

Gender aspects of migration in Asia

Factsheet

The Context

- Women represent two thirds of the poor in Asia.¹ Over 50% of all international migrants in Asia are women² – the bulk of whom are employed as domestic workers.³
- Women are driven to migrate by a range of factors – poverty, lack of decent work and sustainable livelihoods, political instability, and climate change and environmental degradation. Gender inequality can also be a powerful factor driving migration, when women have economic, political, socio-cultural expectations that are not met because of a lack of independence and opportunities in countries of origin.⁴
- Increasingly, women, especially young women, are migrating independently, both internationally and internally, as a survival strategy to support themselves and their families and communities in their countries of origin.⁵

The Challenges

- Despite the benefits, many women migrant workers end up in unregulated workplaces in the informal economy, in domestic work, hospitality, entertainment and manufacturing sectors.¹⁰
- Women migrant workers routinely lack access to labour and social protection. These include social services like healthcare and education, social safety nets including welfare and pensions, protections under labour laws and employment contracts, leaving them vulnerable to abuse such as harsh working and living conditions, low wages, illegal withholding of wages and travel documents and premature termination of employment.
- Continued discrimination, violence and exploitation of women migrant workers, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), violates their fundamental human rights, and also limits productivity and economic growth.
- The worst abuses see women trafficked, smuggled or migrating under unsafe, insecure conditions, eventually being forced into conditions of sexual slavery and/or forced labour.



The Benefits

- Migration has significant financial benefits via financial remittances, savings schemes, and diaspora investments for countries of origin and destination. While destination countries experience increased production and economic activity generated by migrant workers and their families, origin countries experience significant gains from migrant workers' remittances. Migrant workers send more than USD 325 billion in remittances annually to developing countries –

and over USD 440 billion worldwide.⁶ Remittances far exceed the volume of official development assistance (ODA). In Asia, women migrant workers' remittances contribute significantly to many countries' GDP. In Nepal for example, which has the most feminized migrant stock in South Asia at 68.2%,⁷ they represent around half of the total migrants workers' contribution of 23% of GDP.⁸

- Migration can be an empowering experience for women, creating jobs and income, opening up opportunities for choices and independence. Women learn valuable skills, knowledge, ideas and values that can also be transferred to countries of origin (known as social remittances).⁹ Women migrant workers must be empowered to claim their rights and celebrate their contributions to development, through capacity-building, and dedicated and financial and human resources that enable women migrant workers and their organizations to shape and influences laws, policies, plans, programmes and budgets that address their needs and concerns.

“However, it is precisely now, when everyone is looking for solutions to drive economic recovery, that women’s contribution needs to be unleashed. By strengthening women’s economic role, economic recovery can be faster, deeper, more sustainable and fairer. And women’s rights will be advanced, and this is especially important for migrant women.”

– Michelle Bachelet, Statement at 2012 First Regular Session of UN Women Executive Board, 24 January 2012

Factors contributing to women’s migration

- Global and regional economic integration, especially liberalized trade and investment flows and the worldwide boom of “trade in services”, or the movement of migrant workers employed in service jobs.
- The increasingly gendered segmentation of the labour market and resulting vacuums and demands for women migrant workers, especially in the informal economy, in manufacturing and service jobs.
- Demographic factors such as falling birth rates and growing aging populations in middle income and wealthy countries of destination, as well as increasingly younger and mobile working age populations, especially of young women and girls, in developing origin countries.
- Combined multiple “crises”, including the global economic and financial crisis; climate change and environmental degradation; food insecurity and energy crises; lack of access to water and other public goods; and political and social unrest.



UN Women's role

– a Regional Programme on Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Asia

UN Women's work with women migrants draws upon international human rights standards, including CEDAW and the GR. No. 26 on Women Migrant Workers, and encompasses countries of origin, transit and destination. Working with governments, civil society and the private sector, efforts focus on promoting safe migration for women, eliminating trafficking, and enabling policy, institutional and socio-economic environments that ensure women's equal opportunities and benefits from migration. Specific programme support goes towards establishing laws and practices that protect women migrants' human rights, drawing connections between gender concerns in migration and development including plans and national poverty reduction strategies, strengthening migrants' organizations, and brokering exchanges between source and destination countries to advance labour and social protections.

Milestones of the programme so far

- In Jordan, UN Women supported the development of a standard employment contract, the first of its kind in the region. Jordanian labour law was amended to include protections for domestic workers and to recognize domestic work
- Community-based networks of migrant women workers were formed in Indonesia, Nepal and Cambodia, leading to widespread education of prospective women migrant workers on how to access: safe, low-cost, legal migration channels; labour and social protections; and justice and redress for human rights violations.
- Regional dialogues on women migrant workers' human rights between countries of origin and destination, has led to greater understanding by governments, the private sector, including employers and recruitment agencies, and civil society, especially women migrant workers and their advocates, on how to address women migrant workers' specific issues and unique concerns
- Regional commitments such as the Jakarta Declaration in 2003, and an Ethical Code of Conduct for Private Recruitment Agencies across Asia in 2008.
- UN Women supported the CEDAW Committee in developing the first General Recommendation on migration, the CEDAW GR No 26 on Women Migrant Workers, and facilitated civil society inputs throughout the process of developing this key GR.
- Regional trainings for governments and civil society on how to use the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the General Recommendation No 26 on Women Migrant Workers, to address women migrants' issues resulted in all programme countries reporting on the issue of women migrants to the CEDAW Committee.
- Globally, UN Women is a member of the Global Migration Group (GMG), an interagency mechanism for coordination on international migration and development. UN Women has taken a lead role in promoting the concerns of women migrant workers, especially domestic workers, at the Global Forum on Migration and Development, from 2007 to 2012.

“According to the United Nations, the Asia and Pacific region is losing between USD 42 billion and USD 47 billion each year because of women’s limited access to employment opportunities. And that is not all...Because women are disproportionately represented in informal and vulnerable work; there is a need for social protection. This is especially important for migrant women, women who work in export processing zones, and women farmers.”

– Michelle Bachelet, Remarks at the APEC Economy and Women Session, 15 September 2011

1. UN Women “Women, Poverty and Economics”, available from: http://www.unwomen-eseasia.org/Women_Poverty_and_Economics/index.html

2. UN Women (2002) Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Asia: A Briefing Kit.

3. ILO (2003).

4. UN Women (2004) World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration “Executive Summary”.

5. UN Women (2012), forthcoming.

6. World Bank (2011) Migration and Remittances Factbook vii.

7. UN Women and V V Giri National Labour Institute of India (2012) Migration of Women Workers from South Asia to the Gulf p. 22.

8. Nepal Institute of Development Studies (2012) “Current activities”, available from: <http://www.nids.org.np/current-activities.htm>

9. Peggy Levitt and Deepan Lamba-Nieves “Social Remittances Revisited” Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Vol 37, No 1 (2011) pp 1-22. p. 3.

10. UN Women (2005) Claim and Celebrate Women Migrants’ Human Rights through CEDAW p. 22. CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No 26 on Women Migrant Workers para 4.