



WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

Women constitute approximately half of the 244 million individuals who live and work outside of their country of origin.^a Contrary to popular discourse, which has painted women as passive actors in migration – moving as dependents of their spouses or for family reunification – recent decades have seen an increase in the feminization of labour migration.^b These migratory flows are in part influenced by the lack of decent work for women in countries of origin, and the increase in the demand for female labour in destination countries.^c Current discourse on the feminization of migration is largely focused on the economic benefits it has to development. Based on research and lessons learned from UN Women's EU-funded global project "Promoting and Protecting Women Migrant Workers' Labour and Human Rights: Engaging with International, National Human Rights Mechanisms to Enhance Accountability", which is piloted in Mexico, Moldova, and the Philippines, this Brief explores the contributions of women migrant workers to development more broadly.

Introduction

Female labour migration tends to be heavily concentrated in occupations that are traditionally associated with specific gender roles. A key example is domestic and care work, including nursing, elderly and child care, cleaning and other related work in households. Such work is seen as a natural extension of women's traditional gender roles. This type of work is referred to as reproductive labour, which is typically undervalued and undercompensated.

Ageing populations, declining fertility rates and increasing female labour participation have resulted in a care deficit in many burgeoning economies, often made worse due to a lack of affordable public care services. This care is commonly outsourced to women migrant workers.

These women, who leave their country of origin to provide caregiving services abroad, will often assign their own caregiving duties either to a paid worker or a family member - this is termed the global care chain. Throughout the chain, labour needs are typically met by women, and at each stage, the value of reproductive labour reduces.¹ Historically, global care chains began through unmet care needs in the Global North – increasingly, they are also beginning in middle-income countries in the Global South.²

In the case of agricultural and manufacturing sectors, notions around women as docile, nimble, and obedient workers, have contributed to their increasing presence as migrant workers, with employers trying to capitalise on the perceived advantages of migrant women's labour. Due to its low-skilled nature, lack of regulation, and high

- a. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015). "International Migration Report 2015 Highlights." p. 1.
- b. Datta, K. McIlwaine, C. Evans, Y. Herbert, J. May, J. & Willis, J. (2010). "A migrant ethic of care? Negotiating care and caring among migrant workers in London's low-pay economy." *Feminist Review*, 94: 93-116.
- c. Petrozziello, A. (2013). "Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration-Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective." p. 40.

¹ Hochschild, A.R. (2000). "Global care chains and emotional surplus value". In W. Hutton, & A. Giddens (Eds.). *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*.

² 4th Summit of the Global Forum on Migration and Development. ANNEX to Roundtable 2.2 Background Paper 1 "Uncovering the interfaces between Gender, Family, Migration and Development: The Global Care Economy and Chains."

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levels of precarity, feminised labour migration has received increased attention from governments, civil society – including women's organisations – and the international community.

Financial remittances and contributions to development

Migrant remittances regularly surpass the amount of foreign direct investment and overseas development aid in many developing countries.³ As such, there is increasing attention given to leveraging labour migration for economic growth.

The feminization of migration has further drawn attention to the potential for women migrant workers to contribute to development.⁴ This focus is largely on financial contributions made by way of remittances.

Though their wages are typically lower, women migrants are more likely to send home a higher proportion of their earnings more frequently. The remittances of women migrant workers are more likely to be spent on health, education, family and community development.^{5 6}

It is reported that by sending a higher proportion of their often lower wages, migrant women are responsible for half of the World Bank's estimated \$601 billion in global remittances sent through formal channels.⁷ In countries such as Nepal, women migrant workers – mostly domestic workers – contribute about 50 per cent of migrant workers' remittances, or around 23 per cent to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁸

It is argued that the extent to which remittances can promote development (economic and social) is

reliant on whether migration and remittances form part of a "virtuous cycle" for local economic development. A virtuous cycle typically includes the ability to invest remittances through formalised financial services generating spill over effects to local economic activities. This has been described as promoting "inclusive financial democracy", using remittances to generate an ability to do more, not just buy more.⁹

This approach to linking remittances to development has been criticised for viewing migrants and their families as a homogenous group sharing the wish to engage in the formal financial sector, whereas commonly the opposite is true; whilst riskier, the informal financial sector offers speed, lower transfer fees and a level of trust that the formal sector has yet to match.¹⁰

This approach is also criticised in relation to women's access to and control over productive resources, which may not change as a result of migration. Indeed, women migrant workers may not retain control over remittance spending once funds are transferred home. Restrictive laws and practices governing women's access to and control over property can limit their ability to acquire assets in their home countries. Limited access to financial services and products in home and host countries, a lack of financial literacy, insufficient support for capacity building, investment, or income diversification can also reduce women's ability to channel their earnings into concrete and realisable benefits.

More research needs to be conducted on how remittance services can be used to bank the

³ World Bank (2016). Migration and Remittance Factbook 2016.

⁴ Petrozziello, A. (2013). "Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration-Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective." p. 35.

⁵ UN Women (2013). "Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers." p. 8.

⁶ Orozco, M; Lowell, L., Schneider, J. (2006). "Gender-Specific Determinants of Remittances: Differences in Structure and Motivation."

⁷ World Bank (2016). Migration and Remittance Factbook 2016.

⁸ UN Women. (2013). "Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development."

⁹ Petrozziello, A. (2013). "Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration-Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective."

¹⁰ Ibid.

unbanked, and how to increase women’s financial access, usage, and assets.¹¹

Social remittances and contributions to development

The idea of social remittances – transfers of practices, norms, identities, and social capital – focuses on the concept that the contributions of women migrant workers can reach further than the act of transferring money.

The experiences of migrant women can inform and change social, cultural, and political norms and can influence positive social change across households and communities in origin and destination countries. For instance, when a woman’s new earning capacity has the effect of elevating her status in her family and/or community, she may have more influence on how that money is spent, as well as on other significant decisions that she might previously have been excluded from influencing.¹²

Migration also allows for origin countries to reap significant benefits from the transfer of knowledge, ideas, practices, skills, and technologies.¹³

Social remittances are not as predictable as monetary remittances and are difficult to measure – and hence often discounted. In addition, the ability to measure or predict social remittances is made harder due to the fact that any socio-political benefits will be dependent on the woman herself and the migration experience she has had. The structural barriers to women migrant workers’ empowerment (as discussed on the following page) are the same barriers that prevent women

from realising the socio-political benefits of their migration experience, either because of gender and cultural norms or misguided policies.

Social and economic contributions to destination countries

In providing a reproductive labour force, women migrant workers benefit host countries by freeing up more of their workers to engage in the productive labour market, which in turn contributes to growth in these countries. In the United States of America alone, the care sector is expected to grow by 70 per cent over the next ten years.¹⁴ As ILO’s World Employment and Social Outlook 2015 underscores, similar trends can be observed globally.¹⁵

Women migrants in the care economy increasingly fill care deficits left by lack of affordable public care services and health sector cut-backs that are not responding to the reduction in national women undertaking reproductive labour tasks.¹⁶ In the United States, a significant proportion of domestic workers are migrant women, with 39.5 per cent of domestic workers being Latin American women in 2010.¹⁷

Over the past ten years, migrant workers accounted for 47 per cent of the increase in the labour force in the United States and 70 per cent in Europe; such expansion of the labour force has both direct and indirect effects on a destination country’s economic growth.¹⁸

In addition to increasing the local labour force, migrant workers commonly contribute more in

¹¹ UN Women (2015). “Gender, remittances and asset accumulation in Ecuador and Ghana.”

¹² Temin, M. et al. (2013). “Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World Policy Brief.” p. 8.

¹³ UN Women (2013). “Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development.” p. 23.

¹⁴ See:

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2012/10/02/health-care-job-growth/1600255/>

¹⁵ ILO (2015). “Women and the Future of Work – Taking care of the caregivers.” p. 2.

¹⁶ UN Women (2013). “Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development.” p. 33.

¹⁷ ILO (2013). “Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection.” p. 38.

¹⁸ OECD (2014). “Migration Policy Debates: Is Migration Good for the Economy?”

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taxes and social contributions than they take in benefits.¹⁹

Migrant workers also bring human capital, supplementing the stock of knowledge and skills without costing the destination country in terms of investments in education and human development. Nurse migration from the Philippines, for example, responds to a demand for skilled medical specialists in destination countries. By bringing in nurses from the Philippines, destination countries gain vital skills without any prior investment in these migrants' human capital.

The nature of women's contributions to development are dependent on the environment within which they live, migrate and work. In particular, key factors include access to decent work and social protection, as well as their family situation.

Barriers to decent work and social protection

The potential development contributions of women migrant workers are constrained by their heightened vulnerability to precarious employment with insufficient levels of social protection. Women migrant workers face a number of barriers to social protection and decent work, such as: exclusionary policies which limit access to gender-responsive services, health care, or legal support for migrants; power imbalances between employer and employee, often enhanced by migration status tied employment; isolation and lack of access to information on rights and protections; family separation and dependence on remittances; as well as sector specific risks and language barriers.

Frequently, women migrant workers are subject to restrictive gendered immigration and emigration policies, such as: skill level or financial requirements for permanent entry; sector-specific programs which channel women into gendered streams of entry via temporary work permits; bans on women's emigration applied to specific sectors (most commonly domestic work) or age restrictions on women's migration. Such restrictions do not typically mitigate the costs associated with women's labour migration and, conversely, frequently lead women to pursue migration through irregular, unregulated and unprotected channels – often with the assistance of unregulated recruiters and other intermediaries.

Women migrant workers are commonly employed in low skilled, low paid, and informal sectors.²⁰ Each of these three elements creates a triple jeopardy for women migrant workers, acting to further undervalue and undermine their work. For example, women migrant workers typically command lower value than men in the workplace, regardless of their sector or occupation; the work they do (i.e. domestic and care work) is typically undervalued because it is seen as women's work; and migrant workers can be competitively cheap and flexible.

The low status of domestic and care work contributes to its invisible, informal, and unregulated nature. Domestic workers are rarely covered by labour laws and commonly have their migration status tied to a single employer.²¹ These gaps in protection for domestic workers are common even in countries known for better working conditions. For example, the United Kingdom recently abolished the domestic worker visa, replacing it with a "tied visa" that prohibits workers from changing employers within six

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ UN Women (2016). "Progress of the world's women: transforming economies, realizing rights." p. 92.

²¹ Ibid, p. 34.

months.²² The “tied visa” which names employers on work permits is also commonly used in Canada.²³

Whether migrating through regular or irregular channels, women migrant workers often face the risk of economic exploitation, intersectional discrimination and often sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) from intermediaries and employers, with little access to legal protection or justice and SGBV protection services.²⁴

While forced labour is a risk for many individuals using irregular channels, women migrant workers are more susceptible to being trafficked for sexual exploitation, constituting 98 per cent of all such victims. Globally, almost 21 million people are victims of forced labour, of which about 11.4 million are women and girls. Additionally, 29 per cent of all victims of forced labour are migrants.²⁵

Many migrant women also face gendered vulnerabilities that are specific to their sector of labour market insertion. In the care sector, for example, they are often isolated in private homes and/or with restricted movement, and without access to legal or social protection, the situation of migrant care workers can commonly contravene relevant international human rights standards, including the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

The human rights abuse that migrant care workers face can range from physical, psychological, and sexual violence, to labour abuses including excessive work hours without rest or additional pay.

Impacts on migrant women and their families

Whilst the migration of women can have a positive effect on the labour force and the economy in countries of origin and destination, it can be associated with various costs for the migrant.

Limited access to health and education services, coupled with isolation (both physical isolation and isolation created by language barriers), family separation, or delays in family reunification, can have long-term deleterious effects on the health and well-being of women migrant workers and their children. For those women in care work, long hours in the employers’ home, coupled with the emotional nature of the work can manifest in terms of both physical exhaustion and also psychological harm of women migrant workers.²⁶

Throughout their journey, women can face financial, emotional, physical, and psychological costs of migration. Indeed, migration can be an expensive process for women, who may incur high levels of debt because of high recruitment fees, travel and living costs associated with migration.²⁷

Upon returning home, women migrant workers may face stigma, a pervasive lack of reintegration services or employment opportunities, which can impact both the women and their dependents adversely.²⁸ This phenomenon is not specific to children who remain in the country of origin, as transnational mothering and extended separation can have a negative impact on the development of children who migrate with or follow their parents, as well as those that are left behind.²⁹

²² Human Rights Watch (2014). “UK: Migrant domestic workers face serious abuse.”

²³ Hennebry, J. (2014). “Falling through the cracks. Migrant workers and Social Protection.” *Global Social Policy*.

²⁴ UN Women (2016). “Progress of the world’s women: transforming economies, realizing rights.” p. 92.

²⁵ International Labour Organization (2012). “ILO Global Estimate of Forced Labour.”; Donovan, P. (2013). “Britain Turns Back the Clock on Migrant Domestic Workers”. *New Internationalist Magazine*.

²⁶ Parreñas, R. S. (2001). “Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work.”

²⁷ Asis, M. M. B. (2005). “Preparing to Work Abroad: Filipino Migrants’ Experiences Prior to Deployment.” Rep. N.p.: Scalabrini Migration Center. Print.

²⁸ UN Women (2013). “Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development.” p. 30.

²⁹ UN Women (2016). “Progress of the world’s women: transforming economies, realizing rights.” p. 134.

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Within the context of the global care chain, the question over the positive benefit of migration is particularly complicated. On the one hand, if, as a result of migration, a woman must leave her children under the care of another un/low paid woman, but through migrating she is able to afford to educate, feed and clothe her children with the money she earns, the impact of her migration could be seen as positive. On the other hand, the insertion into feminised job sectors and the global care chain perpetuate traditional gender norms and roles, which in turn continue to restrict a woman's agency.

Women migrant workers often feel pressure to continue their care duties back home resulting in a double burden of migrant work and parental duties.³⁰ This burden is discharged both through emotional care, but also through material remittances. Indeed, transnational parenting and transnational families are defined by material connections and a need to perpetuate family ties across borders, as opposed to the traditional family unit within a home.³¹

In order to ensure that women migrant workers get the most out of migration and to maximise the positive contributions that they make to development, their human and labour rights must be promoted and protected at all levels.

Advocacy and governance responses

There are several conventions at the international level that seek to respond to the situation of

migrant workers, improve their labour rights, provide greater protection, and prevent exploitation and abuse:

- The UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families (ICRMW) is a key instrument for the protection of migrants' rights;
- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its General Recommendation No. 26 seek to strengthen protections for women migrant workers in all situations;
- ILO Domestic Workers Convention No. 189 and its supplementing Recommendation No. 201, seeks to extend basic labour rights to all domestic workers including migrants.³²

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a number of goals, targets and indicators that address the situation of women migrant workers through different lenses, in particular Goal 4 on education, Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 8 on decent work, Goal 10 on reducing inequality, and Goal 17 on global partnerships.

Goal 5.4 specifically aims to, "Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work...", which could have a direct bearing on the contribution migrant women make through the global care chain.³³ Goal 8.8 addresses women migrant workers directly through its commitment to "protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment".³⁴

³⁰ Yeates, N. (2011(a)). "Going Global: The Transnationalization of Care." *Development and Change*, 42(4): 1109-1130, p. 1119.

³¹ Yeoh, B. Huang, S. and Lam, T. (2005). "Transnationalizing the "Asian" family: imaginaries, intimacies and strategic intents." *Global Networks*, 4(4): 307-315, p. 308.

³² Other relevant ILO Conventions include: Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97), Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)

Convention, 1958 (No. 111), Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) and accompanying recommendations, Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181).

³³ UN General Assembly (2015). "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." A/Res/70/1.

³⁴ Ibid.

The contribution of women migrant workers to the social and economic development of countries of origin and destination was also firmly recognized at the 2013 High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, which recognized that women and girls account for almost half of all international migrants at the global level, and the need to address the special situation and vulnerability of migrant women and girls by, inter alia, incorporating a gender perspective into policies and strengthening national laws, institutions and programmes to combat gender-based violence, including trafficking in persons and discrimination against them.³⁵

More recently, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants recognised the specific vulnerabilities of women on the move.³⁶ The New York Declaration also recognises the significant contributions and leadership of women, committing to ensuring women’s full and meaningful participation in the development of local solutions.³⁷ Annex Two of the New York Declaration sets out the commitment to launch a process of intergovernmental negotiations that will lead to the adoption of a new “global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration” (global compact for migration). It is intended that the new global compact for migration will stipulate a range of principles, commitments and understandings among UN Member States regarding international migration in all its dimensions, enhancing international coordination and cooperation on migrants and human mobility. The content of the global compact on migration will address the, “protection of labour rights and a safe environment for migrant workers and those in precarious employment; protection of women

migrant workers in all sectors; promotion of labour mobility, including circular migration”.³⁸

The normative frameworks themselves are effective tools which advocacy organisations can use to strengthen their governments’ accountability to the promotion and protection of women migrant workers’ rights. Specifically, studies show that there is a correlation between civil society groups advocating for the rights of women migrants in CEDAW shadow reports, and an increase in recommendations addressing migrant workers’ labour and human rights in the treaty body’s concluding observations.³⁹ The incorporation of a strong focus on migrant women’s labour and human rights in the forthcoming global compact for migration will be central for realizing the promotion and protection of the rights of women migrant workers.

Policy Recommendations

- Promote the development of human rights-based and gender-responsive migration policies that address the gendered dimensions of migration, recognizing women’s agency in migration and promoting women’s empowerment and equality;
- Increase collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data on remittances;
- Improve data collection on wider socio-economic aspects of women’s migration, both in relation to the situation of those who migrate and the implications and impacts for those who remain in countries of origin, including the impacts of exploitation, abuse, and discrimination against migrants;

³⁵ UN General Assembly (2013). “Declaration of the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development.” A/68/L.5, para. 11.

³⁶ UN General Assembly (2016), Draft Resolution Referred to The High-Level Plenary Meeting On Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants by The General Assembly at Its Seventieth Session (‘New York Declaration’) A/71/L.1, 13 September 2016.

³⁷ Ibid, para 31.

³⁸ Ibid, Annex II, para 8q.

³⁹ Gammage, S. and Hennebry, J. (Forthcoming). “Bearing the burden for change: claims-making, advocacy and organizing among women migrant workers.”

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- Improve training and capacity development on gender, migration, and development for policy makers;
- Consult women migrants in policy making;
- Increase civil society use of international mechanisms to advocate for greater government accountability to migrant women;
- Counter the challenges faced by women in accessing formal remittance transfer systems regardless of informal employment status and increase measures to help promote financial literacy;
- Recognize the positive contribution of women migrants to sustainable and inclusive development, and acknowledge that development cannot be truly sustainable and inclusive until it encompasses and fosters the full economic, social and political empowerment and the leadership of women and girls at all stages of migration.

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