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Women's roles changing with their participation in international migration, impacting both sending and receiving countries

(UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, 3 March 2005) Women taking on the challenges of migration are carving out more active and self-sufficient roles for themselves and are overall making strong contributions at both ends of migrant streams, according to a UN study launched today.

Traditionally, most women have migrated internationally to join husbands or fathers, but the *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration* finds an increasing impact by women who migrate on their own, and are principal wage earners for themselves and their families.

Furthermore, "in the process of international migration, women may move away from situations where they live under traditional, patriarchal authority to situations where they are empowered to exercise greater autonomy over their own lives," the UN says. Even women who do not move, but remain behind when their husband or children migrate, generally take on larger economic and familial responsibilities, and are thus "unacknowledged heroines in the larger migration agenda of families," the UN report says.

Globalization, with its emphasis on communications, trade and investment, has increased awareness of options within and outside home countries, and so tends to open up a range of new opportunities for women, the UN report suggests. But negative factors also play a part. Women in many countries lack economic, political and social opportunities and rights, the UN study points out, and gender inequality is a major cause of migration.

There is a diversity of modes of migration by women. They include family formation and reunification, labour migration and forced migration – both of refugees and of trafficked women.

The jobs migrant women find are most often in traditional female occupations, including domestic work, the garment industry, nursing and teaching, the UN points out. Although some women take on high-paying and high-status jobs — running multinational corporations, teaching in universities, carrying out research and development, programming computers — most find only low-paying jobs, lacking benefits or formal protection measures, and the average wage of women migrants is lower than that of men.

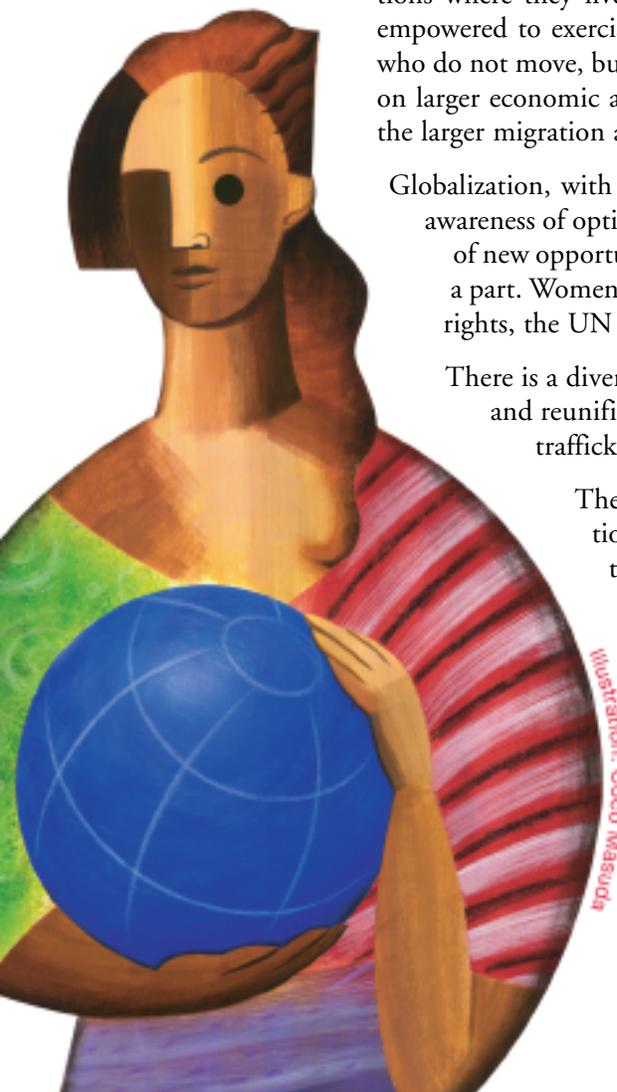


Illustration: Coco Masuda

Contributions to countries of origin

Even so, women migrants contribute significantly to their countries of origin by sending home part of their earnings. Overall remittances from migrants are estimated to have totaled more than \$100 billion in 2003, of which \$93 billion went to developing countries. The latter figure exceeds official development assistance to all developing countries, which in comparison totaled only \$69 billion in 2003, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. With regard to remittances, as in many other categories, statistical data breakdown by sex is not available. But the contribution of women may be close to 50 per cent, as studies cited by the UN indicate that women have a higher propensity to remit to family members than do male migrants, counterbalancing to a certain extent their lower wages and greater likelihood of unemployment.

Also beneficial to sending countries are the skills that women migrants on temporary work assignments or who return to their home countries for other reasons bring back with them.

Exploitation and discrimination

Migration can be an empowering experience for women, but it can also entail new inequalities and vulnerabilities, the UN cautions. Variation between personal advancement, on the one hand, and exploitation, on the other, depends on factors including legal status, language, access to work permits, skills of the individual, and religious and cultural traditions and norms. The UN points out that migrant women are exposed to double discrimination – as women, and as migrants.

Trafficking of women for prostitution and forced labour is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity, and of increasing concern to the international community. Women smuggled by traffickers may be led to believe that they will work in legitimate occupations but find themselves trapped into forced prostitution, marriage, domestic work, sweatshops and types of exploitation that constitute a contemporary form of slavery.

The UN study sets out recommendations for supporting and protecting migrant, refugee and trafficked women. These include:

- empowerment of women to participate in decisions affecting them and their families;
- protection of migrant, refugee and trafficked women's rights and safety, including through legislation and international conventions but, even more importantly, via programmes which help them to assert their rights;
- enhancing employment opportunities and access to education, training, safe and affordable housing, health care and other services; and
- more and better disaggregated data on women and migration, along with further study into causes and impacts, so as to provide a base for formulation of policies and programmes.

The full text of the *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration* is available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/review/english/press-releases.asp>

To order copies of the report, please e-mail United Nations Publications at publications@un.org. The copies are also available at UN bookstores in New York and Geneva.

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