

Rio+20 and Women's Migration in Asia and the Pacific: Mainstreaming gender concerns in migration to achieve sustainable development

Factsheet

The Context

Migration touches on all the priority areas of Rio+ 20 (the UN Conference on Sustainable Development held in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.). International migration, especially of women migrant workers is driven by, among other factors: the search for decent jobs (Priority 1); access to resources including energy sources and water (Priorities 2 and 5); the urbanization drive that sees men and women and their families migrate internationally from rural areas in countries of origin to cities in countries of destination (Priority 3); food insecurity and unsustainable agricultural systems (Priority 4); and climate change and environmental degradation (linked to priorities 2, and 5-7).

“The world can no longer afford to leave women out. Sustainable development cannot happen without half of the world's population.”

- Michelle Bachelet, speech delivered at the opening of Rio+20, 14 June 2012

Women make up over half of Asia's migrants and two-thirds of Asia's poor.¹ For some countries the numbers are even higher – in 2009 women represented 83% of Indonesia's outgoing migrants,² while in 2005 they represented 62-75% of migrants from Sri Lanka and the Philippines.³ In the Pacific Islands, circular labour migration has recently become economically significant in Vanuatu. The Pacific Island country most affected by international migration is Fiji.⁴

Gender inequality is both a factor propelling women's migration,⁵ and a barrier to sustainable development. In the context of migration in Asia, gender concerns intersect with a lack of decent work and sustainable livelihoods; lack of access to land, markets and credit; multiple crises including the global economic and financial crisis, oil shocks, and food insecurity; climate change and environmental degradation; and restrictions on women's choices and opportunities for independence and empowerment.⁶



Women Migrant Workers and the Search for Decent Work and Sustainable Livelihoods

Migration is increasingly recognized as a significant issue related to sustainable development. The key intergovernmental sustainable development process is Rio +20. The guiding principle for long-term global sustainable development consists of three pillars or interlinked and mutually reinforcing pillars: economic, social and environmental.⁷ Women's rights, gender equality and women's empowerment must be integrated into these three pillars to truly achieve sustainable development for all.

Migration in search of sustainable livelihoods is wider than the search for decent jobs. It involves the interaction of concerns under all seven Rio+20 priority areas. It is estimated that by 2050, climate change and environmental degradation will displace 50-200 million people globally.⁸ According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster⁹ indicating a lack of gender-sensitive environmental and disaster-risk reduction development initiatives. In the Asia-Pacific region,

women's limited mobility compared to that of men, and other factors, make them more likely to die in severe storms and flooding.¹⁰

Women who migrate for work may be propelled by a combination of these environmental factors, along with social and economic development needs. In Asia, the high proportion of women migrant workers from some countries is partly a result of women increasingly making choices (of migration) independently of their spouses and families.¹¹ However, women migrant workers, are less likely to have access to decent work than men – this is especially the case for rural women, women with disabilities, and women in post-conflict settings.¹² Gender norms and stereotypes create gender-segregated labour markets in which women are disproportionately concentrated in the informal economy, in vulnerable, low-wage and low-status work. Although sex—disaggregated and up-to-date statistics are scarce, many migrant workers in South-East Asia are employed in the informal economy, a significant proportion of whom are women.¹³

Engendering Rio+20 to Empower Women Migrant Workers, their Families, and Communities

Rio+20 has focused on creating “green economies”, building on successes like 2.3 million “green jobs” created in the renewable energy sector in recent years.¹⁴ The differentiated impacts on women and men migrant workers of an economic transition to sustainable economies will depend on a range of factors. These include: existing labour-force participation rates, education levels and skill sets; gender-sensitive initiatives that make green education and training relevant and accessible to all people.¹⁵

Rio+20 also looks to strengthen the institutional framework for sustainable development. However, if both the green

economy and its institutional framework are gender-blind, this could lead to significant losses economically (as well as socially and environmentally). Currently, the Asia-Pacific region is estimated to be losing USD 42-47 billion annually because of restrictions on women’s access to employment opportunities, and another USD 16-30 billion because of gender gaps in education.¹⁶ Green employment and education initiatives simply cannot afford to remain gender-blind.

While migration is often seen as a survival strategy, it can also be a proactive adaptation approach that supports sustainable development.¹⁷ Migration

can reduce risk of loss of lives, livelihoods and damage caused by environmental degradation. When migrant workers transfer financial and social remittances (knowledge, skills, ideas and values), they boost the incomes and resources of their families and communities in countries of origin, as well as their ability to cope with environmental challenges, food insecurity and economic shocks.¹⁸ Not only do women migrant workers remit higher proportions of their lower incomes, which are spent on meeting basic household needs and healthcare and education expenditure, women are often the recipients and managers of these remittances.¹⁹

Recommendations for a Future Women Want

To truly include women migrant workers, their families, and communities, in inclusive growth and sustainable development frameworks, the institutional framework must address women’s rights, needs and concerns. In the first instance this involves incorporating key principles on gender equality and women’s empowerment, by drawing on:

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including the CEDAW GR No. 26 on Women Migrant Workers
- The Human Rights and Labour Law Framework Protecting Women Migrant Workers – including the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and the Committee on Migrant Workers’ General Comment No. 1 on Migrant Domestic Workers, and the core and migration-specific ILO Conventions, Recommendations and standards. In the Asia-Pacific region this framework also includes regional commitments to protect women migrant workers, like the ASEAN Declaration on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers
- The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and related outcome documents from previous World Conferences on Women
- The Rio 1992 Declaration, especially principle 20 on gender equality, and Agenda 21, especially Chapter 24 on Global Action for Women towards

Sustainable and Equitable Development

- The Rio+20 Outcome Document, especially paras 236-244 on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Drawing on these commitments, policymakers, decision-makers and key stakeholders should:

1. Mainstream gender concerns in migration into all plans, policies, laws, programmes and budgets concerning sustainable development at all stages of the process (formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation).
2. Advance women’s decision-making at all stages of economic, trade, social and environmental development processes, at multilateral, regional, and national levels including by providing financial and human resources to support the capacity of women, including migrant workers and their organizations, to claim their rights and celebrate their contributions to sustainable development.
3. Collect sex-disaggregated data and generate action-oriented gender-sensitive research to address gender concerns in migration to promote sustainable development, including on the 7 priority areas of Rio+20
4. Ensure women’s full and equal access to: economic and trade opportunities, political processes, markets, credit, education, health care including sexual and reproductive health care especially related to HIV/AIDS and other commu-

nicable diseases, social protections, land and agricultural resources, water and other public goods,

5. Address women’s human rights concerns by ensuring access to justice, and eliminating human rights violations against women migrant workers and their families, including: violence against women, the denial of sexual and reproductive health rights, exclusion from labour and social protections, discrimination against women in law and in practice, and other violations.
6. Maximise women’s contributions to sustainable development, including by: recognizing the value of unpaid care and domestic work; promoting more and decent jobs for women migrant workers and sustainable livelihoods for all; implementing gender-sensitive remittance mechanisms and woman-friendly savings and investment schemes; harnessing women’s knowledge, and expertise including social remittances and the livelihoods strategies of women-headed households, to address economic, social and environmental challenges.
7. Ensure that gender equality and women’s empowerment is represented in the SDGs and the new sustainable development framework – both as a standalone goal and as a mainstreamed concern in all other SDGs. Any SDG should address issues, via a gender perspective, finance, technology, and other enabling modalities and tools for its implementation.

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