Women on the move: migration, gender equality and the SDGs

This discussion note has been prepared specifically for the SDC Global Meeting on Migration and 2030 Agenda (25. – 27. May 2016, Charmey – Switzerland) and represents initial findings for a comprehensive Policy Brief on the topic which ODI will publish in July as part of an SDC 2016 funded mandate.

Key messages

- Women and girls migrate as much as men and boys.
- Gender norms and relations in source and destination countries shape the decisions and experience of female migrants.
- Many women are employed in the ‘global care chain’. The cost and benefits of migration depends on where women are located in the chain.
- Most migrant domestic workers are women employed in high-income countries, most in Arab States.
- Highly skilled migrant women have higher rates of migration but many are employed in low skilled jobs.
- Migration creates empowerment trade-offs for individual women and between different groups of women – and this matters for gender equality and for SDG attainment.

1 Introduction

The briefing examines how gender shapes women and girls’ migration experience and outcomes. It looks at how gender norms and relations inform women and girls choices and decisions. It describes how the feminisation of labour and the resulting global care chain leads to empowerment trade-offs for women, and between different groups of women and girls. These trade-offs have implications for SDG attainment, particularly for poor and marginalised women and girls.

1.1 Definition of terms

Two types of migrants are considered: international economic migrants who move for the purposes of employment. Refugees who owing to fear of persecution are outside their country of origin and are unable to avail themselves of protection from that country.

1.2 Migration trends

15-year span of migration trends [to be described with graphics].

Summary data on overall migration (UN, 2015):
- 244 million international migrants in 2015, approximately 3% of global population (up from 173m. in 2000). Europe and Asia host the most international migrants (76 million and 75 million respectively). Countries with highest growth in economic migrants are S. Europe, Thailand and Gulf States.
- 19.5 million refugees in 2014. 86% of refugees are in developing countries, and more than half come from three countries (Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia).

Summary data on women’s migration:
- Women migrate as much as men. In 2015, 48% of all migrants were female (UN DESA, 2016). 70% of the world’s internally displaced population are women and children (IDMC, 2014).

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1 Authors: Tam O’Neil, Anjali Fleury and Marta Foresti.
2 Art. 1(A)(2), Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Art. 1A(2), 1951
• In 2015, around 60% of women migrants were in developed regions (Europe, North America, Oceania) and 40% in developing (Africa, Asia, LAC). However, women’s migration is increasing more rapidly to developing than to developed regions (15.8% to 6.4% rate of increase between 2010 and 2015) (UN DESA, 2016).

1.3 Migration, gender equality and the SDGs
• SDG Target 5.2 refers to the elimination of trafficking (SDG 5.2). No other SDG includes a specific target on gender and migration.
• But several targets are relevant to whether and how SDGs are attained for female migrants (e.g. targets relating to decent work, migration, and eliminating violence against women and girls), and whether migration is likely to contribute to SDG 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment (to be presented in a box).

2 Gender norms and women and girls’ migration
• Women and men migrate for similar reasons – to get an education, find work, marry or join family members, or to flee persecution or harm.
• But migration is a gendered phenomenon: gender norms, power relations and unequal rights shape women and girls’ (and men and boys) migration choices and experiences. Gender and other social norms in the source and destination country influence whether migration empowers women or girls or exposes them to harm, and in what way.
• Women have less control over the decision to migrate than men. The decision is more likely to be taken by the family than the individual female migrant (Yeoh et al., 2002). Where women lack autonomy, this challenges the distinction between forced and voluntary migration – and particularly so for adolescent girls.
• Discriminatory gender norms may limit or drive women’s migration. Families may prevent women from migrating for fear of ‘moral corruption’; other women use migration as a means to escape gender-based structural inequalities and violence (e.g. forced or early marriage, FGM/C, gender-based violence or family control) (Temin et al, 2013).
• Women are more likely to migrate towards countries with less discriminatory social institutions than their country of origin, which also tend to offer greater economic opportunities ((Ferrant et al., 2014; Ferrant and Tuccio, 2015).
• Female migrants, particularly girls, have less information, less education, and fewer options for legal migration, exposing them to a higher risk of exploitation and abuse, including trafficking (UNFPA 2015). It is estimated that 80% of trafficking victims are women (Farah, 2006), with girls migrating alone particularly vulnerable (Temin et al. 2013).
• Migration can increase women’s status within the family (e.g. through remittances, new skills, new norms). But returning migrants can also face stigma or struggle to reintegrate into their families and communities (Sijapati, 2015).

3 Labour migration and the global care chain
3.1 Unskilled domestic and care work
• Most migrant domestic workers are women and girls (almost 75% of the 11.5 million in 2013) (ILO, 2015). Domestic work is the most common employment for girls under the age of 16 (UN OHCHR 2015).

3 For the full briefing, boxes with case studies of women in different part of the global care chain will be added, incl. discussion of costs/benefits.
While 80% of domestic workers are in lower and middle-income countries, **79.2% of migrant domestic workers are in high-income countries**. Arab States have the most of all regions (27.4%). 86% of female labour migrants from Sri Lanka work as domestic workers in the Middle East (IOM, 2015).

**Domestic and care work is under-valued and poorly regulated** (Temin et al. 2013). 40% of countries also do not include domestic work in their labour laws (UN Women 2012). Domestic workers are often not paid well and work long hours, may suffer from insufficient sleep and time off, and depending on their living situation with their employer, may have difficult with having time off or receiving pay (Temin et al. 2013; Piper 2005; UN OHCHR, 2015).

Paid domestic work is mostly in private homes – which increase the risk of abuse and mistreatment (Fleury, 2016; Oishi, 2002; Piper 2005; Temin et al. 2013; UN OHCHR 2015). For example, in Ethiopia, **migrant girls working as domestic workers are more likely to experience sex or forced sex than other girls**, in part due to social isolation and dependence on their employers (Temin et al. 2013).

Migrant men doing unskilled work tends to be in relatively better regulated and visible sectors than women, such as construction, mining, and agriculture (Garcia et al., 2002). Even when female migrants have legal rights, these are less likely to be enforced and women and girls are less likely to be aware of them when they work in private homes rather than private or public organisations (e.g. private care homes, hospitals).

### 3.2 Skilled domestic and care work

**Skilled migrant women also tend to work in ‘feminine’ professions**, such as education, health, social work, and nursing (Piper 2005). In high-income countries (e.g. Canada, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, UK and the US), migrant women are recruited and hired as doctors and nurses (Fleury, 2016).

**Highly skilled migrant women have higher rates of migration than low skilled women.** They are also more likely to migrate than highly skilled men (the weighted average was 1.2. in 2000), and were the fastest growing category of migrant for most source regions between 1990 and 2000, including OECD countries (Docquier, Lowell and Marfouk, 2009).

**Many high-skilled migrant women are employed in low-skilled jobs**, indicating a gap between expectations and opportunities for women migrants. Employers may not recognise migrants’ qualifications or experience, or migrants may face discrimination or language barriers (Fleury, 2016).

### 4 Conclusion: migration creates empowerment trade-offs

**Women’s experience of migration challenges simple empowerment-vulnerability dichotomies.**

Female migrants are more likely to be empowered in cases of legal migration and when the migrant is separated from family, working in the formal sector, and residing in the destination area for a long period (Fleury, 2016).

However, changes in gender relations are unpredictable and non-linear, and women can gain or lose power across different dimensions, including psychological, social, economic and political (O’Neil and Doming, 2016).

**Migration therefore entails trade-offs for individual women** – they may gain power in one aspect of their life, but face increased vulnerability and risk of violence in another.

As the global care chain demonstrates, migration also entails trade-offs between different groups of women and between different societies. Migrant women who work as paid domestic workers may be de-skilled or at higher risk of harm, but their labour may enable other women, mostly more privileged, to access better economic opportunities. Women’s remittances are more reliable and regular than men’s and can improve their families’ wellbeing, but women and girls who take over domestic responsibilities of migrant relative can suffer education and employment opportunities. The drain of skilled nurses and teachers can harm access to health and education for whole communities.

The global care chain does not change the uneven distribution patterns between women and men regarding unpaid care work responsibilities. The availability of (cheap) migrant women to fill care gaps may also reduce incentives for public policy that supports more equal distribution of domestic and care work within families, and between families and the state and/or private sectors actors.

**These trade offs – for individuals and between groups and societies – has implications for SDG attainment and the LNOB agenda.** The policy agenda is to increase the benefits of migration for all women, and minimise harm.

### 5 References

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4 Policy implications of these conclusions will be outline for the full briefing.

5 A full reference list can be provided on request and will be included in the full brief.