Women on the Move –
Migrant Women in the Health Professions

Women in Global Health - Germany and the Center for Global Health at the Technical University of Munich organised the event “Women on the Move – Migrant Women in the Health Professions” that was held successfully on Wednesday 20th March, 2019 at the Charité in Berlin. The event was supported by the German Federal Ministry of Health, the World Health Summit Foundation GmbH and the Medical Research Council of the UK.

Background
The World Health Organization (WHO) has published a report and a policy brief addressing the issue of female migrant care workers. The goal of both the policy brief and report is to raise awareness of the importance of ensuring migrant workers – who in most cases are women - providing home-based care, are given a legal working status in the receiving country, accompanied by appropriate working conditions and access to health and social services. The project was initiated in 2017 at a meeting in Berlin supported by the Federal Ministry of Health.

Considering the current debate around care provision and the lack of qualified personnel in Germany, a translation of the policy brief was considered to be a valuable contribution to the discussion, highlighting the importance of legal protection and health insurance for the migrant care workers the German population increasingly relies upon.
Therefore, the goal of the event was to share the German translation of the policy brief and take discussions on female migrant health care workers in Germany further, aiming to connect researchers, policy makers and those working in the healthcare sector.

The event was very timely, with the German Pflegetag (German Day of Care) having just come to an end, the International Women’s Day witnessing demonstrations themed “Women demonstrations are care demonstrations” and a new study being circulated in the news that states that at least 150,000 care positions in Germany are filled by informally employed care workers.

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Ilona Kickbusch founder of Women in Global Health-Germany guided the participants through the afternoon, early evening event with great passion and insights. First, Dr Sabine Ludwig (founder of Women in Global Health-Germany) provided an introduction to Women in Global Health and specifically the Germany Chapter. Katharina Klohe, Msc., Technical University of Munich, presented a summary of the key messages of the WHO Report and the reason and objectives of the event.

The first invited guest speaker, Dr Ibadat Dhillon from the World Health Organization (WHO) then gave a very insightful fact-based overview of the health sector and regulations concerning migration, highlighting the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel that was adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 2010. The reporting by countries has been continuously improving since its inception and for the first time large countries like India and China are also providing numbers. Importantly, the movement of migrant doctors, nurses and care workers is not just from the south to the north, but follows a much more complex pattern of mobility. A particularly relevant problem is the issue of voice: migrant women care workers do not have the power to stand up for their rights and thus their needs are not being heard.

Dr Dominik Zenner from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) followed up on this with real life case studies that he had experienced himself as a doctor, emphasising the need to always remember that it is human beings that are at the heart of the problem we talk about. He also confirmed the complex pattern of international migration. At the same time, he highlighted the need to differentiate between foreign-born and foreign-trained healthcare workers, a distinction around which there tends to be confusion. Similarly to female migrant
care workers not having a voice, according to Dominik Zenner, there simply is a lack of data on care workers in general. In order to address the needs of these healthcare workers, transferability of social protection schemes, Objective 22 of the Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration (https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration) needs to be ensured, in order to “put people first, not borders”.

During the question and answers that ensued, Ilona Kickbusch was able to share the information that Universal Health Coverage will be discussed at the next High Level Meeting in September being an issue of migrants. However, it remains a contentious and political discussion. The complex relationship of “giving and receiving” will undoubtedly play a role in those discussions.

Marie-Luise Eßrich from the Integration Management at the Directorate of Nursing at the Charité was then able to demonstrate what can be done and is currently being done at the Charité with regards to attracting and retaining international healthcare workers. Since there is a lack of nurses, the proportion of international nurses will continue to rise. Members of the audience, representing the Philippines and Mexico, countries that collaborate with the Charité with regards to their migrant healthcare workers were able to contribute their experiences. Interestingly, because of the Code of Practice mentioned previously, Germany can currently recruit only from three countries, namely Albania, Mexico and the Philippines.

In addition to organisational and policy related concerns and observations, Prof Dr Ulrike Kluge from the Charité Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy talked about the mental to their transit and transformation. The biggest concern and issue migrant healthcare workers face is the uncertainty concerning their legal status in the receiving country and the related consequences for their social protection, family reunion and the like. Prof Kluge and her team work with translators as language is critical for people to feel either empowered or disempowered. In addition, language barriers can also lead to conflict in teams with international care workers, conflicts that need to actively be addressed. The problem is that there is very little research on migrant care workers in Germany.

Dr Christine Kurmeyer, Equal opportunities officer at the Charité presented the project “Women for Women” that she had initiated together with Prof Sehouli in 2015 with regards to female refugees and a space for women to discuss their intimate concerns, health problems and concerns that they suffered from and had encountered during their refuge-seeking travels. She emphasised that those who come are not only a burden but also a potential for the respective receiving country.
The five speakers then came together for a plenary discussion. It was pointed out that there were regional agreements with regards to migration and work, however since the flow of people was not regional bilateral agreements might be more adequate to address the problem. It was suggested to start with small practical problems on the ground to help individuals, before trying to tackle the global social security questions.

Furthermore, it was stressed that the Federal Ministry of Health, the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, as well as the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs currently cooperate in the field of health care and have established several working groups. The representatives of the Federal Ministry of Health also emphasised that Germany has taken the Code of Practice very seriously.

The event was followed by a networking reception allowing an informal exchange and discussions on this subject.

Overall, it can be said that there is a real need for interdisciplinary research and work in this field. It is important to identify the factors for a successful integration and to turn that into policy measures. In order to take the issue of the global paradox of female migrant care workers, forward, we need to know more about the successes, failures as well as structures that are in place or needed. Finally, it is important to stress again that female migrant care workers represent a neglected part of the workforce agenda who deserve attention.