

THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS
IN ASIA AND THE ARAB STATES

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

A. THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS ON
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Until the onset of the economic and financial crisis in 2008, international migration had been steadily increasing, propelled by socio-economic, political and environmental factors. The number of people moving across borders for greater economic opportunities and livelihoods had increased also with changes in policies to accommodate labour migrants. Recent decades saw an increase in the number of female migrants, including in Asia and Arab States. This meant that more women were leaving their families behind and were seeking employment in other countries. In some countries women leaving Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka constituted as much as 80 per cent of all international migrants leaving these countries.

The global economic and financial crisis affected migrant women, although exactly how and to what extent is not known. There is currently no global “tracking system” for migrants, including female migrants. Moreover, even if such a system existed, it would track only those with official documents, whereas many women migrant workers are often undocumented and fall outside existing labour laws and regulations.

UNIFEM has focused on the impacts of the global financial crisis on women including women migrant workers in Asia by organizing two multi-stakeholder dialogues to examine the gendered impact of the economic crisis on migrant women in 2009 and commissioning a study on the impact of economic stimulus packages on women, including female migrants. Both forums came up with concrete proposals for policymakers and other organizations for supporting women, especially against intensified exploitation and abuse.

In many countries, migrant workers face potential discrimination and inequality. Women migrant workers are especially affected because they are female and are often low-skilled. In addition, the crisis is expected to impact male and female migrant workers differently, especially in certain economic sectors dominated by one gender. Women migrant workers have been particularly hard hit in sectors like the garment industry, electronics, related informal sectors, such as home-based work, domestic work, and health care, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The economic crisis has exacerbated the vulnerability of women migrant workers in most countries in the region. In societies structured around patriarchal principles, such as those in many countries in Asia and the Arab region, women are often the first to lose their jobs when demand for exports falls. This has also been reported by civil society organizations and various studies undertaken by academics and United Nations agencies. Due to falling wages, many women have been forced to find additional work, including jobs in the informal economy. Some women migrants face increased violence from male members of their families who may have lost their jobs and take out their frustrations on the female relative. As was observed during the Asian financial crisis of 1997, unemployment often leads to an increase in social problems, such as violence against women and children, increased alcoholism, domestic abuse and racial violence

against women migrant workers. With loss of jobs, remittances are often declining and women in the countries of origin have to work harder or seek additional paid work to earn a living.

With economies dependent on export of goods, services and migrant labour, a global economic downturn may cause reduction in money allocated for development, education, health and other social services. Such cuts in public spending and in wages impact women more adversely as they will have less access to education and health services. Paid health care and education is often reserved for male members in the family.

An economic slowdown in certain sectors and industries in many countries such as manufacturing and the garment industry indicates that while there is more pressure for women to emigrate due to economic hardship in their home countries, there are fewer opportunities for them or less favourable conditions in the countries of destination. For example, in one country in Southeast Asia, about 50,000 job losses in the garment and construction industries were observed by mid-2009 with more losses expected in the future. The garment industry accounted for more than 15 per cent of GDP in 2007 and is dominated by women workers. It provided direct employment to more than 300,000 workers in 2006, the majority of which were migrant workers from neighbouring provinces. The garment industry alone recorded loss of jobs for around 25,000 women. The export revenue dropped from about US\$ 200 million to US\$ 100 million per month, since its top export destination country was severely hit by the crisis, causing women workers to receive lower wages.

With job losses or reduction in wages, which in many developing countries are already low, workers in the manufacturing sector are likely to face poverty. Some research shows that the urban living expenses have risen over the past years, while wages seem to have remained largely stagnant. The living standards of migrants have declined as they have to cut down on other expenses to keep paying rent and food, and many have started relying on the families left-behind to cover their costs for meals. These situations create more pressure for women as well as men, particularly those lacking education and skills, to look for economic opportunities abroad. Further, many female migrant returnees are often forced to re-migrate due to absence of livelihood opportunities in the home country.

The economies in countries of destination are also hard hit by the economic crisis and now provide, for example, fewer work opportunities, fewer hours of work, lower wages and less favourable working conditions. Some migrants will return to their countries of origin not knowing that they might also face difficulties in finding livelihoods there. In an attempt to protect the national labour force from the economic crisis, many developed countries have imposed quotas and restrictions limiting the number of migrant workers (International Organization for Migration, 2009). Such policies will only make migrants more vulnerable to poor and exploitative working conditions and also make them susceptible to human traffickers and other irregular ways of travel.

Some Governments have included provisions for returning migrant workers in their economic stimulus packages as well as support for families suffering from reductions and loss of remittances from overseas. Because many women migrant workers leave through unregistered agents, or simply because they were undocumented workers, they lack information about the formal process of accessing support and are unable to benefit from the provisions for returning migrant workers. Stimulus packages need to include funds to disseminate information to migrant returnees so that more women are able to benefit from them.

B. RECENT INITIATIVES TO STRENGTHEN THE EVIDENCE BASE ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

UNIFEM works with national statistics offices and ministries of labour to engender their labour statistics; trains civil society organizations and service providers to create and maintain databases to capture documented and undocumented women migrant workers, and encourages prospective migrant workers and recruiting agencies to migrate through regular channels.

C. CURRENT AND PLANNED ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

UNIFEM addresses the development-migration nexus in its strategic plan for 2008-2011 and regional and sub-regional strategies (United Nations, Executive Board of the Development Programme and of the United Nations Population Fund, 2007). For example, the regional programme to empower women migrant workers in Asia aims to protect and empower women migrant workers, covering nine countries in Asia and the Arab States. UNIFEM has been undertaking gender-sensitive research on strategic issues for policy reform and plans in-depth empirical studies on the impacts of the financial crisis on women migrant workers. UNIFEM works to promote gender sensitive legislation on migration and to mainstream gender concerns in migration into national and local development plans and action plans of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including engendered results frameworks and budgets. UNIFEM's programmes on migration advocate for and build the capacity of service providers to promote the rights of migrant women workers. In Southeast Asia, UNIFEM and its programme partners participated in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Task Force on Migration contributing technical assistance on gender and migration and collaborating on the drafting of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.¹

UNIFEM has been part of global discussions on migration, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development and co-convened the International Conference on Gender, Migration and Development (ICGMD) in Manila, the Philippines, from 25 to 26 September 2008 in order to sensitize participants on gender and rights aspects of migration and development prior to the second Global Forum meeting. The conference attracted 436 participants from 36 countries and five continents, who jointly formulated a resolution and recommendations in the Manila Call to Action.² It summoned all interested parties to commit to actions, comprised of 23 points upholding rights and 12 points seizing opportunities "to ensure that national and international commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment are adhered to and enhanced by coherent, fair and gender sensitive migration and development policies and practices."²

At the 2009 Global Forum meeting, UNIFEM was part of the roundtable on "How to make the migration-development nexus work for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)." UNIFEM worked with the Special Rapporteur for Gender to ensure that concerns of women migrants were addressed at the meeting. In addition, UNIFEM made recommendations on integration of gender-sensitive policies into national development plans. At the end of the meeting, the Forum called for sex-disaggregated data collection and reporting in order to understand migration patterns and their impact on development agendas, mainstreaming gender concerns into research, policies, development programmes for migrants, and international strategic plans with a focus on women migrant workers. The Global Forum called for gender to be strongly integrated into all stages of migration from pre-departure to onsite to return and for comprehensive, gender reintegration policies for women migrants. The

discussions also highlighted the use of CEDAW principles in framing development plans for women migrants.

UNIFEM has generated the following information and knowledge products, some of which are forthcoming:

- Gender, migration and development – Emerging trends and issues in East and South East Asia
- An in-depth study on the realities and concerns of Nepalese domestic workers in Hong Kong
- Legal protection of domestic workers
- Gender dimensions of remittances: a study of Indonesian domestic workers in East and Southeast Asia
- Claim and celebrate women migrant workers’ human rights through CEDAW
- Empowering women migrant workers in Asia: a briefing kit
- Good practices to protect women migrant workers

UNIFEM is planning to formulate a global programme on gender and migration as a development intervention. It will focus on global policy advocacy, capacity development and knowledge management. UNIFEM is also planning to launch the third phase of the regional programme to empower women migrant workers in Asia. The focus is on more explicit synergies and linkages of safe migration with the broader developmental agendas focusing on achieving gender equality such as pursuing the recognition of women’s contribution to the economies of countries of origin and destination, women’s representation in decision-making processes about social and economic development, and gender responsive budgeting. UNIFEM will continue to advocate for the use of CEDAW general recommendation 26 that affirms “that migrant women, like all women, should not be discriminated against in any sphere of their life” (United Nations, 2009).

NOTES

¹ For the declaration, see <http://www.aseansec.org/19264.htm> (accessed 24 June 2010).

² For the full text of the Manila Call to Action, see http://icgmd.info/docs/icgmd_manila_call_to_action.pdf (accessed 29 April 2010).

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