

Making migration work for women and men in rural labour markets

Many poor rural households see migration to urban or other rural areas, or abroad, as a strategy to escape poverty or improve the quality of their lives. Migration patterns vary by continent and even countries within continents, and change over time. One of the most significant changes in the last half century is the increasing proportion of women migrating: today, they constitute half of the international migrant population, often migrating independently as the main economic providers for their families.¹ Driven by economic, social and political forces as well as new challenges (such as environmental degradation, natural disasters or climate change impacts), migration can bring, both benefits and costs to the migrants themselves, their families, and their communities of origin and destination, depending on the migrants' profile and gender, and on labour market specificities.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Over 214 million people resided outside their countries of origin in 2010 compared with 190 million in 2005, with an increased number of both origin and destination countries.²
- However, the bulk of rural migrants in the developing world are moving internally, into urban areas³. During the last 50 years, 800 million people have migrated from rural to urban areas, a number that is steadily increasing.⁴ In Mexico for example, between 1995 and 2000, only 5 to 9% of the total migrants were international migrants.⁵
- The gender profile of migration is country-specific. For instance, men dominate migration flows to the US from India or El Salvador, whereas more women than men migrate from China, the Republic of Korea or the Dominican Republic.⁶
- Women constitute around 50% of the total international migrant population,⁷ but account for 60% or more of migrants from some countries (such as Indonesia and the Philippines). Women are more likely than men to migrate internally or just across borders.
- Most destination countries have gender segregated labour markets, with migrant women concentrated in domestic and care-giving work, and men in construction, transport and trade.
- Female migrants' wages are generally lower than male migrants' wages.⁸ In 2008, recent female migrants to the UK were 1.5 times more likely than male migrants to be paid less than the national minimum wage.⁹
- Remittances constitute the second largest flow of resources to developing countries (US\$328 billion transferred in 2008), with formal transfers nearly tripling the value of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and accounting for up to 10% of GDP in some countries.¹⁰ 500 million people (8% of the world population) are estimated to depend, at least partly, on remittances. At household level, remittances can be very substantial, accounting for 30 to 70% of the household budget in Senegal for example.¹¹
- 500 million people (8% of the world population) are estimated to depend, at least partly, on remittances, with Latin America and the Caribbean receiving 25%, East Asia and the Pacific 24%, and Sub-Saharan Africa less than 5% of all international remittances.¹⁰
- Studies estimate that a 10% increase in per capita official international remittances in a country can lead to a 3.5% decline in the percentage of poor people living on less than US\$1 a day.¹²

WHY IS ACTION NEEDED?

The impacts of rural migration on local labour markets, the gender division of labour, and agricultural production and food security can be positive or negative, depending on:

- who migrates (individuals or families and their characteristics: age, gender, education, skills and assets);
- the reasons to migrate (better living conditions, family reunification, to escape conflict or environmental problems);
- the duration (permanent, temporary, circular); and
- the destination (internal rural-rural or rural-urban, intra-regional, international).

1. Rural migration can change gender based power relations in rural households and communities

- Changes in gender roles and responsibilities triggered by the migration process (see Box 1) can be positive or negative depending on who migrates. While these changes can lead to women's empowerment, they can also bring social and psychological problems (see Box 2).¹³
- Working abroad can increase migrants' social status and bargaining power. Enjoying greater social and economic independence, gender equality and welfare support in host countries, migrant women may be reluctant to return to their former roles and status in traditional patriarchal environments.



BOX 1 Migration can transform gender relations in households and communities

When men migrate and women stay at home, there may be little change in gender roles in some cases. However, if the husband/household head migrates or if young men who provide a significant labour input migrate, the impact may be substantial. In such cases, women often take over male responsibilities for agricultural production and marketing, household purchases, and social and community duties, or have to handle family decisions they would normally share. These can be burdens unless women can use remittances to hire labour and move into more empowering, supervisory roles.

When women migrate and men stay at home, the effects on the family left behind vary depending on the women's age and stage in their life cycle and their family profile. The impact may be slight if young single women migrate but if married women with young children migrate, the remaining relatives (especially mothers, sisters and grandmothers) may be overburdened with childcare and household work. Nonetheless, migration can be empowering: migrant women's increased earnings, skills, social identity and networks can boost their self-confidence and decision-making power in the household and community, making them important agents for cultural change.

- Migration can undermine the self-esteem and personal growth of those left behind, and threaten marital stability. Dependency on their wives' remittances can be culturally difficult for men (with some resorting to alcohol, drugs or domestic violence). Women can endure loneliness, social withdrawal and reduced confidence when their husbands migrate. Children can suffer from lack of role models, discipline or parental care and, especially if their mothers migrate, their education and health may be jeopardized.¹⁴

2. Migration has gender-differentiated impacts on agricultural labour markets

- In highly populated areas, seasonal or permanent out-migration by either men or women can alleviate underemployment in agriculture, reduce pressure on land and other natural resources, and improve livelihoods. Rural out-migration often leads to a reallocation of household agricultural labour, with women taking on male tasks or vice versa (see Box 3). While migration-induced labour shortages can increase gender-specific work burdens and/or lead to lower production and greater food insecurity. Remittances from such migrations can partially compensate through on-farm investment, labour hiring, inputs use, or reduced credit constraints.¹⁵

- When a household can afford to hire labour with remittances but local labour is scarce, labourers from neighbouring areas or countries may come to fill the gap, with a specific gender profile responding to the new demands. In Senegal, for example, Malian migrants (mostly male) substitute for Senegalese workers who have migrated to Europe or the Gulf. In the Philippines, female international migration generates internal migration of women to help with domestic or child care work in the sending communities.
- Migrant remittances do not always lead to agricultural growth and employment, as they are often spent on housing and consumer goods rather than on agriculture.⁷ But such expenditures can generate local non-farm employment opportunities, creating a pathway out of agriculture into urban or rural non-farm activities.¹⁶

3. Migrants' remittances and new skills can improve livelihoods and stimulate rural development

- Remittances can help poor rural families cope with agricultural risks and livelihood instability. With an appropriate enabling environment, they can foster productive investments in agriculture, reduce credit constraints¹⁵ (which particularly affect women) and stimulate off-farm businesses (e.g. rural women's handicrafts, trading, food processing activities), creating an income multiplier within the sending household similar to that created by public transfers.¹⁷
- If the increased income from remittances is spent on local products and services, this is likely to generate additional employment in the sending area. Remittances of Mexican rural migrants in the US, increased the incomes of recipient families by 10%.⁷ Non-migrant households also benefit from the "second round income effects" of remittances: studies in South and South East Asia found that each migrant created, on average, three jobs through remittances.⁷
- Exposed to different social and economic systems in the host country, migrants often become social innovators, bringing back new ideas, skills and know-how and in some cases, new attitudes about gender equality. Policy makers can leverage these changes to elaborate new gender-equitable labour standards and legislation, and develop public and private partnerships to benefit local populations.
- Gender differences in earnings, life cycle and family responsibilities, influence the propensity to remit: Men tend to



Internal migrant worker from the countryside coming to seek employment in town. Railway Station, Beijing, China.

save or invest some of their wages whereas women usually dedicate remittances (which represent a higher percentage of women's incomes) to family needs.¹⁸

- Attitudes towards paid work in receiving communities also vary by gender. In Mexico, for example, women in rural families receiving remittances withdrew from paid work (mostly poorly paid informal sector work) to devote themselves to reproductive work, whereas their male counterparts shifted from formal jobs to start their own business (becoming risk takers).¹⁹
- Remittances generally have a positive impact on health and nutrition while the impact on education is mixed: school attendance improved in South Africa, Mexico and Guatemala, while performance and attendance declined in Albania, especially for girls and for rural areas which offer poor quality education.¹⁶ In Pakistan, if they can use remittances to hire labour, women recipients are more likely to send their children to school than non-migrant families.²⁰

BOX 2 Gender and remittances: rural women migrants from the Dominican Republic

- When migratory flows to Spain first began, women remitted money to their husbands. Because they did not like the way the men managed the money, they then sent the money to their mothers or sisters who used it for basic consumption, or education, or health.
- Businesses started by women with remittances were typically small and with a high failure rate due to women's heavy workload and time constraints and lack of access to finance, education and training.
- The community benefited from reduced malnutrition and infant mortality, and improved amenities. However, migration was also seen as a cause of social problems such as family disintegration, low educational attainment, school abandonment, early pregnancy and increased drug use among children.

Source: INSTRAW, 2006

BOX 3 Gender impacts of migration on labour in rice farming

Studies suggest that the gender impacts of migration on rural labour are highly variable. A survey of rice farming households found that in the Philippines, Thailand and South Vietnam a higher proportion of adult sons and daughters migrated than their fathers while in North Vietnam a higher proportion of fathers migrated. In Thailand, principal females continued to contribute significantly in field activities. In Vietnam, labour out-migration resulted in fluidity in gender roles, as the principal females took over traditional male tasks (irrigating the fields, preparing the dikes, applying pesticides and hauling farm products). In contrast, in the Philippines, the principal females withdrew from field activities and were more engaged in managing their farms and non-farm income-generating activities. While remittances were mainly used for food and other daily expenditures, some were spent on farming inputs. However, rice yields among migrant and non-migrant households were similar, indicating that migration did not affect productivity. To overcome financial and managerial constraints faced by women, training was provided on the efficient use of inputs in rice production, which led to yield increases.

Source: Paris et al. 2009

4. Migrants, especially women, are often vulnerable and face discrimination

- Women tend to migrate shorter distances, generally for informal, seasonal jobs, since it is usually harder for them to leave their children or, for cultural reasons, to live away from their families, but also because migration may be too costly (expenses for transportation, intermediaries, and resettlement).
- Migrants can be very vulnerable until they find a job, learn the local language, and become aware of their rights. If they cannot find a job, fall sick or receive very low wages, the risk of indebtedness and impoverishment is high, particularly if they bore heavy expenses to migrate. In such situations, women under economic pressure might be vulnerable to prostitution or trafficking.
- Difficulties in obtaining work permits, particularly for women who migrate to join their husbands, may restrict migrants to lower paid informal work without social benefits.²⁴
- While remittances generally reduce household vulnerability, providing better and more secure livelihoods, they can increase vulnerability if they are the main or only source of revenue and suddenly drop or stop, with the loss of the migrant's work,²¹ for example, due to health problems or an economic crisis.

While the former can affect both men and women, economic crises tend to have mixed gender impacts on employment depending on the sector and skills involved, among other factors.

WHAT ARE THE POLICY OPTIONS?

A combination of legal, policy and practical measures is required to provide viable alternatives to rural out-migration, ensure protection and welfare for migrants, encourage the best use of migrant earnings and learning by rural households and communities, and create viable and sustainable options for return and reintegration. While governments have a key responsibility for ensuring gender-sensitive migration policies, the engagement of concerned populations and their organizations, and the commitment of employers' and workers' organizations in both origin and destination countries, are also vital.

1. Address the push factors of rural out-migration with a gender sensitive approach

- Provide core public goods to improve agricultural productivity and incomes, reduce gender inequalities in access to productive resources, stimulate rural employment creation and entrepreneurship (with specific incentives to encourage female employment), and lighten rural women's workloads (such as infrastructure to facilitate access to water, fuel, markets, education, training and health services).
- Invest in education and vocational training with equal opportunities for boys and girls to give them more employment options at home (and to strengthen work skills of potential migrants).
- Invest in health services, ensure women's access to reproductive health, and train them to improve the health of their children and grandchildren, as healthier individuals are more productive and can better ensure their own and their families' livelihoods at home, or when they migrate.
- Influence the gender patterns of migration through selective (prohibitive, permissive, or promotional) rules of exit that affect men and women migrants differently. Usually based on the status and roles of men and women within the family and the society, those rules can be implemented by labour-exporting countries to selectively encourage or prevent men or women from engaging in labour migration.

- Address the specific cases of forced migration in line with international conventions and guidelines, which include gender-specific provisions for displaced and refugee women fleeing natural and/or man-made disasters.

2. Develop gender-sensitive research on rural migration to support policy design in both origin and destination countries/regions

- Collect and analyze sex-disaggregated data on rural migrants and migration flows (short/long term, international/internal, South-South or South-North).
- Disaggregate remittance data by gender/types of migration, to examine differences in remittance patterns (flows and use) and their role in poverty reduction and community development.
- Assess the gender-differentiated impacts of migration on rural livelihoods and agricultural production, including:
 - gender dynamics underlying migration decisions, especially the reasons for and the impacts of migration on areas/countries of origin and destination;
 - the impacts of technology-led agricultural transformation on demand for/displacement of rural male, female and youth labour;
 - the impacts of migrations on the agricultural and rural labour force, production and food security, and care and reproductive roles;
 - the impacts of new skills, know-how and money acquired abroad on agricultural investment and farming systems.

3. Provide tools and legal frameworks that help migrants, especially women, to access decent work

- Define an entry status that allows both male and female migrants to equally access residency, social and employment rights in receiving countries. Because migrant women are often viewed as "dependent" (wife or daughter of an "independent" man with whom they migrate), they may face difficulties to obtain residence and work permits, limiting their access to legal and social rights, and leaving them in informal and precarious situations.
- Promote female migrant associations, women's membership in mixed associations and migrants' membership in trade or workers' unions. This can facilitate access to information on the migration process (risks, immigration policies, working conditions and rights

BOX 4 Access to education for migrants' relatives can perpetuate intergenerational inequalities

An interesting feature of East African migration (especially within Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) is the circulation of children within extended families in order to obtain education. This may encourage onward migration since better educated adults have a greater probability of getting a formal sector urban job with higher wages. Their remittances are often, in turn, re-invested in school fees, perpetuating intergenerational inequalities.

Source: Black, R., McLean Hilker, L., and Pooley, C. (2004)

in the destination country/area), legal and social assistance, and health care.

- Stimulate discussions between governments, social partners (employers and trade unions), civil society and migrant communities so that the contributions of migrants are recognized, their rights are protected, and positive social and economic changes in the local community can take place.
- Introduce national labour and migration legislation that enshrines international standards for the legal protection of

migrants (particularly women), and international labour standards to ensure decent work conditions for migrants and national workers alike. The ILO Multilateral Framework for Labour Migration provides a comprehensive, gender-sensitive guide to the principles, international standards, institutional measures, and practical actions.

4. Maximize the benefits of migration, in sending areas, in terms of gender equality and development.

- Support female migrant associations in promoting gender equality back home through projects that encourage female migrants, upon return, to become change agents in local communities.
- Create conditions for returnees, including women migrants who have gained independence, confidence, and skills working abroad, to obtain employment and/or start-up entrepreneurial activities.
- Provide information and incentives to optimize the use of remittances in rural areas of origin in ways that address gender-differentiated needs and ensure gender-equitable benefits. Strategies to enhance the contribution of migration to rural livelihoods, community welfare and development should:

- Ensure safe, efficient and inexpensive remittance channels and facilitate access for men and women to financial institutions,
- Develop special instruments and mechanisms that help women to have control over their remittances back home and to play a role in deciding how remittances are used;
- Encourage men and women migrants to engage in collective use of remittances for local rural development projects in communities of origin. The Asian Migration Centre in Hong Kong, for example, invites migrant workers to participate in group savings aiming at sustainable investments in their home countries. Migrant women, linking with their families left behind, local authorities and social institutions, can play an important role in designing gender sensitive projects which can improve the global welfare of their communities through investments in health, child care, or education.

Endnotes

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TOOLS

ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration: *Non-binding principles and guidelines for a rights-based approach to labour migration, 2006* - http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2006/106B09_343_engl.pdf

CONTACTS

Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) Elisenda Estruch: elisenda.estruch@fao.org

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Rosemary Vargas-Lundius: r.vargaslundius@ifad.org

International Labour Office (ILO) Patrick Taran: taran@ilo.org

This brief was prepared by Soline de Villard, with Jennie Dey de Pryck (for FAO), and with inputs from Patrick Taran (ILO), Elisenda Estruch (FAO) and Monika Percic (FAO)
Editor: Soline de Villard (FAO)

Coordination: Eve Crowley (FAO), Rosemary Vargas-Lundius (IFAD), and Loretta de Luca (ILO)

