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High-level panel on  
“The Gender Dimensions of International Migration”

**(Gender Dimensions of Labor Migration in Asia)**

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## Gender and Labor Migration in Asia

Labor migration has been underway in Asia for more than three decades. The main features of labor migration in the region are as follows: it is premised on temporary migration; much of it occurs within the region; most of it is unskilled; female migration is significant; and unauthorized migration is substantial; and the migration industry is very much involved in the process.

As of the mid-2000s, some 6.3 million Asian migrants were legally working and residing in the more developed countries in East and Southeast Asia, or 7.5 million, if migrant workers in an unauthorized situation were included. When organized, large-scale labor migration commenced in the 1970s, it was mostly a male affair. Female migration became more noticeable from the 1980s and the process has been irreversible since. Assuming that about a third of all migrants were women (the proportion female in earlier estimates), women migrants would comprise some 2.1 to 2.5 million of all migrants in East and Southeast Asia (Asis, 2005).

Most female migration is associated with the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, where women comprise some 62-75 percent of all migrants that are *legally* deployed from these countries.<sup>1</sup> Unlike other labor-sending countries, these three promote the migration of women to work abroad. If unauthorized migration (and especially, trafficking in persons) were considered, more countries would figure as sources of significant female migration.<sup>2</sup>

The participation of men and women in labor migration stems from different demands. Male migration basically responds to the shortage of workers in sectors that have been deemed undesirable by the local population – e.g., plantation, construction, and manufacturing. Female migration, on the other hand, responds to a very specific labor shortage – the shortage of reproductive workers. The concentration of women in domestic work and entertainment,<sup>3</sup> gives a cautionary note to female mobility. On the one hand, the mobility of women in contemporary times marks a significant departure from the cultural prescription that regarded migration as a male prerogative. On the other hand, since domestic work and entertainment (which many believe is a euphemism for sex work) are unprotected sectors, women's participation in migration raises many questions about prospects of empowerment and gender equality.<sup>4</sup> The legal framework of

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<sup>1</sup> The data for the Philippines pertain to *new hires* among *land-based* workers. If sea-based workers were included, the gender composition of Filipino migrants would be about evenly divided between men and women.

<sup>2</sup> For example, women comprise less than 20 percent of legal migration from Thailand. Women, however, are the majority of unauthorized (and possibly trafficked) migrants in destination countries such as Japan. Burma is a primary source country of migrants to Thailand, but women and girls were rendered invisible because domestic workers were not included in Thailand's registration program until 2004. Burmese women and girls, however, are commonly profiled in trafficking to Thailand. Similarly, in South Asia, female migration within the sub-region is mostly talked about in reference to trafficking.

<sup>3</sup> The domestic work sector is a much bigger market than entertainment. It is also a sector that is characterized by a stable demand and is quite immune from economic fluctuations. Japan is the major destination of entertainers, mostly from the Philippines. Other entertainers in Japan come from many other countries, but most of them are either unauthorized migrants or were trafficked. In 2005, Japan introduced tougher requirements for the entry of legal entertainers; this was prompted by being on the watch list of the US Trafficking in Persons report. This resulted in a drastic reduction of entertainers from the Philippines – the 2005 deployment levels were cut by almost half when compared with the deployment in 2004 (SMC, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The risks and vulnerabilities that can befall women in domestic work are the reason why other labor sending countries – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal – do not allow or promote female migration. This is changing. Bangladesh, which has flip-flopped on its ban on female migration in the past, has lifted

women's migration as domestic workers or entertainers does not provide *sufficient* guarantees for their protection, primarily because legal migration is

channels of unauthorized migration or trafficking. NGOs have developed programs to provide support and assistance to foreign spouses and their children. The issue of international marriages has stirred some discussion on integration and multiculturalism in Japan and The Republic of Korea.

Much of the knowledge on female migration in Asia is focused on domestic workers (also entertainers and brides to some extent). Although domestic work is the largest sector that provides employment to many women migrants, there is a need to examine the participation of women migrants in other sectors – e.g., manufacturing. Are women migrants in the “productive” and protected sectors indeed better off than women migrants in the “reproductive” sector? Furthermore, how do women and men compare in the different sectors? Sectoral studies comparing women and men may also shed light on trafficking for other purposes and may uncover trafficking in men. Thus far, trafficking is very much identified with women and girls (and the predominance of trafficking for sexual purposes) while men are relatively absent. The focus on the sex sector *may* have skewed the portrait of trafficking as involving mostly women and girls.

Women’s participation in the migration of the highly skilled and professionals is another area that requires further study. The increasing demand for highly skilled and professional migrants by the developed countries has revived the debate on the brain drain, which was an issue in the 1970s. Interestingly, countries of origin all aim to send more skilled migrants and professionals in the future. The offer of family reunification and permanent residence to highly skilled and professional migrants can lead to permanent settlement in other countries – which implies the loss of talents for countries of origin. The tension between individual vs. collective interests, the individual’s right to move vs. the national interest, has come into play in the migration of health professionals, particularly nurses. Prospects of higher wages in the developed countries have enticed many nurses to consider migration;<sup>10</sup> the personal decision to migrate for better wages is rational for individuals but may imply dire consequences for the health care systems of the countries of origin. In the Philippines, several bills have been filed requiring mandatory service of at least two years before nurses can be allowed to leave for abroad. Proposals of this nature have been opposed by nurses’ groups who argue that such a move is discriminatory and infringes on their right to migrate.<sup>11</sup> Kingma (2006:137) raises an intriguing question in light of moves to restrict the migration of nurses: “Is it because they are women that nations are willing to ignore nurses’ basic human right – the right to leave their country?” By comparison, the migration of ICT professionals, many of who are men, does not seem to invite policies to restrict their migration – how does gender factor into this situation?

Labor migration is not only about workers on the move but also involves the families they leave behind. To keep migration temporary, receiving countries resorted to: limiting migrant workers’ stay in the destination countries (typically for a two-year contract), limiting their integration (they participate in the economy but are otherwise excluded from other sectors of life), and not allowing family reunification (specifically for less-skilled workers). The last condiens240.75 -1.75 TD -0.1946



It should be noted that there are some countries where NGO or associational activities are not allowed or encouraged – this situation leaves a wider gap in terms of women migrants' access to support, assistance and advocacy.

- The contributions of hometown associations to their home communities in Mexico and other Latin American countries provide a point of departure to consider similar questions on the role of associations formed by women migrants (including hometown associations) in promoting development in their home communities. The counterpart given by the federal, state and local government to the donations by migrants is an idea that needs to be further studied in the region. The study in Asia is envisioned to contribute to discussions of transnationalism.

*Advocacy to promote the protection of women migrants*

- None of the receiving countries in Asia (or the global context for that matter) has ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. In countries of destination, information-education-communications (IEC) campaigns may be designed to enhance the awareness of the local population of the contributions of migrant workers, especially women migrants. It is vital to raise consciousness of the contributions of women migrants to their host societies because their work is easy to ignore. The commemoration of International Migrants Day on December 18 is an appropriate time to wage or to launch these campaigns. Noted and respected key persons, who believe in migrants' rights, particularly the rights of women migrants, may be tapped as spokespersons.

- In the countries of origin, the contributions of migrants in general to the economy, particularly their remittances, are recognized. In the Philippines, overseas Filipino workers are hailed as the country's new heroes on account of the sacrifices they have made to send remittances to their families. Overseas Filipino workers or groups who have done exemplary acts are given awards during the commemoration of Migrant Workers Day (7 June, the day the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act was passed in 1995) and Overseas Filipinos Month (every December). NGOs have used the state's recognition of migrants' contributions to challenge the government to improve the support and services to migrants and their families.

- The publication of a yearly report on the violations of migrants' rights as well as a record of good practices promoting migrants' rights would help bring to light the wrongs committed against migrants. The good practices on the other hand will help promote the dissemination of workable ideas that lead to good outcomes

*Development cooperation between countries of origin and destination*

In the years to come, developed countries are expected to turn to less developing countries to source not only less skilled workers but highly skilled and professional workers as well. The acceleration of the aging of the population and declining population growth are demographic facts that will intensify the demand factors for workers from the less developing countries. While countries of origin may benefit in terms of remittances, they alone bear the burden of the social costs of migration. Some discussions have been advanced on this issue of compensation – such as receiving countries paying some taxes to the developing countries. Another approach would be the forging of a development cooperation between countries of origin and destination – i.e.,