

The invisible ones: women in migration

Traditionally, migration has been mostly a male phenomenon because men had the freedom to travel and a duty to maintain the financial upkeep of the family. Migration was a men's world: migrants' jobs were male jobs and migrants' rights were men's rights. But recently globalisation has brought with it a feminisation of migration, and the number of women who migrate alone, as men do, to make money for themselves or to support their families, is increasing. "There are very limited job opportunities in this country (...) I remember how I suffered before securing a job in Yemen (...) things would have been worse for me and my family had I not gone abroad to work", Ethiopian woman working in Yemen.

Who are migrant women?

They are married or single, divorced or widows, mothers and daughters, girls and older women. They are many but they are invisible as there is not enough data or sex-disaggregated statistics on migrant women. We know that women make half of international migrants¹ and that they tend to migrate from poor to poor countries as they avoid long journeys, may not have enough money to travel far, or are attracted to countries similar in terms of customs, religion, language, climate etc. But the number of women migrating to rich countries is increasing and today women represent the majority of immigrants in North America, Europe and the Middle East and the majority of emigrants from many countries in Asia and Latin America are female.

Why do women migrate?

Whilst women migrate for similar reasons as men, there are incentives specific to their gender:

- To join a migrant husband (family reunification) or to marry someone living in a different country. "I approved because she is a girl and so has to leave" said Hashim of his daughter leaving Ghana.
- To study or to acquire work experience and economic independence in order to gain more respect within their family and community because of the contribution they make to their welfare. "While working in Hong Kong I experienced many things – the way people treat a dependent or independent woman. I have gained much experience and my confidence has grown. Now, I have a say in decision-making at home. My husband does not shout at me. I have bought a piece of land and four rick-

shaws and I am creating a means of livelihood for four other families", Sushila Rai, Nepalese migrant domestic worker².

- To escape gender discrimination and constraining gender norms, such as the obligation to marry or have children, the prohibition to study or work.

Furthermore, women who might have migrated for other reasons often do not want to return home because they fear to lose their newly-won autonomy.

Many women are also forced to migrate by traffickers; sometimes to work in agriculture and manufacturing industries, often to enter the sex trade. The latter represents the third source of illicit profits in the world (after the arms and drugs trade) and 80% of its victims are women³.



Picture by John Perivolaris

What are typical "female" jobs?

They are maids, cleaners and caretakers of the sick, the elderly and of children, as well as farmers, waitresses, sweatshop workers, highly skilled professionals, teachers, nurses, entertainers, sex workers⁴. Skilled women tend to go into care-related professions (education, health, social work); nursing is the most female-dominated sector (90%)⁵.

1. Towards Hope, women and international migration, the state of World Population, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2006.

2. Empowering Woman Migrant Workers in Asia, United Nations Development Fund for Women, (UNIFEM), 2004.

3. Women and Migration 2007, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Lisbon.

4. UNFPA, id.

5. Overview report, Gender and Migration, BRIDGE, 2005.

However, while male migrants often undertake work that is classified as “skilled”, such as management positions in the manufacturing sector, women frequently are engaged in so-called unskilled positions, such as domestic work⁶: 60% of Latin American women migrants work as domestic employees in the host country⁷.

What are the challenges for migrant women?

One of the key issues for migrant women is their vulnerability to violence, exploitation and discrimination, for instance:

- Immigration policies in destination countries tend to give more rights and opportunities for the regularisation of workers in the male sectors, which are traditional migrants' sectors. The female sectors tend to be characterised by their poor working conditions, low pay, insecurity and potential to be exposed to sexual abuse.
- Women can be the subject of sexual or physical violence from transporters, fellow male travellers or border guards. Trafficked women are especially at risk as they are completely dependent on their traffickers who provide them with false passports and work (often within the sex industry). Traffickers regularly threaten women with hurting their families back home and keep them in abusive situations (loss of freedom, rape, torture).
- Women can feel isolated due to the restrictions imposed by their social relations or relatives wanting to preserve their cultural identity in the host country.
- Women are particularly exposed to infectious diseases and are not informed enough about sexually transmitted diseases, such as AIDS. They are at risk not only when subjected to sexual violence or when they enter the sex industry, but also when migrant husbands return home. The spread of such diseases within migrants' communities is taking place both in countries of origin and of destination and regional migration has become one of the most dominant ways through which HIV has spread around Africa⁸.

The new face of migration

It is not only women who are impacted by migration; women themselves are changing the face of migration. Despite the lack of disaggregated data we know that:

- Women's remittances make up for a large part of some country's revenues (in 2005, 86% of the remittances from Europe to the Dominican Republic were sent by women⁹). Women tend to send home a higher proportion of their wages but the total amount is smaller because they often earn less than men.
- Women have particular skills, attitudes, ideas and knowledge. In turn, migration acquires new features. For instance, in sectors like domestic employment where women have direct contacts with families, more relationships are built with the local community. This has a positive impact on integration because it helps to lower the level of fear amongst the local population and can reduce racism and xenophobia.
- Migrant women can help redefine traditional gender roles in the country of origin, as Afghan women did on their return by ensuring female participation in the new constitution.

The key issues

Patterns of migration can differ for women and men, but most crucially, the impact on either is often radically different, and women on the whole are the most vulnerable. But women can also bring positive new features to modern migration. Therefore sending, transit and receiving countries must bring a gender perspective in all policies related to migration so that before any decision is made, an analysis of their effects on both women and men is ensured in order to make the most of women's specific skills and knowledge and to protect them from abuse. In particular, measures should be taken to:

- guarantee gender equality and empowerment of migrant women in migration policies. The latter would have positive impacts on developments in all areas, such as peace and security, integration and human rights;
- save women's lives by providing greater access to information about the specific risks associated with migration and women's health;
- tap into women's potential to help with integration efforts of migrant populations so as to lessen racism and xenophobia and potential spill-over situations of conflicts, tensions, extremism, etc.

⁶. Gender and Migration, United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), 2007.

⁷. FIDH, id.

⁸. Migration and AIDS in Africa: a gender analysis, Joy Hamilton, Women's Study Senior Seminar, Spring 2003, Saint Olaf College.

⁹. As reported in Caribbean Update.