

Women in Motion

Female migration challenges traditional family settings

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Chair: **Howard Duncan**, International Metropolis Project, Ottawa, Canada

The global economy's rising demand for women's labour has focused attention on women in migration, and generated debate about the 'feminisation of migration'. This panel discussed the challenges of female migration from the perspective of Asian countries, Europe and Canada.

Close to 50 per cent of the world's migrants are women. Most of them work as domestic workers and entertainers, in private households, informal commercial or care giving sectors. The feminisation of migration, however, seems to be a rather modest and segmented phenomenon: Worldwide, the percentage of female migrants has increased by only 2.8 per cent over the past 45 years, whereas migration flows have been greatly feminised in some countries, especially in Asia. The percentage of Philippine women in migratory flows has increased by 52 per cent in twenty years, while other countries in Asia showed a lower increase due to bans and restrictions on women's migration.

Statistics show that the number of highly skilled female migrants is rising constantly over the last years. The outflows of skilled women grow faster than those of unskilled women or skilled men. But this does not necessarily mean that high-skilled women are getting high-skilled jobs. Women still go into "feminised occupations" – especially in the "global care economy". Besides skilled migration, student migration and marriage migration are two important female migration patterns. Statistics show a surge of intra-Asian student migration and also a growing number of Asian students studying abroad. Similarly, international marriages have increased within Asia. They mostly involve local men and foreign women, predominantly coming from neighbouring developing countries within Asia (e.g. the Philippines, Vietnam).

Whatever the reasons for migration may be: many women leave their families – and often their children – behind and are trying to compensate their absence through remittances back home. A woman's dilemma continues to be the choice between earning a good livelihood for her family and her children elsewhere or being present and taking care of them personally by remaining with

the family. The traditional family set-up with a husband bringing the money home is getting strongly tested.

Migration experiences of women can modify gender roles and women's status, as they gain access to financial resources and potentially change their norms- and values – and thus have a strong impact on their families. Due to the children's strong emotional attachment to their mothers, the mothers' intensive involvement in education and the fathers' maladjustment to new gender roles, children of migrant mothers often show lower educational attainment and more psychological problems.

The discussion made it clear that feminised migration has opened up new opportunities for migrant women to increase family incomes but, at the same time, increased the inequality and injustice based on gender, class and nationality, especially in Asia. On the one hand, while states of origin have benefited from the remittances sent by women migrant workers from across the globe, they also continued blaming the "absent mothers", and never actually acknowledged the economic benefits effectuated by women. On the other hand, governments of destination countries view female migrants merely as a workforce to meet labour shortages and ignore protective measures. With this, all migration costs have been shouldered by migrant women. Therefore, the panellists agreed in the end on the need of a gender and family sensitive social as well as migration policy.

Carina Sarstedt

Facts and Figures

- Feminisation of international migration: 49.6 % of global migrants are women
- Modest Feminisation: Percentage of female migrants increased by only 2.8 % over the past 45 years (World Bank 2008)
- Feminisation of Brain Gain: Percentage of migrant women with tertiary education in OECD countries increased (OECD 200)