

Valuing the contributions of women migrant workers in ASEAN

There has long been a trend to consider the contribution of labour migrants in terms of the economic benefit that they can bring to development. As the autonomous labour migration of women has increased so too has the interest in the development benefit that they bring. This interest has been primarily economic, focusing on how women migrant workers' remittances – money sent home – can contribute to economic development. This Policy Brief takes a broader view of women's labour migration in ASEAN and considers both the economic and non-economic contributions that they make. Recognising that women labour migrants face gender specific challenges and barriers, this Policy Brief provides recommendations to policy-makers on how to ensure the potential of women migrant workers is maximized to benefit the individual migrant, her family and her community while avoiding simplifying women migrant workers as tools of economic development.

ASEAN's remittance trend

In many developing countries, the amount of remittances regularly surpasses the amount of foreign direct investment and overseas development aid.¹ In 2013 personal remittances to the eight largest ASEAN Member States reached around US\$50.5 billion, some 2.4 per cent of their combined GDP. For the lesser developed countries in the region (Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam) labour migration is considered to be a way to address poverty by harnessing the development divide in the region. For these sending countries, migration offers a double benefit; providing employment where it is lacking domestically and

hastening economic growth by way of remittances that exceed domestic wages.² With the lowest wages in the region, Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic currently offer an average of \$119 and \$121 per month respectively.³ In contrast, the minimum wages of Thailand and Malaysia are almost double, at \$237 and \$275 per month respectively.⁴

Women migrant workers in ASEAN – an overview

Women's participation in labour migration in the ASEAN region is growing, in numbers and in share of total migrants. In Singapore, the number of migrant domestic workers increased from 160,000 in 2006 to over 200,000 in 2011.⁵ The proportion of women migrant workers is also increasing; in Indonesia, for example, the percentage of women migrant workers rose from 75 per cent in 2006 to 83 per cent in 2009, with over 90 per cent being domestic workers.⁶ A similar proportion of Lao women migrant workers are domestic workers.⁷ In the Philippines in 2011 women migrant workers outnumbered men at 217,830 to 181,145, of whom 135,870 were female domestic workers.⁸ These increases can be attributed to push and pull factors

¹ ILO: *Regional Model Competency Standards: Domestic work* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 19.

² ILO and Asian Development Bank (ILO and ADB): *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 84.

³ *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁴ M. Luebker: *Minimum wages in the global garment industry* (Bangkok, ILO, 2014).

⁵ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Good practices

- 1 Migrant Worker Resource Centres and community-based organisations in countries of origin are providing pre-departure financial literacy training that especially targets women migrant workers.⁹
- 2 The **Philippines** has prohibited charging of recruitment fees to migrant domestic workers, reducing vulnerability that they face when in debt.¹⁰
- 3 **Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar** are working on Memoranda of Understanding specific to domestic workers that can provide additional protection and standard conditions of employment, including protected wages and access to banking.¹¹
- 4 **Singapore** has improved the Work Pass conditions to ensure that employers pay the required wages to migrant domestic workers.¹²
- 5 Informal savings groups, including the Forum of **Filipino** Reintegration Savings Group, promote collective saving and facilitates the reintegration of women migrant workers, demonstrating the opportunities available through social networking.¹³
- 6 The National Reintegration Centre of Overseas **Filipino** Workers focuses on identifying and responding to the needs of returning migrants, including providing support in recovering unpaid wages and/or advice on productive investment of remittances.¹⁴
- 7 In **Cambodia**, there are examples of migrant workers using mobile phone banking, developed in the Khmer language, that reduces the cost and increases security when sending remittances.¹⁵
- 8 The **Republic of Korea** has established a framework of policy responses and services required for the successful return and reintegration of migrant workers under its Employment Permit System.¹⁶

Key policy recommendations

- 1 Establish and implement systems to collect gender disaggregated statistics on remittances and reintegration outcomes.
- 2 Provide training on financial literacy/planning that responds to the needs of women migrant workers as part of pre-departure programmes.
- 3 Provide safe and low cost remittance channels, in accordance with the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (with particular consideration of the potential of technology and mobile banking).
- 4 Encourage the creation of financial products including gender-responsive remittance savings and investment schemes controlled by women migrant workers.
- 5 Track the return of women migrant workers and conduct psycho-social needs assessments in order to identify and establish systems to address exploitation and abuse.
- 6 Establish mechanisms and practices that recognise skills and abilities of returned women migrant workers, increasing access to decent employment and enterprise development opportunities.
- 7 Establish a legally binding regional instrument that is gender responsive and human rights based to ensure effective regional labour migration governance.

⁹ See: Providing information and support services - Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCS), ILO, GMS TRIANGLE Project, 2015, www.ilo.org/asia/WCMS_312713/lang-en/index.htm [accessed 12 Oct. 2015].

¹⁰ Philippines Overseas Employment Administration: *Governing Board Resolution No. 6*, Series of 2006.

¹¹ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 117

¹² UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 34.

¹³ Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 34.

¹⁵ "Mobile app next big thing for Wing, says CEO", in *Mobile World Live*, 13 July 2015.

¹⁶ M.J. Kim: *The Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS): Background and Rapid Assessment* (Geneva, ILO, 2015).

encouraging migration that specifically affect women. Where employment options for women in countries of origin are limited, certain employment sectors in countries of destination specifically seek to employ women. An especially gendered example is the domestic work and care sector (commonly taking care of children, the elderly, sick or disabled alongside domestic duties), as well as entertainment and hospitality industries. Women are also recruited into export-oriented manufacturing industries, construction, sex, entertainment and hospitality work. These industries are regularly those considered less attractive to national workers, due to being stigmatized, low status and/or low paid.

Women migrant workers' contribution to the economy

Contributions to countries of origin

With an increasing demand for intra-ASEAN migration of women migrant workers, more emphasis has been placed on the economic contributions that women migrant workers make to their countries of origin, including policy developments designed to increase women's remittances. Though women migrant workers are likely to earn less than men, they have been found to remit higher proportions of their earnings and at more stable and regular intervals when compared to men.¹⁷ Studies indicate that rather than being spent on assets and building capital, women's remittances are more likely to be treated like extra income and spent on education, health and family development.¹⁸

Women's interaction with remittances is more complex than the amounts sent home and how they are spent. Gender cuts through all of the decisions connected with women migrating for labour, their remittances and how they are spent. Women, for example, are often the receivers of the remittances and, in directing the remittances of women migrant workers towards health and education may be reflecting the gendered considerations in the decision that prompted the migration in the first place (that maybe the result of a family – rather than individual – decision).¹⁹ Indeed, remittances from

women migrant workers are used to supplement or substitute welfare and public services, that would largely benefit women.²⁰ Whether as remitters or receivers, when women have control over money, they will invest in the well-being of the household and its members.²¹ This supports the narrative that women are more responsible to their families and more willing to make sacrifices;²² further supported by studies that show that women are less likely to spend money on themselves than men. In this way, the feminization of migration can also be seen as a phenomenon that has gendered characteristics throughout the cycle, from the drivers to migrate, the proportion remitted, the way remittances are spent, and by whom.

Contributions to countries of destination

The dominant focus on economic contributions of migrant workers is on remittances sent home. However, women migrant workers in the care industry specifically are bringing economic benefit to countries of destination that cannot be ignored. As countries develop, they are able to meet the conflicting demands of productive and reproductive work through the commodification of care. Alongside this trend, populations of developed countries become older and fertility rates lower. These factors together create a care gap that generates a demand that women migrant workers are able to meet by accepting roles as domestic workers, nannies and aged-carers.²³

In providing care and facilitating the reproductive work in countries of destination, women migrant workers are facilitating the ability of those countries to maximize the proportion of their population in productive labour and, therefore, generating growth. The reliance on a largely commodified and unregulated care sector, has also removed the financial burden for developed countries to address the care gaps through welfare and public services.²⁴ Ultimately, women migrant workers in the care sector are supporting destination countries to maximize their ability for economic growth by providing an invisible base of the socio-economic system.²⁵

Women migrant workers' non-economic contributions

Socio-cultural contributions

The non-economic social remittances that returning migrant women contribute can include increased skills, confidence and agency within the family and community. A migrant woman's new earning capacity can elevate her status and broaden the

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁰ A. Petrozziello: *Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration-Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective* (Santo Domingo, UN Women, 2012), p. 80.

²¹ Ibid, p. 79.

²² Ibid, p. 78.

²³ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 7.

²⁴ A. Petrozziello: *Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration-Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective* (Santo Domingo, UN Women, 2012), p. 33.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 135.

scope of opportunities beyond those normally available.²⁶ Evidence shows that when women migrate to more progressive destination countries, they return with new attitudes and cultural norms that positively impact on gender equality in their country of origin.²⁷ Social remittances can also be realised in a families' increased capacity to do more, rather than just to buy more. For example, where children's improved education and health outcomes lead to greater opportunities for the next generation; when remittances are invested in ways that encourage employment and economic growth in the community; or when the skills of returned migrant women enable higher paid or higher status jobs. In this light, social remittances may be seen as more sustainable than economic remittances.

Political contributions

As with the transfer of social and cultural remittances, migration can have positive implications through the transfer of political empowerment. Studies have found that migration into countries with higher political empowerment has a significant and positive impact on the female parliamentary shares in the country of origin.²⁸ Increased political engagement from women has been seen to lead to an increase in investment in education and health, as well as gendered issues like increasing reporting of crimes against women, or improving access to justice for women.²⁹ These changes can impact key indicators for development.

Political empowerment of women migrant workers can also be seen through their increased organisation and advocacy for improved labour rights, specifically in relation to domestic work that does not usually attract union representation.

Advocacy groups have established themselves in

countries of destination and created networks of networks that come together to advocate for better treatment of women migrant workers. Migrant International are such a network, made up of 95 organizations in around 22 countries that works to organize Filipino migrants globally to demand the protection of their rights from the Philippine government. The passing of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) can be attributed to the advocacy and pressure from such groups and networks globally.

Challenges and barriers to women's contributions

Women migrants work in the formal and informal economies of ASEAN. Several structural factors, however, mean that the opportunities and benefits of migration are limited for women, in part because women are more likely to find themselves in irregular and unprotected migration, situations that heighten vulnerability and reduce their opportunity to benefit from their migration and make positive contributions.

Wage gaps

There is little sex disaggregated data on migrant worker remittances in ASEAN. Country specific data that is available shows that while women migrant workers make up at least half of the migrant stock from most ASEAN countries of origin, their remittances are not proportional. In the Philippines, women's remittances were just one third of the total in 2010.³⁰ This is an example of the structural challenges faced by women migrant workers – the amount women migrant workers remit reflects directly on the limited wages they earn.

Wage gaps for women migrant workers reflect national wage gaps in ASEAN countries and are the product of wage discrimination.³¹ With the exception of the Philippines, women earn less than men in all ASEAN Member States for which data is available.³² Domestic work, a sector that predominantly employs women, is regularly excluded from national minimum wage protection.³³ In reality, many women accepting migrant domestic work positions can expect to earn far less than the minimum wage.³⁴ Informally, it is reported that employers commonly pay below the minimum wage in garment manufacturing industries that primarily employ women.³⁵

Much of the work available to women migrant workers in ASEAN is considered low skilled: domestic work, garment and manufacturing, sex

²⁶ M. Temin et al.: *Adolescent girls and migration in the developing world: Policy Brief* (New York, Population Council, 2013), p. 8.

²⁷ G. Ferrant and M. Tuccio: "South-South migration and discrimination against women in social institutions: A two-way relationship", in *World Development* (2015, Vol. 72), pp. 240-365, p. 242.

²⁸ E. Lodigiani and S. Salomone: *Migration-induced Transfers of Norms. The Case of Political Empowerment* (Milan, Centro Studi Luca D'Agliano Development Studies Working Papers No. 343, 2012), p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁰ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 8.

³¹ Gender wage gaps in ASEAN are significant, with women in Cambodia and Singapore earning about a quarter less than men; with the exception of the Philippines, women earn less than men in all ASEAN Member States for which data are available. See ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 9 and p. 73.

³² ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 73.

³³ As is the case in major destination countries of Malaysia and Thailand, with Singapore having no minimum wage at all. See ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 115.

³⁴ ILO: *Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics on the extent of legal protection* (Geneva, 2013).

³⁵ *War on Want: Restricted Rights: Migrant women workers in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia* (London, 2012), p. 7.

work, entertainment and hospitality.³⁶ Women who do enter more male-dominated sectors such as construction, tend to do so at the lower levels and are restricted to jobs that are low skilled and low paid within these sectors. Further, migrant work in the region is characterized by its temporary and circular nature, meaning that migrants work abroad for limited time with the expectation of returning home.³⁷ Unofficial figures for ASEAN indicate that the majority of migrant workers engaged in temporary or circular migration are women.³⁸ Even for regular women migrants (those who are documented and working formally), available work is still the lowest paid.

Irregular migration

Women migrants who enter irregularly (without the proper documents or working in informal sectors) are paid even less. The numbers of women migrant workers in informal and irregular employment is high in ASEAN with approximately 65 per cent of women workers being engaged in vulnerable employment.³⁹ This reflects a broader trend in ASEAN; women's vulnerable employment is higher than men's in seven of the eight ASEAN Member States for which there is data.⁴⁰ Much informal migration is the result of long, porous land borders in the region, navigated by brokers who secure migrants' work in largely unregulated sectors in destination countries. Specific to women, however, is the effect that gender specific migration restrictions have; reducing regular migration options and pushing women to pursue irregular channels.⁴¹ Irregular migrants are less likely to access support services, pre-departure training or other information, including guidance on finances, saving and remittances. With so many women in irregular situations, ability to access trade union support and organize for improvement to working conditions is also limited. Informal and vulnerable employment also increases the risk of violence and

sexual abuse for women migrants, risks that exist both inside and outside the workplace. These factors further influence a woman's ability to remit.

Debt bondage

Other practical challenges also limit women's ability to secure decent wages. Because of high demand for domestic workers, employers are more likely to agree to cover recruitment and training costs up front and recruitment agents are more likely to provide loans to migrant women to cover these costs.⁴² While this facilitates greater female migration, training and other migration costs are often passed on to employers and then deducted from the domestic workers' wages. For domestic workers in Singapore, these deductions have been reported as equivalent to as much as eight months' pay.⁴³ This practice reduces the control that women have over their debt and earnings, often leading to situations of exploitation and debt bondage.⁴⁴ Women domestic workers are especially vulnerable to these practices with reports of recruitment agencies charging excessive fees and employers keeping the domestic worker in servitude, often isolated in private households, long after the debt is paid.⁴⁵

It is also regularly reported that employers withhold all wages from domestic workers with the promise of payment at the end of the contract; this practice has led to underpayment or no payment at all. Whilst these practices are particularly common in the domestic work sector, they are also found in other sectors in which migrant women work.

Sending money home

Women also face gender specific barriers with respect to the transfer of remittances. Globally, women are 20 percent less likely than men to have a bank account, limiting the options available for remitting money.⁴⁶ Some studies suggest that women are less confident about their financial skills, potentially as a result of being excluded from broader financial decision-making. With high numbers of women migrating irregularly into informal jobs, the transfer of remittances is often also managed informally. This means relying on money transfer practices that are at best costly and at worst offer no assurance that the full amount will arrive. For isolated workers, the ability to access money transfer systems is reliant on employers and, as such, not guaranteed.

³⁶ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁹ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Including banning the migration on women into domestic work, restrictions on women migrating on their own, and restrictions on women by age.

⁴² K.C. Yen et al.: *Structural conditions and agency in migrant decision-making: A case of domestic and construction workers from Java, Indonesia* (Sussex, Migrating out of Poverty Research Consortium Working Paper 25, 2015), p. 21.

⁴³ M. Platt et al.: *Financing migration, generating remittances and the building of livelihood strategies: a case study of Indonesian migrant women as domestic workers in Singapore* (Falmer, University of Sussex, 2013), p. 40.

⁴⁴ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development: *The new slave in the kitchen: Debt bondage and women migrant domestic workers in Asia* (Chiang Mai, 2011), p. 1.

⁴⁶ World Bank: *The global index database, women and financial inclusion* (Washington D.C., 2013), p. 1.

Reintegration

The generally low skilled nature of women's employment and lack of skills certification means that women are often not considered to have gained skills while abroad and face the same, limited employment prospects as before migrating. Social stigma, including that attached to women who challenge traditional gender norms by working outside the home, can also detrimentally affect migrant women on return, sometimes resulting in increased pressure to (re)conform to gender roles, thus restricting future freedoms. In the worst cases, where women have suffered physical or economic exploitation or abuse, they may return with no money, no ability to claim redress and with psycho-social issues that need to be addressed before these women are able to move forward. Treatment services are rare, especially in rural settings, meaning that women who suffer negative migration experiences may return to a worse position than before they left.

Increasing the contributions of women migrant workers

ASEAN economic integration

With ASEAN economic integration anticipated, it is important for governments, non-government organizations and development partners to cooperate to ensure the ASEAN Economic Community responds to the particular issues facing women migrant workers. The demand for low skilled workers is predicted to rise with the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community, but job creation is not expected to be distributed evenly; job gains for men are likely to be greater than those for women.⁴⁷

By developing gender responsive and gender transformative interventions, ASEAN will be better able to ensure that women make the most of their migration, both economically and socially. A gender transformative approach will bring economic benefits alongside a broader and more sustainable range of social developments, providing the knowledge, skills, creativity and resilience that will create sustainable and inclusive development.

The response of international and regional instruments

The ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, as implemented by the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration provides an umbrella framework that outlines the commitments of ASEAN Member States to migrant workers. This includes the promotion of fair and appropriate payment of wages and a commitment of Member States to enforce human resource development and reintegration programmes. At the global level, the Sustainable Development Goals have been agreed upon and contain several targets relevant to women migrant workers. These include goals to recognize the value of domestic work (Goal 5), reduce remittance costs to 3 per cent (Goal 10), and promote full and productive employment and decent work for all including for women migrant workers (Goal 8).

⁴⁷ G. Ferrant and M. Tuccio: "South-South migration and discrimination against women in social institutions: A two-way relationship", in *World Development* (2015, Vol. 72), pp. 240-365, p. 242.

	Ratifications in ASEAN	Provisions related to economic and social remittances
UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, General recommendation No. 26 on women migrant workers (2008).	Ratified by all ASEAN Member States.	Notes that women may receive lower wages than men, or experience non-payment of wages, payment that is delayed their return, or transfer of wages into accounts to which the worker cannot access.
		Recognizes that women may face familial pressure to remit a high proportion of their earnings.
		States that women may not be able to transmit remittances safely due to barriers including restrictions on movement and costs.
		Recommends to countries of origin to establish measures to safeguard the remittances of women; and provide access to banks and savings schemes.
		Recommends to countries of origin that women should have access to comprehensive socio-economic, psychological and legal services aimed at facilitating their reintegration.
UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990).	Ratified by Indonesia and the Philippines, with Cambodia as a signatory.	Stipulates that migrant workers, including those in an irregular status, shall enjoy treatment equal to nationals in respect of wages.
		Requires that migrant workers have the right to transfer their earnings and savings, in particular those funds necessary for the support of their families. The State shall take measures to facilitate such transfers.
ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).	Ratified by the Philippines.	States that migrant domestic workers are to receive an enforceable contract prior to departure, which outlines the terms and conditions of their employment, including wages.
		Stipulates that domestic workers shall enjoy minimum wage coverage; and are to be paid cash at regular intervals, at least once a month.
ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100).	Ratified by Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.	Requires equality in wages for men and women workers.
ILO Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97).	Ratified by Malaysia and the Philippines.	Stipulates that migrant workers must be given a contract prior to their departure which outlines their wages.
ILO Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143).	Ratified by the Philippines.	Provides for equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation for migrant workers lawfully in the country.

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