

# Facts and figures: Women migrant workers in ASEAN

This Policy Brief provides an overview of the data available on women migrant workers in ASEAN, identifying good practices and making recommendations for improvements. The Policy Brief also highlights the importance of reliable and sex-disaggregated data on migrant workers, calling for donors and development partners to ensure that the specific situation of women migrants is monitored and addressed in migration programs in the region. Generating accurate and comparable data allows policy makers to develop policies that are responsive and effective in the promotion and protection of women migrant workers' rights. Such data also provides evidence on which civil society groups and trade unions can rely in advocating for these rights. Without reliable data specific to women migrant workers, policies risk responding to assumptions or (mis)perceptions on the migration of women, leaving the realities of women migrants' experiences unaddressed. Accurate and reliable data can shine a light on barriers that prevent women's access to decent work, the vulnerabilities and risks faced in migrating, and the potential benefits of migration.

## What is the scale of labour migration in ASEAN?

It is estimated that there are around 14 million migrant workers from ASEAN Member States, six million of whom have migrated within South-East Asia.<sup>1</sup> Remittances – money sent home by migrant workers – received in the ASEAN region exceeded US\$50 billion in 2013,<sup>2</sup> up from US\$47.96 billion in 2012 and US\$44.23 billion in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic are net sending countries; Myanmar and the Philippines both have an estimated ten per cent of their populations

abroad. Around two million migrant workers depart from Indonesia and the Philippines, primarily to the Gulf and Arab States and to parts of China.<sup>4</sup> Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei Darussalam are net receiving countries; with Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand being the destination for approximately 97 per cent of intra-ASEAN migrants.<sup>5</sup> In Singapore, migrants make up 37.8 per cent of total employment and in Malaysia this figure is 13.6 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

## What is the feminization of migration?

Data from 2013 indicates that women account for 47.8 per cent of all migrants (both labour and non-labour) aged between 20 and 64 in the ASEAN region.<sup>7</sup> There is no definitive data on the proportion of female migration that is for the purpose of work, however, it is estimated that it is a similar level.<sup>8</sup> An increase in autonomous women's labour migration has been the response to the need of women to find work and contribute to the family income, whilst at the same time a pull from countries of destination that have a demand for women to fill feminized sectors of labour. This work is largely low skilled and

<sup>1</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division (2013).

<sup>2</sup> ADBI, ILO and OECD: *Building Human Capital through Labour Migration in Asia* (Tokyo, Bangkok, Paris, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> "The Philippines tops list of Southeast Asia Remittances", in *ASEAN Briefing*, 23 May 2013.

<sup>4</sup> ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> UNDESA: *International Migration Policies 2013 Wall Chart*. Available at [www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/policy/InternationalMigrationPolicies2013/InternationalMigrationPolicies2013\\_WallChart.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/policy/InternationalMigrationPolicies2013/InternationalMigrationPolicies2013_WallChart.pdf) [accessed 07 Oct. 2015].

<sup>8</sup> Including estimates of regular and irregular migration.

## Good practices

1 ASEAN Member States have made commitments to improving data, through the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2007, Article 18), which identifies the need for data sharing for the purpose of enhancing policies.

2 The ILO's ILMS Database for ASEAN<sup>9</sup> project is specifically focusing on building the capacity of countries to standardize data collection of labour migration across the region. The ILMS database seeks to identify knowledge gaps between countries, and to help harmonize definitions and coordinate implementation.

3 The Philippines Overseas Employment Administration collects and publishes data on the deployment of migrant workers, by skill, destination country and sex, making it easy to be able to see how many women are migrating, as a proportion of the total, into what sectors and in which countries. For 2010, for example, these figures illustrate that the category of "women domestic workers" was the largest category of overseas migrants at 94,880.<sup>10</sup>

4 Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), has focused on increasing data on women and men in informal employment. Their studies demonstrate and advocate for better sample surveys that build up accurate pictures of informal employment.<sup>11</sup>

## Key policy recommendations

1 Provide technical assistance to government departments to develop capacity to collect and analyse data, and institutionalize measures for collection of sex disaggregated data.

2 Encourage governments, employers and recruiters to disaggregate data on labour migration by sex, age, education, wages and occupation/sector.

3 Encourage governments, employers and recruiters to make data freely available.

4 Standardize the terms and methods of data collection on women migrant workers in ASEAN for increased comparability.

5 Promote the importance of collecting data on informal employment and informal sector employment in labour force surveys.

6 Build awareness and capacity to increase understanding of the nexus between trafficking, forced labour and labour migration statistics.

7 Require sex-disaggregated data in monitoring service provision and integrate reflexive programming to be able to respond to and address barriers to women's access to services.

<sup>9</sup> Developed by the ILO ASEAN TRIANGLE Project and available at: <http://apmigration.ilo.org/asean-labour-migration-statistics> [accessed 7 Oct. 2015].

<sup>10</sup> Philippines Overseas Employment Administration: *OFW Deployment per Skill and Country – New hires For the Year 2010*.

<sup>11</sup> Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO): *The Development of Statistics on the Informal Economy*. See: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/development-statistics-informal-economy> [accessed 7 Oct. 2015].

low paid with a significant amount being in the domestic work and care sector. In the Asia-Pacific region, the number of domestic workers increased from approximately 33.2 million in 1995 to 52.6 million in 2010.<sup>12</sup> Women, mostly employed as domestic workers, represent the majority of migrant workers in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.<sup>13</sup> As at 2012, Malaysia had around 350,000 migrant domestic workers, with Singapore having 214,500 registered at the end of 2013.<sup>14</sup> In the Philippines in 2011 women migrant workers outnumbered men at 217,830 to 181,145, of whom 135,870 were female domestic workers.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst there is little in the way of sex-disaggregated data, it is reported that migrant women are responsible for half of the World Bank's estimated US\$582 billion in global remittances.<sup>16</sup> Though commonly earning less than men, studies have shown that women migrant workers tend to remit a higher proportion of their incomes at more regular intervals.<sup>17</sup>

It is estimated that up to a third of migrants employed in ASEAN work in the informal sector.<sup>18</sup> Although there are no figures for informal and irregular migrant workers it is anticipated that women make up a large number of those in ASEAN; women migrant workers tend to work in the informal economy and are increasingly migrating through undocumented channels.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the fall in the percentage of newly hired migrant women workers from the Philippines from 71 per cent to 52 per cent

between 2005 and 2009 is thought to be indicative of a rise in women's undocumented migration.<sup>20</sup> In 2011 it was estimated that there were 1.4 million (men and women) undocumented and unregistered workers in Thailand alone.<sup>21</sup> The Malaysian Federation of Employers suggests that there are three undocumented migrant workers for every one documented in Malaysia.<sup>22</sup> A further indicator of the levels of women migrants working in informal sectors is the ILO estimate that approximately 65 per cent of women workers in ASEAN are engaged in vulnerable employment.<sup>23</sup> Work in the informal economy can include agriculture, fisheries and construction; also work in households, especially domestic and care work, which is largely excluded from labour and social protections. This reflects a broader trend in ASEAN with women's vulnerable employment being higher than men's in seven of the eight ASEAN Member States for which there is data.<sup>24</sup>

There are a number of factors that increase women's vulnerability to irregular migration into informal employment. Many ASEAN states have introduced policies that have sought to protect women migrant workers from exploitation, but arguably have had the opposite effect – restricting women from accessing regular migration options and limiting them to irregular channels. Such policies have included banning the migration of women into domestic work, restrictions on women migrating on their own/without permission, and restrictions on the migration of women by age.<sup>25</sup> Potential migrant workers may also be deterred from migrating through regular routes because of the high costs associated with regular migration, related to the required documents, health checks and fees from recruitment agencies.

There is also a pull from informal sectors in destination countries that demand temporary, irregular labour migrants in specifically feminized sectors. Barriers to regular labour migration can also be due to cultural gender norms that put less emphasis on educating women and recognising their skills, reducing the options available to them. Lack of access to accurate information and services can also result in a reduction in the opportunities available to women to choose decent work options.

An assessment of Cambodian migrants, who returned en masse from Thailand in 2014, indicated that up to 53 per cent of the 225,000 were women.<sup>26</sup> This was a significant increase from 37 per cent – the proportion of women who had registered to work in Thailand under the Memorandum of Understanding. The assessment also found many more women than expected had been working in Thailand's informal construction industry.<sup>27 28</sup>

<sup>12</sup> ILO: *Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection* (Geneva, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (2010), in UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> "Western Union Pays Tribute: Women Move US\$ 291B Globally to Loved Ones; Half of \$582 Billion in Global Remittances", in *Western Union*, 4 Mar. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> A. Orbeta Jr.: *Enhancing labour mobility in ASEAN: Focus on lower skilled workers*, (Makati City, Philippines Institute for Development Studies Discussion Paper Series No. 2013-17).

<sup>19</sup> UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Migration Policy Institute: *Labour Migration in Colombo Process Countries: Good Practices, Challenges and Way Forward* (Geneva, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> IOM: *Thailand Migration Report 2011: Migration for Development in Thailand: Overview and Tools for Policymakers* (Bangkok, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> The ILO defines workers in vulnerable employment as the sum of own-account workers and contributing family workers. They are less likely to have formal work arrangements, and are therefore more likely to lack decent working conditions, adequate social security and 'voice' through effective representation by trade unions and similar organizations. Vulnerable employment is often characterized by inadequate earnings, low productivity and difficult conditions of work that undermine workers' fundamental rights. See also ILO: *Labour and social trends in ASEAN 2008: Driving competitiveness and prosperity with decent work* (Bangkok, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Myanmar has in the past implemented bans on women migrating to Singapore for domestic work and a policy that women migrating to work in factories in other areas of Malaysia must go in groups of at least five. Similarly, Cambodia has banned the migration of women to Malaysia for domestic work.

<sup>26</sup> IOM: *Assessment of Returned Migrants in Cambodia*, 9 Sep., (Phnom Penh, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> IOM: *Emergency Response for Cambodian Migrants Returning from Thailand*, 20 June, (Phnom Penh, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> J. Holliday: "Lessons from returning women migrant workers", in *The Phnom Penh Post*, 10 Sep. 2014.

# Intra-ASEAN women's labour migration

**Myanmar → Thailand**  
 Domestic work;  
 Agriculture;  
 Construction

**Lao PDR → Thailand**  
 Domestic work;  
 Agriculture;  
 Construction

**Viet Nam → Malaysia**  
 Manufacturing

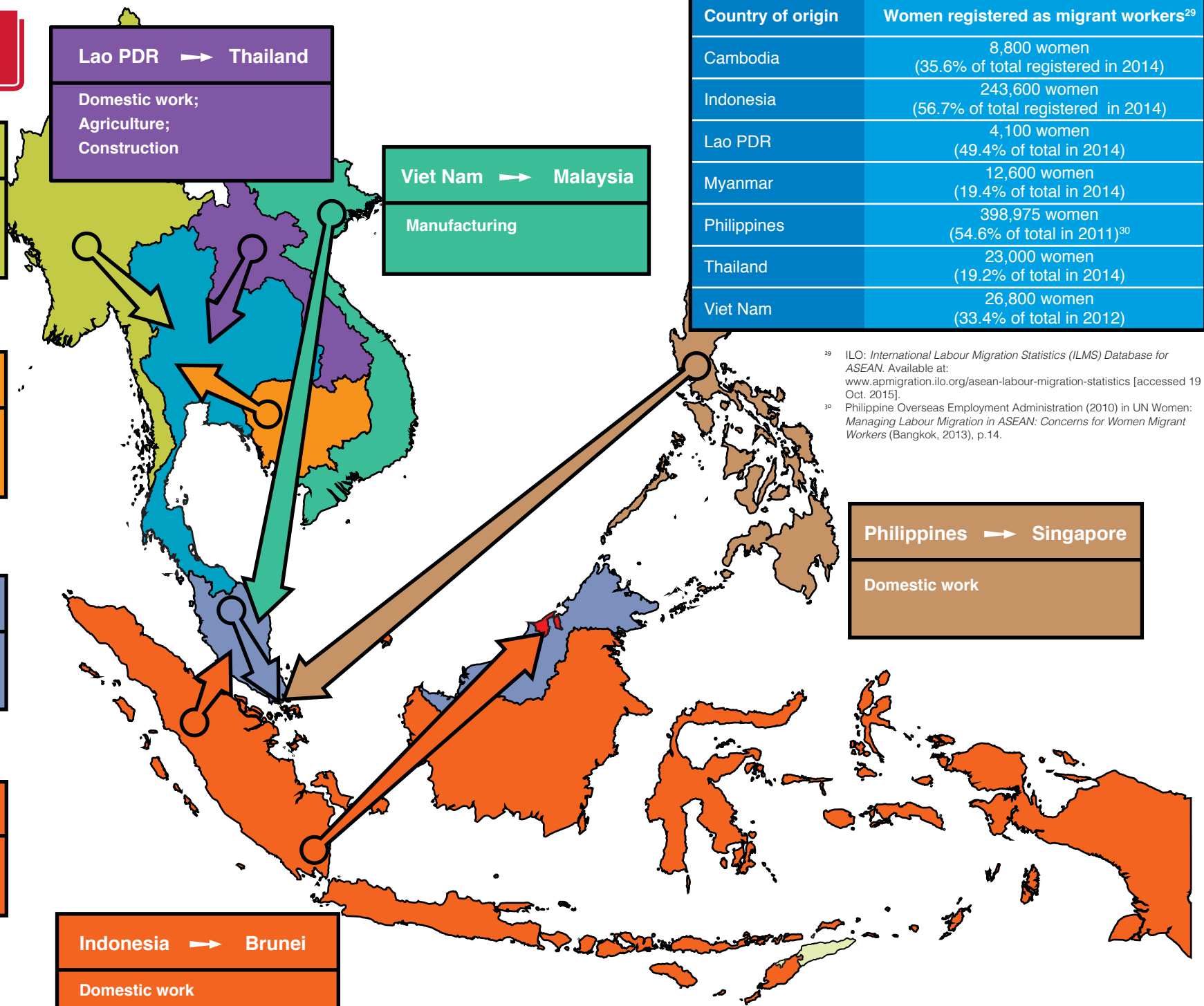
**Cambodia → Thailand**  
 Construction;  
 Agriculture

**Malaysia → Singapore**  
 Domestic work

**Indonesia → Malaysia**  
 Domestic work

**Indonesia → Brunei**  
 Domestic work

**Philippines → Singapore**  
 Domestic work



Country of origin	Women registered as migrant workers <sup>29</sup>
Cambodia	8,800 women (35.6% of total registered in 2014)
Indonesia	243,600 women (56.7% of total registered in 2014)
Lao PDR	4,100 women (49.4% of total in 2014)
Myanmar	12,600 women (19.4% of total in 2014)
Philippines	398,975 women (54.6% of total in 2011) <sup>30</sup>
Thailand	23,000 women (19.2% of total in 2014)
Viet Nam	26,800 women (33.4% of total in 2012)

<sup>29</sup> ILO: *International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) Database for ASEAN*. Available at: [www.apmigration.ilo.org/asean-labour-migration-statistics](http://www.apmigration.ilo.org/asean-labour-migration-statistics) [accessed 19 Oct. 2015].

<sup>30</sup> Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (2010) in UN Women: *Managing Labour Migration in ASEAN: Concerns for Women Migrant Workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p.14.

## How much data is there on women's labour migration?

Labour migration data comes from various sources, from the international to the national level. There are three key global data sources that provide global estimates on the stocks of international migrants according to their host country and country of origin. The World Bank's Global Bilateral Migration Database estimates international migrant stocks in some 230 host countries according to their sex and country of origin. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs' (UNDESA) International Migrant Stock also provides estimates for some 230 host countries based on migrants' sex, country of origin, and age. The World Bank's Bilateral Migration Matrix 2010 and Bilateral Migration Matrix 2013 also present two stand-alone sets of estimates according to country of origin (but neither sex nor age). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) keeps a database on immigrants in OECD and non-OECD countries (DIOC-E). Whilst this data includes women migrant workers, it focuses primarily on those migrating into OECD countries and does not contain data on intra-ASEAN migration.

The ILO launched the International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) Database in December 2014, the first of its kind in ASEAN. The ILMS Database gathers together all of the official government data sources on international migrant workers' stocks and flows within the region, as well as on countries' nationals living or working abroad. Sex-disaggregated data was collected, where possible.

Although projects including the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), and the ILMS seek to publish sex-disaggregated data, they are limited by the data provided to them by states. Most states do not sex-disaggregate the data on the numbers of workers migrating. They rarely, however, provide sex disaggregation on the destination, occupation or age of the migrant. As such, this data can illustrate how many women are leaving to work overseas, but will not provide information on who they are, where they go, or what they do.

Data is also collected at the national level in the form of labour force surveys, through population/household census style surveys or through administrative records. Countries may also collect

data on emigration and immigration, albeit not necessarily disaggregated by the type of visa issued. Where countries have agreements for the sending or receiving of labour, they may collect data on the number of people migrating under the agreement. These data sources provide elements but rarely a full picture of labour migration or women's labour migration. There is no standardized approach to sex or sectoral disaggregation across the region. Labour force surveys do not all include migrant data and, if they do, rarely reflect any temporary or cyclical nature of migration, a particular element characterising women's labour migration in ASEAN. Without this data, it is not possible to be able to track changing trends (in terms of flows between particular countries or into specific sectors) or accurately identify important gaps in protection.

Across ASEAN there is no standardized methodology or categorisation for data collection as related to labour migration for men or women migrant workers. Women may be recorded as applying to work overseas by their country of origin, but if there is no reciprocal record in the country of destination then data can be lost on the sector they migrated in to, how long they worked and how much they earned. Similarly, due to the informal nature of domestic work, women migrants may migrate irregularly or on different visas, falling entirely outside of the datasets. In the absence of standardized definitions and regularity, comparability becomes a problem, making it harder to identify regional trends. Data is often only collected and recorded where migration occurs through regular channels into formal sectors. Such data therefore fails to record many women migrant workers who migrate irregularly into informal sectors.

The mismatch in data on the labour migration of women from Myanmar to Thailand highlights the difficulty in comparability. As at November 2013, the proportion of women migrants from Myanmar who entered Thailand irregularly and applied for nationality verification was 41 per cent; higher than the 31 per cent who applied for regular migration through the Memorandum of Understanding system.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> ILO: *Review of the effectiveness of the MOUs in managing labour migration between Thailand and neighbouring countries* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 15.

## What about victims of exploitation, trafficking and forced labour?

In the absence of clear and standardized approaches to data collection on labour migration, there is also the risk that data collected on trafficking, labour exploitation and forced labour further complicates the picture. There is, worldwide, significant attention paid to trafficking, including financial and technical support from donors and development partners. This generates data to highlight the level of trafficking and number of victims and has largely focused on women. The growth in the interest and understanding of women's labour migration in ASEAN has arguably been generated through the lens of trafficking, weighted towards sexual exploitation rather than labour. The irregular nature of women's migration, the unregulated and informal sectors in which women work, and the added risks and vulnerabilities that they face as women migrants, have added to the perspective of women migrant workers as potential victims that need protection. While this is an important element to consider when addressing women's labour migration, it has contributed to a situation where the agency and empowerment felt by many women migrants is ignored. It has been argued that this lens has meant that efforts are focused on protecting women from trafficking and exploitation, rather than providing access for them to their labour rights – more so than men.

## Why does sex/sector disaggregated data matter?

The importance of sex/sector disaggregated data has been recognised at the international level through inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs specify the need for states to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by gender and migratory status.

- **Understanding the jobs women are doing and how they are being recruited:** Reliable data can illustrate the sectors that women work in and, conversely, where women are not working. There are already indications that women have unequal access to formalized migrant labour schemes, such as the Republic of Korea's Employment Permit Scheme, which had 15–25 per cent recruitment of women from Cambodia between 2009 and 2013, much lower than the average proportion of women regular labour migrants which is around 45 per cent.<sup>32</sup> Consistent data collection of this type can inform government and development partners in designing initiatives to increase women's access to decent work.
- **Connecting with migrant women:** Accurate data is crucial to be able to properly protect women migrant workers; accounting for their leaving and return (and providing appropriate services); and being able to locate them in the event of a crisis.
- **Monitoring women's access to support services:** Support services can include pre-departure training on financial literacy, access to banking and financial services, skills and language training or enterprise advice. Because so many women migrate irregularly and/or into informal sectors, very few have access to these services. Monitoring the numbers and understanding the barriers that prevent women's access will suggest entry points for programming that reaches women.
- **Addressing the needs of women's children and dependents:** Migrant mothers either leave their children in the care of family at home or travel with their children. The migration of women with children creates a new set of needs and vulnerabilities, including access to healthcare and education. Similarly, reproductive healthcare presents a significant need for women who want to prevent pregnancy, become pregnant, or give birth overseas.
- **Counting women migrants' contributions to economic growth and development:** With an increasing focus on women's labour migration due to their economic remittances, better data will be able to illustrate the contributions that women are making to economic growth. A Cambodian household study from 2013 asked questions on rural to urban migration and found that more women sent remittances to rural household of origin than men; women with no children are more likely to send money home

<sup>32</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training: *Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, 2014), p. 18.

than men with no children; and that women with no education are more likely to migrate internationally than domestically, therefore increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.<sup>31</sup> Such data will also inform a greater understanding of the broader socio-cultural impacts of women's migration, both in home and host countries.

- **Monitoring the impact of policy developments:** Better data on women migrant workers will assist in monitoring the impact of policy changes in relation to skills recognition; the promotion of women into new work sectors and within existing sectors, and the success of protective policies; information sharing; and services to improve the status of women migrant workers and helping them realize the positive potential of their migration. As ASEAN moves towards economic integration and the free movement of workers it will be particularly important to be able to track, monitor and respond to the impact of integration on women's migration.
- **Providing evidence for use by policy makers and advocates:** The generation and publication of accurate data can be used by governments and development partners to develop evidence-based policies that respond to the needs of women migrants. This data can also be used by non-government and civil society organisations to develop strong advocacy positions. Data can also be used in advocacy directed to employers and by the employers themselves, seeking to understand trends in labour movement. Improving quality, credibility and consistency of data can build trust between partners and an agreed base from which to generate consensus.

- **Illustrating demographic effects:** Women's labour migration and economic empowerment can impact demography. Capturing data on the age, marital and family status of women migrant workers can help to explain certain demographic trends and shifts that may be the result of labour migration. One such impact might be the effect that migration of women can have on reducing national fertility rates.

<sup>31</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning: *A CRUMP Series Report: Women and Migration in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, 2013), p. 25.

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#### ILO-UN Women collaboration: 'Preventing the exploitation of women migrant workers in ASEAN'

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