

## WOMEN AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

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The *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, presented to the Second Committee of the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session (A/59/287), addresses key issues related to women and international migration. A summary of its main findings is presented below.

The migration of women has always been an important component of international migration. As of 2000, the United Nations Population Division estimates that 49 per cent of all international migrants were women or girls, and that the proportion of women among international migrants had reached 51 per cent in more developed regions. Women often migrate officially as dependent family members of other migrants or to marry someone in another country. Female migrants are, however, increasingly part of flows of migrant workers, moving on their own to become the principal wage earners for their families. Most migrant women move voluntarily, but women and girls are also forced migrants leaving their countries in order to flee conflict, persecution, environmental degradation, natural disasters or other situations that affect their security, livelihood or habitat.

As a key organizing principle of society, gender is central to any discussion of the causes and consequences of international migration, including the process of decision-making involved and the mechanisms leading to migration. Previous approaches to documenting and understanding international migration have often disregarded the migration of women. Analytical frameworks either ignored the participation of women in international migration and their contributions or assumed that the causes and consequences of international migration were similar for migrant women and migrant men, thus avoiding an investigation of how migration and its outcomes differ by sex.

It is important to understand the causes and consequences of international migration from a gender perspective because hierarchical social relations related to gender shape the migration experiences of migrants, whether male or female. Understanding whether migration occurs because of gender inequality or whether migration itself helps to perpetuate gender disparities is important to guide the formulation of policy and measures to address the specific needs of women who migrate.

The incorporation of a gender perspective in the analysis of migration demands considering four questions. First, how do the expectations, relationships and hierarchies associated with being female or male affect the potential for international migration and process of migration itself? Second, how do gender inequalities in the societies of destination affect the experiences of migrant women and migrant men? Third, to what extent and in what ways does migration benefit or disadvantage women and men? Fourth, what steps should be taken to ensure equal opportunities and outcomes for migrant women and migrant men?

The participation of women in migration depends on the social roles of women, their autonomy and capacity to make decisions, their access to resources, and the existing gender stratification in countries of origin and destination. Gender inequality can be a powerful factor leading to migration when women have economic, political and social expectations that cannot be realized in the country of origin. As with any migrant, the migration outcomes for women vary depending on whether their movement is voluntary or forced, and on whether their presence in the receiving country is legal or not. The findings of the *World Survey* permit certain generalizations regarding the causes and consequences of migration for women.

For both women and men, the economic and political context of the country of origin conditions how migration decisions are made and how migration occurs. When practices or policies in the country of origin discriminate against women by, for instance, limiting their access to resources or educational opportunities, or by hindering their political participation, the capacity of women to participate fully in society and contribute to it is reduced. These limitations also affect the potential of women to migrate and determine whether women can migrate autonomously or not. Gender relations within the family determine who migrates on their own, women or men. Gender norms about the inappropriateness of women migrating autonomously, the constraining effects of their traditional family roles, women's lack of social and economic independence, all hinder women's participation in international migration. The migration of women is also limited by their lack of connections to social networks in the country of destination that could provide information and resources to make the move possible.

Women migrate to work abroad in response to gender-specific labour demand in countries of destination that reflects existing values, norms, stereotypes and hierarchies based on gender. Thus, although laws regarding the admission of migrant workers are generally gender neutral, the demand for domestic workers, nurses, and entertainers focuses on the recruitment of migrant women. Moreover, in countries of origin as well, female labour supply is the result of gender norms and stereotypes that gear women to certain traditionally female occupations. Recruitment intermediaries, whether private or official, also contribute to reinforce gender segregation in the labour market. In addition, expectations about reciprocity within the family in countries of origin may favour the migration of women if daughters are seen as more likely to remit consistently and to undertake the responsibility of helping the family left behind. Migration is related to the level of empowerment of women, with migration levels among women being higher when female earning potential is more highly valued in the country of origin and women have access to local employment and income-generating opportunities. However, access to such opportunities may dampen the need or desire for migration.

Migration affects not only the migrants themselves but also their family members even if they remain in the country origin. Gender relations and gender hierarchies in both sending and receiving countries determine the gender-specific impact of migration. Women remaining behind when their male relatives (husbands or parents) migrate may find themselves co-residing with other male relatives who may restrict their activities outside the home. In many instances, women left behind in the country of origin must undertake income-generating activities to compensate for the income lost by the departure of their male relatives if the latter do not send remittances on a regular basis. Adding financial responsibilities to the other responsibilities that women have, such as child-rearing, can lead to stress but can also provide women the opportunity of gaining autonomy and experience in decision-making.

In the societies of destination, gender relations and hierarchies as well as policies or practices leading to gender inequities condition the effects of migration for migrant women. The legal status of migrant women, the gender norms implicit in admission regulations and general attitudes to migrants are also important factors influencing the subsequent experiences of migrant women and the impact of their migration on countries of destination.

Conventions, laws and practices governing the rights of women and migrants in receiving countries affect migrant women. Women who are recruited as domestic workers or those who are unauthorized workers in the country of destination are particularly vulnerable. Depending on the receiving country, they may have no protection or recourse in case of abuse. Migrant women are also affected by gender inequality in the society of destination. Labour market segmentation based on gender and the segregation of women in traditionally female occupations (nursing, secretarial work, garment industry work, etc.) mean that migrant women are often paid less than migrant men who are concentrated in higher-paying occupations. Thus earning inequality between migrant women and migrant men persists in countries of destination. When

migrants start small businesses in the country of destination, female family members may work without remuneration in response to norms and practices that undervalue their contributions.

Nonetheless, when women become migrant workers or participate in the labour market of the receiving society, they tend to gain independence and autonomy, leading to a change in gender relations within their families. Gains of that nature at the household level may, however, do not necessarily extend to other spheres of a woman's life, such as the place of employment or within her ethnic community at large.

Migrant women display considerable agency. They contribute to the economic development of their countries of destination through their competencies and skills, and to that of their countries of origin through their remittances and their increased experience when they return to those countries. Often, migrant women help other family members to migrate by paying for the costs of the move. As migrants, women are sources of remittances that may be used to improve the well being of other family members and foster economic growth. In countries of destination, migrant women work to improve their own and their family's standards of living, and they often press for changed gender relations within their families. In many countries, they also form and participate in non-governmental organizations that lobby for gender equality. Upon return to the countries of origin, migrant women may disseminate the importance of rights and opportunities for women.

Refugee women and girls or those who are displaced are particularly vulnerable when they find themselves in situations where their security cannot be ensured and where they may be subject to sexual violence or exploitation. Providing women and children who are refugees or displaced access to food and other essential items is critical, as is their participation in decisions regarding their future and that of their families.

The trafficking of women and girls for prostitution and forced labour is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity. Women who are trafficked are the most vulnerable of all migrants as the process of trafficking involves exploitation, coercion and the abuse of power. Trafficking builds on existing gender inequalities. Trafficked women frequently originate from regions where there are few employment opportunities for women and where women are dependent on others and lack access to resources to change their situation. Trafficked women and girls often believe they will work in legitimate occupations but find themselves trapped into forced prostitution, marriage, domestic work, sweatshops and other forms of exploitation that are similar to slavery. Strategies need to be developed to protect and empower women in these situations. Actions to prevent trafficking include the dissemination of information on the modes used by traffickers to attract and entrap women, the dangers involved and the legal channels open for migration, as well as the provision of better employment opportunities in the country of origin.

A number of international instruments outline the human rights of migrants. Yet many national laws regulating the admission and stay of international migrants include provisions that negatively impact the human rights of migrant women. For instance, laws may include provisions that bar female migrants from being accompanied by their husbands and children or that make it difficult for migrant women to achieve family reunification. In addition, because of the types of occupations that migrant women are concentrated in, they may not receive adequate legal protection under labour laws, especially if they work as domestic workers.

Increased understanding of the situation of migrant women should provide the basis for the formulation of policies and programmes that promote their equality with migrant men and that safeguard their well-being. The *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* makes a number of recommendations for improving the situation of women who are migrants or refugees as well as for those who have been the victims of trafficking. They include a call on all countries to ratify and implement all international legal instruments that promote and protect the rights of migrant women and girls; to review their national migration legislation and regulations in order to identify discriminatory provisions and modify them, and to

develop legal literacy programmes to promote better understanding of the human rights of women. The *Survey* also calls on Governments to develop policies and programmes to enhance the access of migrant women legally present in their territories to employment opportunities, safe housing, education and language training, health care and other services. The *Survey* underscores the need for research and improved data collection activities to provide a basis for the formulation of gender-sensitive migration policies and programmes.