

A Passage to Hope:

Women and International Migration

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Every year millions of women working overseas send hundreds of millions of dollars in remittances back to their homes and communities. These funds go to feed and educate children, provide health care, build homes, foster small businesses and generally improve living standards for loved ones left behind. For host countries, the labour of migrant women is so embedded in the fabric of society that it goes virtually unnoticed. Migrant women toil in the households of working families, soothe the sick and comfort the elderly. They contribute their technical and professional expertise, pay taxes and quietly support a quality of life that many take for granted.

Invisible and Unacknowledged

Migrant women move to marry, rejoin migrant husbands and family, or to work. They are domestic workers, cleaners, caretakers of the sick, the elderly and children. They are farmers, waitresses, sweatshop workers, highly skilled professionals, teachers, nurses, entertainers, sex workers, hostesses, refugees and asylum seekers. They are young, old, married, single, divorced and widowed. Many migrate with children. Others are forced to leave them behind.

Today, women constitute almost half of all international migrants worldwide—95 million or 49.6 per cent. Yet, it is only recently that the international community has begun to grasp just how much migrant women contribute to the economy and social well-being of populations living in both source and receiving countries. And it is only recently that policymakers have acknowledged the particular challenges and risks women confront when venturing into new lands.

A Silent but Mighty River

In 2005, remittances—funds sent by migrants to their country of origin—rang in at an estimated US\$232 billion. With US\$167 billion of the total going to developing countries, remittances are considerably larger than official development assistance (ODA) and are the second-largest source of external funding for developing countries after foreign direct investment (FDI). Experts consider the actual amount to be much higher, since these estimates do not take into account funds transferred through informal channels.

Despite a dearth of reliable global data, a number of country-specific studies reveal just how critical female remittances can be.

Of the more than US\$1 billion in migrant funds sent back to Sri Lanka in 1999, women contributed over 62 per cent of the total. Of the roughly US\$6 billion remitted annually to the Philippines in the late 1990s, migrant women transferred one third. Although women



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tend to send less overall than men, studies reveal that they send a higher *proportion* of their more meagre earnings to their families back home. One United Nations study showed that Bangladeshi women working in the Middle East sent home 72 per cent of their earnings on average with 56 per cent of those monies earmarked for daily needs, health care and education. This reflects the spending priorities of migrant women all over the world.

Quite apart from remittances, women migrants contribute to their home communities in other ways as well. The World Bank attributes improved child health and lower mortality rates to the health education that women acquire abroad.

Brain drain

The massive outflow of nurses, midwives and doctors from poorer to wealthier countries is one of the most difficult challenges posed by international migration today. On the one hand, skilled women and men are increasingly turning to migration as a means of improving their lives and that of their families. On the other, their countries are facing a health-care crisis unprecedented in the modern world.

Perhaps nowhere is the effect of the “brain drain” more acutely felt than in the already fragile health systems of developing countries. Recent surveys show that the intention to migrate is especially high among health workers living in regions hit hardest with HIV/AIDS—68 per cent of those surveyed in Zimbabwe and 26 per cent in Uganda expressed a desire to leave their countries and move abroad. The Global Commission on International Migration reports that more Malawian doctors are currently practising in the northern English city of Manchester than in the whole of Malawi. Only 50 of the 600 doctors trained since independence are still practising in Zambia.

The motivations for migrating, however, are anything but in short supply. In many poor countries, health systems are collapsing, under-funded and facing chronic shortages of basic supplies, equipment and staff. This is exacerbated by overwhelming pressure brought on by massive health-care needs. While sub-Saharan Africa is now staggering under the highest infectious disease burden in the world (25 per cent), it retains only 1.3 per cent of the world’s health-care practitioners.

Even more so than doctors, nurses constitute the “frontline troops” of patient care. When they decamp owing to poor pay, bad working conditions and a lack of opportunity, patients suffer and health-care systems crumble. In 2000, for example, twice as many nurses left Ghana as graduated. Two years later, the Ministry of Health estimated a nurse vacancy rate of 57 per cent. In 2003, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago reported nursing vacancies of 58 and 53 per cent, respectively. In 2003, an estimated 85 per cent of employed Filipino nurses were working abroad.

Needless to say, the migration of nurses is causing considerable problems. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a minimum ratio of 100 nurses for every 100,000 people, but many poor countries do not come even close. In some (Central African Republic, Liberia, Uganda) the ratio is less than 10 nurses per 100,000 people, as compared to more than 2,000 per 100,000 people in wealthier nations (Finland and Norway). In Europe, the average ratio is 10 times that of Africa and South-East Asia.

Furthermore, measures to stanch the flow—now under way in Canada and the United Kingdom—are unlikely to slow demand. The World Health Organization estimates that, by 2008, Great Britain will require 25,000 doctors and 250,000 nurses more than it did in 1997. The United States Government projects that by 2020, more than one million nursing positions will need to be filled. Canada and Australia are projecting nursing deficits of 78,000 and 40,000, respectively, during the next four to five years. This is partially owing to demographic ageing brought on by lower fertility rates and longer life expectancies in industrialized countries.

Selling Hope and Stealing Dreams

For many women, migration opens doors to a new world of greater equality and relief from oppression and discrimination that limit freedom and stunt potential. For origin and receiving countries, the contribution of women migrants can quite literally transform quality of life. These benefits, however, come at a cost. For migration also has its dark side.

From the modern-day enslavement of trafficking victims to the exploitation of domestic workers, millions of female migrants face hazards that testify to the lack of

adequate rights protections and opportunities to migrate safely and legally. Discrimination is also imbedded in policies that implicitly or explicitly bar women from migrating legally or that relegate them to work in unregulated sectors that render them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Weak multilateral cooperation and the failure to establish, implement and enforce policies and measures designed to protect migrant women from exploitation and abuse mean that it is the most vulnerable who pay—and sometimes with their lives.

Human trafficking

Trafficking is not only one of the most horrific manifestations of migration “gone bad”, it also undermines national security and stability. Today, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 2.45 million trafficking victims are toiling in exploitative conditions worldwide. An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 women, men and children are trafficked across international borders each year. Of these, 80 per cent are women and girls.

Trafficked women are usually forced into sex work, domestic or sweatshop labour. Human trafficking now constitutes the third most lucrative illicit trade after drugs and arms smuggling and nets an estimated US\$7 billion to \$12 billion annually. These numbers, however, reflect only profits from the *initial* sale of persons. The ILO estimates that once victims are in the destination country, criminal syndicates rake in an additional US\$32 billion a year—half generated in industrialized nations and a third in Asia.

The promotion of gender equality and poverty reduction is key to putting a halt to trafficking and other forms of slavery. Women who are desperate to find work—even if it means relocating to another country—are easy prey for traffickers.

Domestic Workers

Domestic work is one the largest labour sectors driving international female migration. While it has provided millions of migrant women with an opportunity to improve both their lives and those of their children, the private nature of their work can put them in gross jeopardy.

Reports of abuse and exploitation come from all over the world. Domestic workers have been assaulted; raped; overworked; denied pay, rest days, privacy and access to medical services; verbally and psychologically abused; and had their passports withheld. The most extreme forms of exploitation have resulted in severe injury and even death.

Domestic workers are rarely protected by labour laws or allowed to unionize: The fact that they work in the private sphere makes them especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. To date, only 19 countries currently have laws and/or regulations that deal specifically with domestic work. Abusive employers are rarely prosecuted and convicted—although in Hong Kong (SAR), China, and Singapore several cases of severe ill treatment have made it to court. In the absence of any kind of recourse, many domestic workers try to run away.

By Force, Not By Choice

Although forced migration entails risks for everyone involved, women and girls face particular hazards—during flight, through temporary refuge and in final settlement. In 2005, roughly half of the world’s 12.7 million refugees were women. By contrast, women are underrepresented among asylum seekers owing to the fact that gender-related claims of persecution are often ignored.

When armed conflict erupts, it is largely women and girls who wind up shouldering the care of the young, the elderly and the infirm. Armed militias often target women and girls for rape and many will be forced to contend with unwanted pregnancies, HIV infection and reproductive illnesses and injuries. At any given time, it is estimated that fully 25 per cent of refugee women of childbearing age are pregnant. Certain groups of women—such as those who head households, ex-combatants, the elderly, the disabled, widows, young mothers and unaccompanied adolescent girls—are more vulnerable and require special protection and support.

Refugee women face specific risks. Although they often enjoy better access to reproductive health care in camp settings than in the general population, women and girls still do not have an equal say when it comes to camp planning, peacebuilding and resettlement. This is a serious oversight that ultimately hinders reconstruction.

Moving Young

Young people are increasingly on the move. Many leave with few belongings, little money and scant information regarding where they hope to end up. But they take with them the great assets of youth: resilience, resourcefulness and perseverance. Young people aged 10 to 24 now account for about a third of all international migrants. For example, 15 per cent of all Mexicans seeking employment in the United States in 1997 were adolescents. Survey results from shelters in Mexico and Central America, at transit points for migrants heading to the United States, show that 40 per cent of new arrivals were adolescents between 14 and 17 years of age. Studies undertaken along the boundaries between Thailand, Myanmar and China report adolescents as young as 13 crossing borders alone.

Developed countries, in particular those with ageing populations, benefit from young migrants who not only take the most menial jobs no one else wants but also constitute a growing share of highly-educated skilled labour. Young people move because they are either unable to find work, continue their schooling or go about their daily lives with a reasonable expectation of safety and security. They migrate because they cannot find these conditions at home. A growing number are students who then opt to stay in the host country following graduation. Although the emigration of young people reduces the labour force among a highly productive age group in source countries, young migrants send money back to their home countries and bring their skills and experience with them when they return.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that young people offer so much, their very youth puts them at risk of abuse and exploitation. This is particularly true of young girls who are more vulnerable to rape and other gender-based forms of violence. An almost complete absence of data makes it even harder for policymakers to gauge just how many young people migrate each year. One thing is clear, however, and that is that young

people are often denied opportunities to migrate legally for no other reason than their age. To ensure that their voices are heard, *The State of World Population 2006* is introducing a special “youth edition”, *Moving Young*, which focuses specifically on the experiences of young migrants told in their own words.

Safeguarding Human Rights, Embracing Cultural Diversity

Global communications and transportation have made it possible for individuals to enjoy more freedom of movement than ever before. But people should not be compelled to migrate because of inequality, insecurity, exclusion and limited opportunities in their home countries. While governments and experts discuss how best to manage migration, the fact remains that migrants are first and foremost human beings with human rights.

Stepped up efforts to reduce poverty, bring about gender equality and enhance development will go a long way towards achieving a more orderly migration system. These are necessary to reduce the gaps between rich and poor and to expand opportunities for all—including women, who in too many countries face overwhelming odds. Sound immigration policies that respond to economic interests and safeguard human rights and gender equality are critical.

Women are migrating and will continue to do so. Although women and youth have always made up a considerable proportion of international migrants, their contributions have largely gone unnoticed. Their voices must be heard. Efforts to combat xenophobia, violence, exploitation and trafficking need to be expanded and policies re-worked to reflect the realities of who migrates and why. Vision and leadership are needed to help steer public debate away from reactionary sensationalism and an emphasis on “otherness” to the recognition of our common humanity that binds us together in a world increasingly without borders.

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For more information

United Nations Population Fund

Information, Executive Board and Resource Mobilization Division
220 East 42nd Street, 23rd Fl., New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.
Tel.: +1 212 297 5020; Fax: +1 212 557 6416
E-mail: leidl@unfpa.org

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