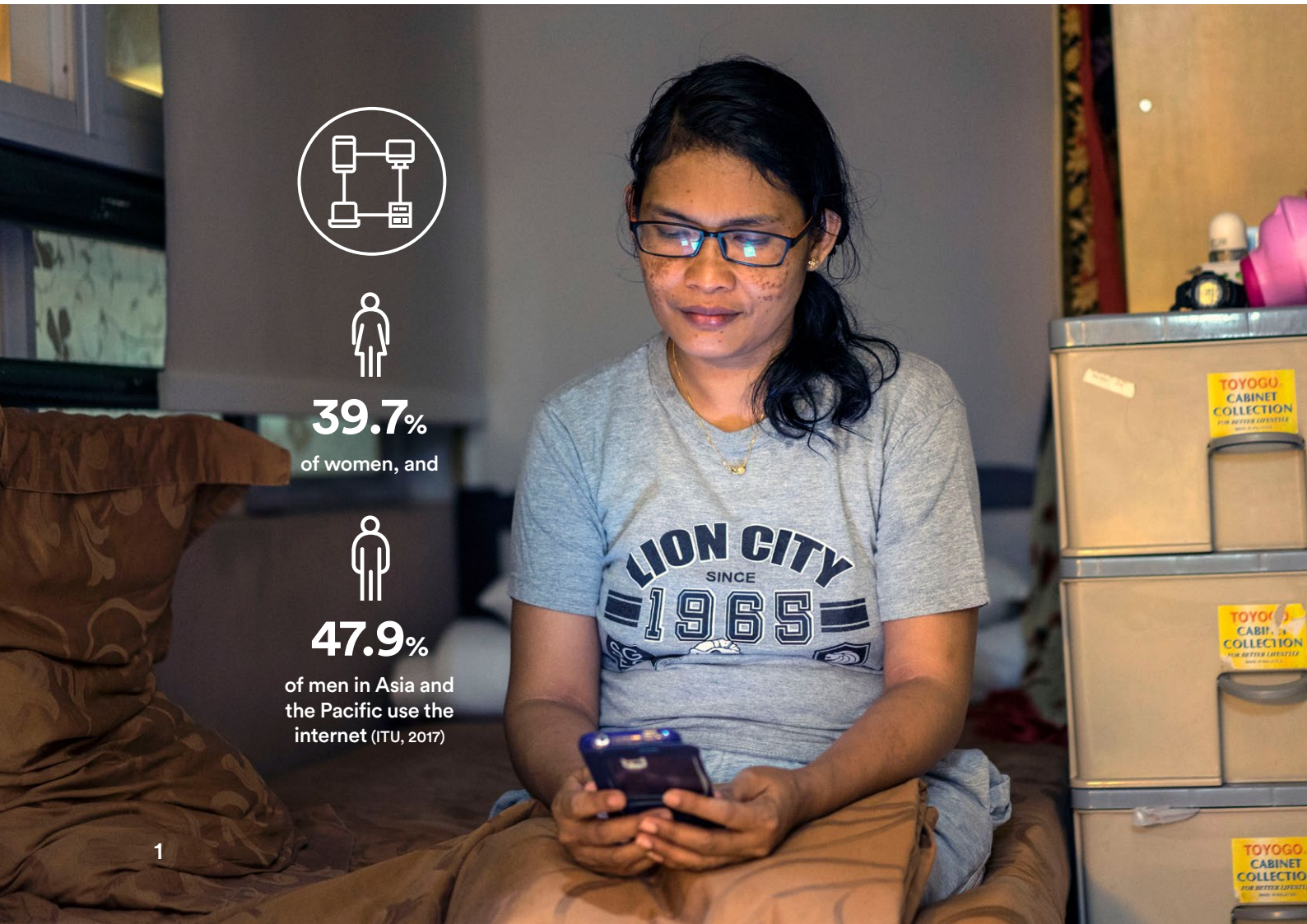
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Key policy recommendations

- Use ICTs to improve networking and organizing.
- Promote online (and offline) support services to women migrant workers, and awareness raising through social media.
- Take care not to consider apps and other digital solutions as a panacea to the challenges that women migrant workers face, especially violence. Traditional outreach and systemic change is still required.
- Change employment norms, standard contracts, and laws to include rights to mobile phone access, particularly for domestic workers.
- Promote streamlined, sustainable one-stop ICT platforms.

Given that women make up close to half of all migrant workers in the ASEAN region, women's unequal access to ICTs and digital skills represent a challenge, particularly where ICTs can aid in making labour migration safer and fairer.

Women migrant workers' barriers to access can be sector-specific. In the women-dominant domestic work sector, live-in workers may have their phones confiscated or have their access to Wi-Fi restricted (ILO and UN Women 2019; Anderson 2016).

Figure 1. Research areas in each country of origin

The ILO and UN Women's Safe and Fair programme under the EU-funded Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls undertook a qualitative study on women migrant workers' ICT usage in ASEAN. Study participants included focus group discussions with 105 potential and returned women migrant workers who owned or had access to a mobile phone in four ASEAN countries of origin: Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines. The study also interviewed 25 other key stakeholders including officials from government, trade unions, employers, recruitment agencies and civil society. The full report provides insight into women migrant workers' use of mobile phones, and how women migrant workers could access more accurate information throughout the migration process and increase their connections with peers.

The rapid digitalization of ASEAN societies means that women migrant workers, like others, are increasingly gravitating towards use of online platforms, including in migration. However, this research shows that usage to date is limited to what women migrant workers believe ICTs exist for: social connectivity. There is a lack of understanding among many women migrant workers of how ICTs can aid in the migration process. For the most part, service providers and stakeholders have fallen short in their digital outreach, failing to harness ICTs in a way that can make migration safer and fairer for women.

It is important that digital technology be modified or developed with the active participation of potential users to accurately tailor for their needs and to test ICT-based solutions. The involvement of women migrant workers is therefore needed in the ICT development process to ensure that such solutions are reaching women migrant workers – and reaching them on par with men.

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FINDINGS

Phone and internet usage in different migration stages

While not all migrant workers have mobile phones, mobile penetration across the region has increased significantly in recent years. In this study, some women reported being able to afford a smartphone after having worked abroad.

Some migrant workers download dictionaries and translation apps to aid in the migration process. Some save phone numbers of embassies and recruitment agencies before leaving home. However, information of this kind can be scarce in practice, with women migrant workers not knowing about toll-free numbers for services or hotlines in case of abuse or violence.

Connectivity through either social media apps or calling and texting were the most common uses of phones, followed by general internet browsing. Facebook was by far the most popular app for women migrant workers, not only for social networking but also messaging (specifically, via Facebook Messenger). Usage differs according to digital literacy, which is the ability to access, understand, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networks (Antonisis, 2018). Digital literacy, in turn, differs according to nationality. Filipinas use the greatest diversity of mobile applications, referencing Twitter, Instagram and Netflix; while other nationalities mainly use Facebook and YouTube. In the study, some Myanmar and Cambodian women were largely unaware of or did not know how to access websites other than Facebook. Potential migrants in Myanmar noted, "The internet is Facebook."

The ways in which migrants use their phones differed between potential migrant women and those who have returned home. Besides using social media for staying connected, some returned women migrant workers reported having sought information useful for migrating; though many said they rely more on offline, personal sources. When using the internet to seek out information, it was mainly to gain access to chat groups, Facebook groups or forums for migrant workers. Filipina participants, having greater digital literacy, made greater use of online sources, and this appears to have helped smoothen migration processes for them. This includes using a variety of apps (for translation, maps to find their workplace, etc.) and searching for information online (for example, reading blogs to find out about living in the destination country and to locate local Filipino communities). Other nationalities did not use internet sources as fully, partly due to a belief that information from personally sought sources, including recruiters, is adequate and more trustworthy than information found online.

Domestic workers need to access mobiles

While lack of access to phones while abroad was not reported as a major issue for respondents, domestic workers interviewed were aware that it is common for employers to restrict domestic workers' access either to phones or Wi-Fi.

NGO respondents reported case data in which they are receiving increasing numbers of complaints from women domestic workers facing phone restrictions. Risks to workers' safety increase when they are not able to access ICT, particularly when it could be used as a mechanism for seeking help if workers experience violence. If workers also lack freedom of movement from their place of employment and accommodation, lack of ICT access results in domestic workers being cut off from the outside world. Therefore, any development of apps aimed at women migrant workers must be in conjunction with strengthened legal frameworks for domestic workers; better regulation of recruitment agencies and employers; as well as the changing of employment norms and standard contracts to include rights to phone access.
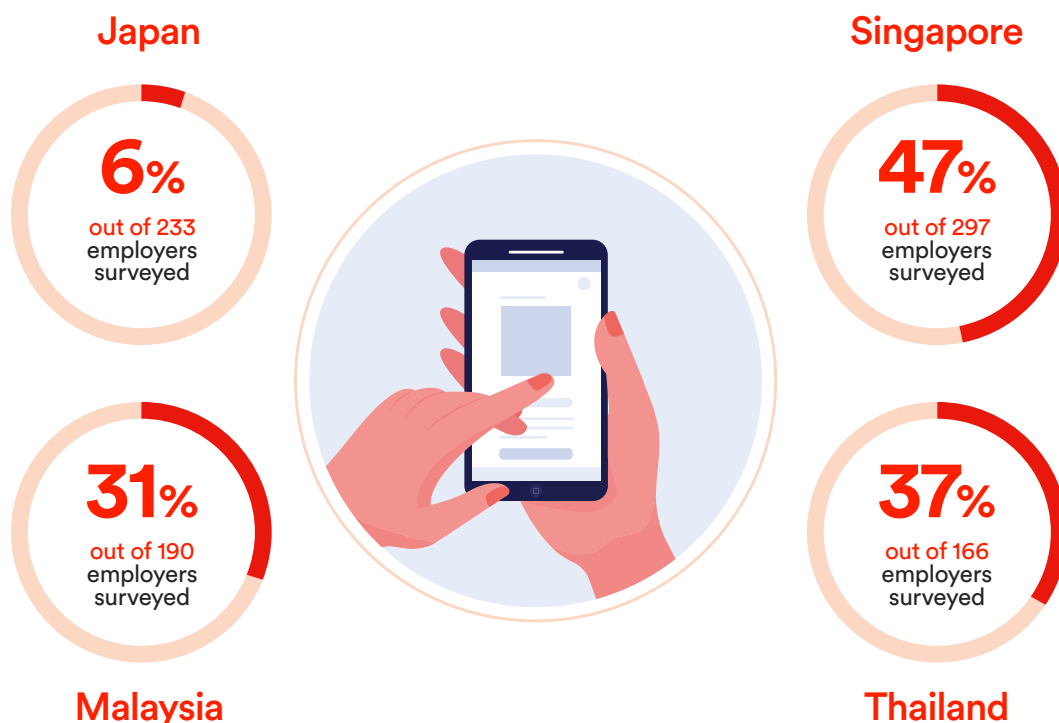
Past research shows that accessibility of phones for migrant domestic workers is complicated by the already complex relationship between employee and employer in domestic work, especially for live-in domestic workers. In such cases, employers may be the sole decider in whether the employee can contact her family, thereby creating a significant power imbalance (Platt et al. 2014).

People throughout the region are increasingly dependent on their phones before and during migration, and see restriction of access to their phones as a reportable problem. A recent ILO and UN Women (2019) study surveyed employers of migrant domestic workers in destination countries for ASEAN migrants: Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The survey asked employers if they let domestic workers have access to their mobile phones out of work hours, and in all countries less than 50 per cent of employers said they did let domestic workers use their phones. See figure 1 below.

One NGO in Singapore that receives complaint cases from migrant workers reports that in 2018 they received 273 complaints from migrant domestic workers of phone removal or unreasonable restrictions by employers, and a further 106 complaints of phone removal or restrictions by recruitment/employment agents. These represent nearly half of the 800 cases the NGO received from complainants that year. The NGO reports that phone restrictions are more common during periods where workers are paying off their recruitment fees, as well as more common for Myanmar and Indian domestic workers, for those who are newer to Singapore, and for younger workers.

Figure 2. Percentage of employers who let domestic workers access their mobile phone out of work hours

Japan

6%
out of 233 employers surveyed

Singapore

47%
out of 297 employers surveyed

Malaysia

31%
out of 190 employers surveyed

Thailand

37%
out of 166 employers surveyed

Source: ILO and UN Women, 2019.

Limitations of digital connectivity: When no one answers

The limitations of digital connectivity were evident as respondents shared their practical experiences in reaching out for help. Indonesian women migrant workers highlighted problems with connecting to recruitment agencies or embassies while abroad, when the only channel for communication was via traditional phone calls. Phone numbers were often difficult to locate, or no one answered when they called.

Some Indonesians reported labour abuses that were compounded by an inability to seek help or by weaknesses with helpline protocols. An Indonesian woman worker reported being locked up with no phone. Another did not have her recruitment agency's phone number, while others complained that their agencies never checked working conditions.

Women highlighted issues related to labour conditions, making clear that solving these issues requires more than just better connectivity. For example, Cambodian participants who experienced labour abuses such as withheld salary payments, no break time, and verbal abuse did not reach out for support at the time of the abuses abroad. Again, this demonstrates the gap between prevention and response. Many of the migrant women interviewed believed that ICT and social media could help by informing them of the risks related to labour migration and therefore aid their decision-making. However, when asked, many had not pre-emptively looked for information on where to seek help if they needed it.

While reporting is an important element and an option for some migrant workers, preventing problems from happening in the first place through rights-based, safe migration policy and implementation are critical. However, knowledge and understanding of reporting mechanisms may not always convince migrant women to take action, as maintaining employment can be of a higher priority than accessing remedies.

Reporting violence and exploitation with the help of ICT

In a few countries outside the ASEAN region, ICTs are being used by women in the general public to report and geotag instances of harassment. However, for most women migrant workers in ASEAN, both potential and returned, their recruitment agency is the first point of contact in the event of any problems, including exploitation, violence or abuse.

In this study, participants were usually referred to their recruitment agencies by a friend, and as such, women migrant workers placed a certain level of trust in agencies to resolve any issues faced. Embassies were commonly seen as a second point of contact, although they were commonly viewed as inaccessible by interviewed women migrant workers.

Several potential women migrant workers in the study stated that, in addition to their recruitment agency or family back home, they would contact their employer in the event of a problem. Despite the assumption that employers can be trusted to resolve work-related issues including violence, very few of the employers interviewed had been contacted by their workers with a problem, and they also did not know of any support services for migrant workers. Employers, like the workers interviewed, put significant trust in embassies. Further, they did not see social media as an effective reporting avenue. However, this was partly due to a lack of trust among employers in workers' abilities to safely use social media.

Some employers in Thailand also recognized that not speaking Thai language is a barrier for migrants wishing to report abuse. However, if reporting is via apps, such as Line and Facebook, translation functions can make communication across linguistic barriers easier.

Social media is indeed a common way for women migrant workers to contact recruitment agencies, embassies and migrant-focused service providers, though the research found that frequency with which this happens is not adequately monitored.

Much needs to be done in engaging with women migrant workers, making information accessible, and increasing women's capacity to migrate safely. Stakeholders in the Philippines and Indonesia confirmed that they receive most communication through social media and messaging, but also admitted their own limited capacity in this regard, unable to regularly update Facebook groups, for example. They recognized the potential of social media to better connect with workers but emphasized the need to improve digital literacy of migrant workers in order to make effective use of digital channels.

> **People access our website, but we don't have data on how many and who they are. But many migrant workers use our Facebook group to find information, share their problems or connect with friends."**
>
> **– Government representative from Indonesia.**

When research participants were asked how they would respond to instances of abusive or violent behavior in the workplace, there were mixed responses, including participants saying they would contact their embassy, recruitment agencies, NGOs or the police. Interestingly,

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> **[When people share experiences of violence on social media], I read the comments so I can get ideas of how problems can be solved.**
>
> - Potential woman migrant worker from the Philippines

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potential migrants from Cambodia felt they simply did not have equal rights while abroad, thus creating a significant barrier to reporting. Returned Cambodian migrants were also not aware of how they could use formal channels to respond to situations of violence or abuse in the workplace. Myanmar women were unsure of how to report, and said they would seek advice from their recruitment agency. Indonesian and Filipina women tended to say they would reach out to embassies first, and then to recruitment agencies in the event of no response from the embassy. Stakeholders said they rely on a combination of phone calls, group chats and social media for receiving reports of abuse or inquiries. One NGO in Indonesia had a platform on social media for migrants to report abuses. The NGO also facilitates group chats where potential and returning migrants can share advice.

Respondents viewed reporting abuses through ICT as an improvement to phone calls to service providers, or to being required to physically go to an embassy. Some women said that they had posted about sexual harassment on Facebook in the past. This demonstrates that, at the very least, some migrant women adapt and use ICT as an avenue for reporting and speaking out, rather than staying silent. Women interviewed did recognize, however, that ICT-type reporting mechanisms do not always offer adequate protection or privacy.

Many study participants felt skeptical and hesitant to use social media to report issues such as poor working conditions, violence or harassment. The reason cited was the possibility of negative backlash through comments and online harassment. Some Myanmar participants, however, said that they would post a negative experience online to help others avoid similar situations. Some Cambodian women workers had shared information online concerning violence during migration, and had indeed received mixed comments.

> **Yes, I may post information about my problem if I couldn't sort it out alone – just for reminding other people how to avoid similar situations."**
>
> **– Potential woman migrant worker from Myanmar**

Returned Indonesian women migrant workers expressed hesitation to share sensitive matters – including violence or harassment – online, and were likely to instead tell friends or family directly, believing that it is not appropriate to share such personal or serious affairs publicly.

> **I never share sensitive problems on social media. Sometimes, I shared about feeling tired or stressed after work. The reaction was not serious, just fun."**
>
> **– Returned woman migrant worker from Indonesia**

Among Filipina study respondents, there was an attitudinal difference between younger and older workers, with younger women less hesitant to share information on violence or abuse on social media; while older women had more reservations about doing so for fear of being judged. Older women workers said they would treat social media as a last resort avenue for assistance, and would first seek out assistance from their recruitment agency. Myanmar women workers said they would similarly first contact recruitment agencies, and then post on social media or in group chats if necessary. They expressed an awareness that they would need to provide evidence of abuses in such an instance.

Cambodian and Indonesian potential migrant workers thought it is acceptable to share problems of abuse or violence experienced abroad, but also expressed the importance of avoiding personal details that could create shame or embarrassment for themselves or others. The offline factors that discourage women from reporting abuse, such as victim blaming, negative backlash and other repercussions, are therefore echoed in the digital space, perhaps even more so due to the widespread accessibility and "viral" nature of social networks.

When asked if social media could be an effective avenue for women migrant workers to share problems experienced while abroad, many respondents recognized potential benefits such as raising awareness and creating a forum where migrant workers can help each other to be aware of the risks and provide advice or help each other.

> **" It doesn't matter if I share problems on social media because the idea is to prevent, warn others to be careful, report, and find solutions."**
>
> **– Potential women migrant worker from Indonesia**

However, as above, they also recognized the risk of victim blaming, retaliation from employers, and humiliation. When seeing other women share experiences of abuse or violence online, there was a feeling of sympathy and pity. Some recognized that such stories are hard to verify, and others saw them as warnings to be careful when migrating.

The mixed responses from the study participants indicate that reporting mechanisms directed toward women migrant workers need to ensure confidentiality and safety as a priority in order to genuinely protect the interests of women migrant workers and to create a safe space where they feel confident to share negative experiences.

Besides security concerns, stakeholders also see the need for greater collaboration between different actors and support services in streamlining efforts to make access to information and reporting mechanisms accessible and user-friendly.

Service providers reported heavily relying on Facebook and chat groups for women migrant workers to reach out to them. They acknowledged, however, that fear of retaliation and shame, as well as lack of awareness of those groups, are the biggest barriers to accessing their services. Facebook does indeed provide a rich and significant digital platform in terms of popularity and connectivity; however, it is not a platform designed to deal with reporting of sensitive matters.

Women migrant workers provided recommendations for how social media could be used effectively to curb violence. In all four countries, women suggested greater involvement of government agencies so as to provide an effective channel for communication between migrant communities and governments. Such integration of government services and social media would create greater accessibility for migrants, as they are mostly unaware of where to turn to for help. Women migrant workers also suggested that in using social media, government authorities could share information on labour rights; labour laws in destination countries; support services for reporting violence and abuse; and basic advice such as securing Wi-Fi access, travelling from the airport, and trustworthy recruitment agents.

Very few of the women interviewed stated that they had experienced violence or abuse – online or offline – and those who did said they had not reported the incident to any authority or organization. Some had seen posts of others who had faced abuses, and while they did not know how to respond, they reflected that they at least had better awareness of such risks. They noted, however, that current channels for awareness raising are too obscure and have very little reach.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use ICT to improve networking and organizing, as well as access to information and services in both countries of origin and destination, including to prevent and respond to violence and abuses.

    - **Harness mobile technology for migrant workers to be able to verify information on labour migration documentation, as well as to find and verify reliable recruitment agents and employers**. This could create healthy competition and more transparency around recruitment costs and services, while at the same time helping women migrants find better employment opportunities. App designs could allow recruitment agencies to promote their services and costs, as well as to receive reviews from migrant workers.

    - **Include digital literacy as part of pre-departure training and post-arrival information programmes**, educating women migrant workers on available ICT-based solutions, cyber security, and how to access reliable information. Capacity-building efforts could include cost-effective ways to connect with family and friends; how to set up an email account; how to find information on safe migration; how to verify recruitment agencies and employers; how to contact service providers; and how to report violence and abuse. Any training should also include techniques on how to negotiate mobile phone use in situations where access to phones is restricted by employers or recruiters.

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> ❝
> **What needs to be improved? "I need to be allowed to carry and use my own mobile phone and contact my family at any time."**
>
> - Indonesian returned women migrant worker

- **Promote the use of mobile technology in networking and organizing migrant workers as well as a way to prevent and respond to violence and abuses in the workplace**. Women report primarily using mobile technology for connectivity. This can be harnessed further by trade unions, domestic worker associations and migrant worker associations.

- **Promote online (and offline) migrant support services, including in response to violence and abuses, and awareness raising through social media**. Given most women migrant workers are using social media, there is potential for high uptake and sharing of apps, platforms and other information for migrants if promoted through social media. Awareness raising through social media should target women migrant workers, as well as friends and family as key influencers and established peer networks.

- **Take care not to consider apps and other digital solutions as a panacea to the challenges that women migrant workers face**. Systemic change as well as traditional outreach is still required, not least to ensure inclusion of those with lower levels of education and income who, as a result, find it challenging to gain access to smart technology or online spaces.

2. Ensure that gender-responsive laws and social norms support women migrant workers' use of ICT.

- **Change employment norms, standard contracts and laws to include rights to mobile phone access**. This is important for all sectors, but particularly for domestic work, where confiscation of phones and restriction of access to Wi-Fi is common. Information campaigns should target employers directly. On 30 October 2018 delegates to the 11th ASEAN Forum on Labour Migration adopted the following Recommendation: "Ensure that all migrant workers are accorded the right to information and communication, such as ownership; access; and reasonable usage to mobile phones or other ICT gadgets. More attention should be placed on isolated and vulnerable workers, including increasing connectivity in hard-to-reach places."

- **Where migrant women, particularly domestic workers, face restrictions on using mobile phones, consider self-help programmes that teach how to conduct an informed "mobile phone negotiation"** with an employer through positive win–win arguments, showing how ICT access results in positive outcomes for both the employer and the employee.

- **Strengthen legal frameworks that protect women migrant workers' rights**, including better regulation of recruitment agencies and employers; full labour law coverage of women-dominant sectors; and robust access to justice and complaints mechanisms throughout the migration process including in cases of violence and abuses. Without rights being guaranteed in law and in practice, any ICT solution that gives information or tries to facilitate complaint-making will fail to make a positive difference to women migrant workers.

3. Promote streamlined, sustainable one-stop ICT platforms.

- **Create one-stop service platforms, streamlining current offerings from various providers**. This will help to ensure information and services reach migrant workers more efficiently and cost effectively, while fostering collaboration between developers

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and other stakeholders and avoiding duplication of efforts.

- If building or enhancing existing apps or one-stop platforms, consider designs with the following characteristics:

  - **Easily accessible and free of charge** for migrant workers. Apps need to essentially be designed in migrant languages. Most women migrant workers spend on average less than US$10 per month on ICT access, and most use pre-paid mobile services and when possible free Wi-Fi to use the internet.

  - **Anonymous for all migrant users, with assurance of data privacy**. Confidentiality fosters trust in mechanisms, particularly those for reporting sensitive information, such as irregular immigration or work status, violence or abuse. Collection, use and sharing of data on migrant workers should be regulated and monitored to protect their privacy and online safety, whether such platforms are developed and managed by private companies or by State actors.

  - **Able to safely allow users to report violence, abuse or exploitation**. The information reported should be made private, confidential and direct to those service providers that can provide immediate help and advice.

  - **Based on a "shared economy" approach** that fosters self-regulation through building a community with shared rules and values. This is similar to the approach adopted by Trip Advisor, whose platform fosters a relationship of trust between hosts and guests. Ride-hailing and e-commerce apps in the region are similarly piloting platform designs that prioritize functionality, user-friendliness and trustworthiness.

  - **Well-resourced and sustainable** (for example, through employers' funding or through integration into permanent sites). Apps require ongoing maintenance and updating, and often also dedicated moderators, to be successful and useful to migrant worker users
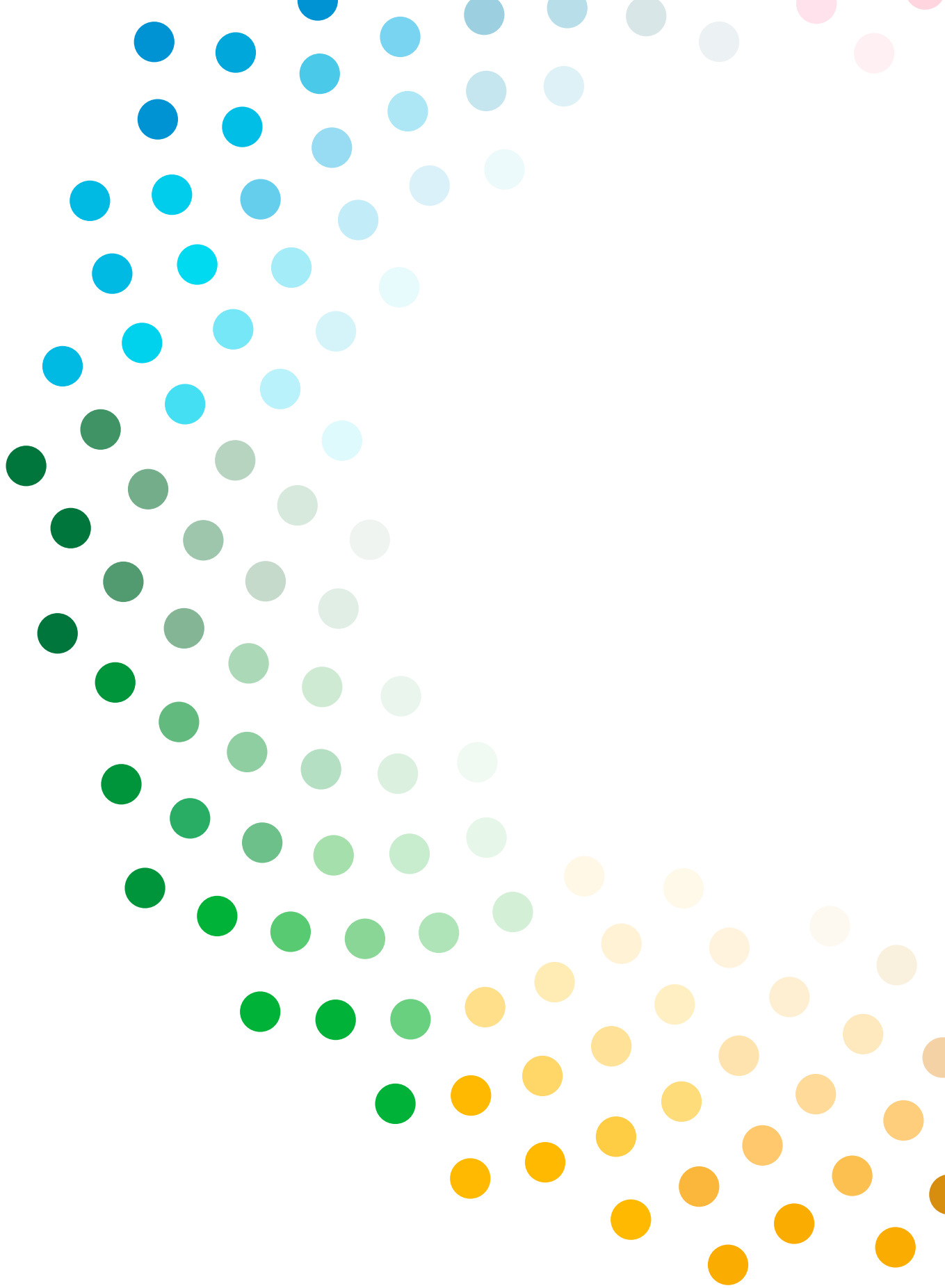
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Mobile women and mobile phones: Women migrant workers' use of information and communication technologies in ASEAN

The joint ILO-UN Women Safe and Fair Programme: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region (part of the multi-year EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls) undertook a qualitative study involving potential and returned women migrant workers in four countries of origin in the ASEAN region – Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. The study covers intra-ASEAN labour migration, including women who intended to migrate to, or had just returned from, Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand. The study provides insight into women migrant workers' use of mobile phones, and how women migrant workers could access more accurate information throughout the migration process and increase their connections with peers.

The Spotlight Initiative is a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. It is the world's largest targeted effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls. Launched with a seed funding commitment of €500 million from the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative represents an unprecedented global effort to invest in gender equality as a precondition and driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. As a demonstration fund for action on the Sustainable Development Goals, the Spotlight Initiative is demonstrating that a significant, concerted and comprehensive investment in gender equality and ending violence can make a transformative difference in the lives of women and girls.

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