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**(Women in International Migration: The Context of Exit and Entry for  
Empowerment and Exploitation)**

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# **Women in International Migration: The Context of Exit and Entry for Empowerment and Exploitation**

by

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## **Introduction**

In most places throughout the world, the term “migrant” conjures images of men, while the phrase, “migrants and their families” introduces women and children into the picture. Yet, statistics show that half of all migrants globally are female and studies document that women are active participants in migration, both within and between countries.

However, active participation and statistical equality do not mean that conditions eliciting migration are the same for women and men or that women face the same circumstances and experiences as men in migrating and in settlement. Migration is in fact highly gendered. Stating that a process or outcome is gendered calls attention to the fact that gender is a core organizing principle of social relations. Gender exists in the societal expectations of the appropriate social roles and behaviors for women and men; gender is shown by practices as well as beliefs found in economic, political, social and cultural institutions that differentiate between men and women. One implication is that seemingly gender neutral phenomena associated with migration, such as exit, entry and experiences in countries of destination are in fact gendered and produce different propensities for migration as well as different outcomes for women and men (Boyd, 2004).

To say that migration is gendered also can imply the existence of gender inequalities at exit, entry and in experiences. Closely intertwined with gender as a core organizing principle of life are asymmetrical relations of power between men and women, where power is defined as the capacity to control, or influence others regardless of the resistance offered by others. These asymmetries exist in social relations between individuals but they also are embedded in societal institutions ranging from families, education, the economy, law and politics. The consequences are often unequal access to resources, diminished social and economic status, vulnerability to abuse and violence, and reduced life chances for women compared to men. Gender inequalities that disadvantage women more than men and opportunities that offer empowerment can be powerful motives for migration. Similarly gendered migration policies or gendered inequalities in destination countries may exert greater negative impacts on migrant women compared to migrant men while gender-informed policy may promote gender equal outcomes.

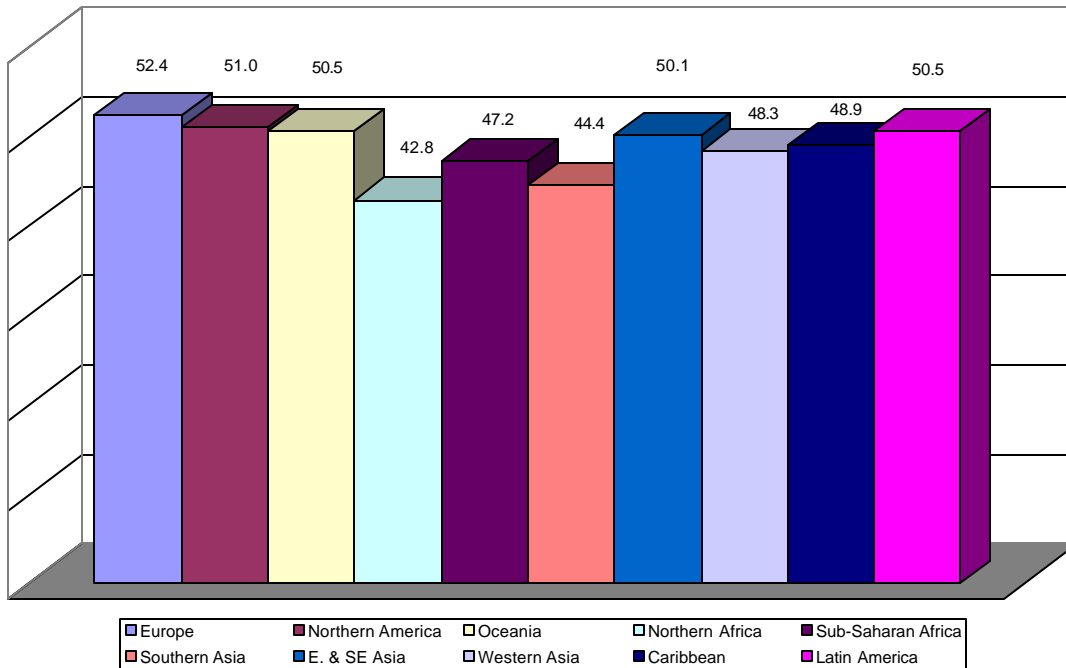
What, then, are the gendered conditions of exit and entry that are associated with empowerment and equality or with the exploitation of migrant women and men? Recent country specific studies as well as broad surveys offer examples (see: Asis, 2004; Boyd

and Pikkov, 2005; Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Kofman et. al. 2000; Piper, 2005; United Nations, 2005). This paper addresses the question through a gender analysis that outlines the influence of structural, familial and individual factors. As noted elsewhere (Grieco





Chart 1: Percent of females among international migrations by region, 2000 (Zlotnik, 2003)



The complexity of factors determining the migration of women raises two questions pertinent to the topic of women migrants: 1) what are the mechanisms for ensuring that migration decisions are empowering for women; and 2) what happens to the women who migrate. With respect to the first question, two factors – development and gender equality – are key levers of change. Historical examples based on migratory flows to traditional countries of settlement (North America, Australia, New Zealand) indicate that development brings with it disincentives for the out-migration of both women and men. As well, growing gender equality may afford women greater opportunities in their own societies. Such opportunities may reduce the need for migration for economic reasons while simultaneously giving women great autonomy and capacity in the migration decision making processes.

Overall, both development and growing gender equality should reduce the propensities of women (and men) to migrate in the long run. In the short term however, growing development and improvements in gender equality may stimulate migration – a phenomenon known as the migration hump. The phrase “migration hump” captures comparatively low levels of migrating at very early stages of development in part because people lack the resources to move. As conditions improve, greater knowledge of opportunities elsewhere can be acted upon. People also may receive higher levels of education that either cannot be fully exploited in the developing economy or afford them jobs in other countries, thus stimulating rises in out-migration that last until development reaches levels that diminish the gains accruing from migration. Improvements in gender equality are likely to working in a similar fashion. Where the status of women is low, women are not likely to have resources to migrate and societal and familial gender scripts may be highly proscriptive of attempts to do so; under conditions of rising gender

equality, the improved status of women, coupled with rising education, may both make women competitive in a global labor market and empower them to become migrants (see: Chant and Radcliffe, 1992). Overall, improvements in levels of development and in gender inequality are likely to increase the participation of women in migration, at least in the short term. In particular, as women seek to migrate in order to improve their situation and that of their families, the proportion of women in labor flows should increase.

However, these transition stages in development and in gender equality can mean increasing vulnerabilities of women to exploitation. During the process of migration, intermediary institutions and agencies, both legal and illegal, can increase the likelihood that women will migrate because they act as networks linking potential female migrants with demands for female labor in destination countries. These intermediaries include recruitment agencies, including those seeking domestic workers or entertainers or facilitating "mail order" and web-based marriages, as well as smaller informal networks or single individuals who offer illegal entry (smuggling) and/or arrange exploitative working conditions (trafficking). In the case of illegal entry, women (and men) may be accessing intermediaries in order to work around established entry policies that implicitly or explicitly restrict their entry (Grieco and Boyd, 1998). Fraudulent entry as well as entry for certain types of work (care work, entertainers, sex work) and entry for purposes of marriage often means that these women are vulnerable to exploitation.

### **Conditions of Entry**

Ironically, having left gender stratified societies, the subsequent experiences of migrant women may also reflect the status of women and gender inequalities in destination societies. Again, issues surrounding the status of women and their influence on migrant women are found at the societal, familial and individual levels. In destination countries, state immigration policies, migrant policies and gender policies determine the rights and entitlements of migrant women and men; contained within these policies are capacities to facilitate gender equality or perpetuate gender inequalities.

Immigration laws and regulations of destination countries influence entry statuses of women and men migrants. Migration policies of many receiving countries may implicitly assume a "dependent" for women and an "independent" migrant status for men. In particular, administrative practices that automatically assign the role of head of household to men increase the likelihood that women are designated as spouses, both by visa officers and the immigrant family (Boyd, 1995). By placing "de facto" distinctions between the entry status of male and female migrants, migrant women admitted as "dependents" may be placed in a legally dependent -- and potentially disadvantaged -- position in relation to men. This is particularly the case for women arriving as m6.75 0. Tj 101.25 0 w3340

Migrant women's entry status in destination countries also can affect the level of social protection available to them. Women who enter countries illegally have few or non-existent rights and risk expulsion. While this also is true for men, women who are trafficked face the double impact of exploitation and criminalization along with expulsion, often back to the same conditions that created the initial motivations for exit. Women migrant workers who are admitted legally, but temporarily, may be poorly protected by existing labor laws in destination countries and they may have little recourse to state protection if abuse occurs. Female specific demand for domestics and nurses can lead to temporary rather than permanent residency for many female migrants.

Migrant policies – those targeted at aiding the integration and welfare of immigrants currently in a destination country – may also be implicitly “gendered,” frequently assuming a “male breadwinner” or “male sponsor” model. Thus, women who are not labor force participants may not have easy access to income security programs should their marriages fail. And, in some countries, extended use of income security programs increases the risk of expulsion for those already in precarious positions. Further, migrant women – particularly those who assume familial care giving responsibilities alongside paid employment– may have greater difficulty in meeting the time frame of integration requirements that some countries have recently implemented (see: OECD, 2003, 2005 ).

Finally, at the societal level, the status of women and the degree of gender equality in the destination society provides an important backdrop for the treatment of all women, including migrant women. Where equality of opportunity or of outcome is readily accepted, where rights based jurisprudence exists, and where associations are allowed to form (thus creating NGO groups), migrant women may have more options in having their voices heard and their needs met than in other settings. This is evident when considering domestic workers, who risk exploitation because of the highly private and personal conditions of work. Media reports of extreme abuse, exploitation and death of domestic workers exist for countries where the status of women is low, where women are confined to private settings, and where migrants have few rights. High levels of gender inequality in destination countries also means immigrant women are disadvantaged.

Much of the discussion about the family context for women migrants centers on their administratively defined relationship of dependency to a (usually) male member. This dependency can be highly problematic under conditions of spousal violence or when immigration and welfare regulations lack provisions for marital dissolutions. However, another strand of debate asks how family relationships change – are women emancipated or empowered vis-à-vis previous roles after migrating, and do gender relations changes. Here, evidence is mixed – studies find both change and stasis. The latter is most likely to occur when women are considered to embody the cultures left behind, thus reinforcing previous gender scripts. However, for some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy (Zentgraf, 2002).

It is also the case that individual characteristics influence experiences in a destination country. In particular, educational levels, labor market experience and knowledge of the language(s) of the destination country are associated with increased knowledge of all dimensions of the receiving country, including rights and entitlements. These are not static characteristics; women and men alike may increase their levels of education, labor





development and the inclusion of women in development processes; they also include actions aimed at eradicating gender inequality in both sending and destination countries and improving the situation of migrant workers and their families.

***Summary Points of Discussion***

***Together, poverty and gender inequality are strong determinants of the propensity to migrate, the type of migration and the consequences of migration for women.***

***Improvements in levels of development and in gender inequality are likely to increase the participation of women in migration, at least in the short term. These transition stages in development and in gender equality can mean increasing vulnerabilities of women to exploitation.***

***Immigration laws and regulations of destination countries influence entry statuses of women and men migrants. Migrant women admitted as "dependents" may be placed in a legally dependent -- and potentially disadvantaged -- position in relation to men.***

***Migrant women's entry status in destination countries also can affect the level of social protection available to them.***

***High levels of gender inequality in destination countries also means immigrant women***

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