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Rural-urban migrants employed in domestic work: Issues and challenges

Briefing Note No. 5

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Why give attention to rural migrants employed in domestic work?

Most African domestic workers, working in cities and towns are internal migrants – they are not from other countries, but come from rural, often less developed and poorer areas within their own countries. This pattern is also found in most countries in Asia and Latin America. Internal migrants face risks of labour exploitation and unfair recruitment practices - not much different from international labour migrants, although the latter have received much more attention from policy makers and the media.

In South Africa, for example, which is a major destination for workers from neighbouring African countries, the intra-country movement of workers is far more significant than cross-border immigration.¹ The South African Census of 2001 showed that internal migrants accounted for 35% of the population of the city of Johannesburg while cross-border migrants made up only 6.7%. Domestic work was a principal occupation of employed black women originating from outside Gauteng Province (to which Johannesburg belongs): some 35.6% of them worked in private households, while only 9% of employed black women born inside

Gauteng did so.² In general, people from poor households move shorter distances because they possess limited resources, networks, market information and skills.³

In colonial times, and until a couple of decades ago in some countries (e.g. Zambia), rural job-seekers moving into urban areas were mostly men. But a combination of economic and social developments has increasingly obliged rural women to seek employment and income-generating opportunities (away from farming) in cities and towns. Among these push factors are: deteriorating agricultural economies and declining food production; land scarcity and loss of women's rights to land; changing marital patterns and family situations such as men's outmigration, desertion by husbands, conflicts with in-laws, and female-headed households.⁴ Domestic work is a principal occupation that women migrants end up doing due to two main reasons: first, it gives an easy foothold into the urban economy as it does not require capital or particular educational preparation; and second, for new arrivals in the city, the opportunity to live in one's employer's house means ready accommodation and safety and security.

There are strong pull factors as well. The increasing participation of urban women in paid employment in private and public sectors, and growth in households headed by women have created a demand for domestic workers. In Tanzania, women living in cities have turned to informal forms of child care, such as engaging "housegirls" from the rural villages, to perform their traditionally defined, unpaid, domestic roles within the home.⁵ In Swaziland, rising women's

employment and better standards of living in urban areas have elicited a wave of female migration to towns from rural areas to fill new jobs in domestic work.⁶ Consequently, push and pull factors have contributed to breaking down gendered-cultural barriers to women's migration (i.e. the negative way men and society traditionally perceived women who leave their families and household responsibilities in order to seek paid work in the city or another region), further boosting women's labour migration (locally as well as internationally).⁷

Girls and boys from rural areas account for an important share of domestic workers in urban households, sent by their families to "help out" in the homes of relatives or friends so that they could access better schooling, secure their subsistence, or earn an income for their families. In Tanzania, a study showed how parents' attitudes, in a space of a decade, went from rejecting their child's desire to explore city-life to encouraging their child to seek employment in the city.⁸ In some countries, the supply of, and demand for, child workers in domestic work were also the result of the breakdown of families affected by war and disaster.⁹

Rural-to-urban migration does not necessarily involve a permanent change of residence. While accommodation in the employer's home is attractive to the worker (as well as to employer) because of unreliable and costly journeys between home and workplace, work tasks that start early in the morning and long working hours, it is not unusual for women domestic workers in town or city to return home frequently and periodically in order to maintain close ties with their children and dependents, as observed in Swaziland

where many domestic workers visit home every week or month.¹⁰ In South Africa, because of the history of spatial segregation between homeland areas and cities, migrant workers in cities tend to stay there less than 6 months at a time and return home each time.¹¹

Issues and challenges

Because rural-to-urban labour migration occurs within home territory, and most often informally and through personal networks, it has not received attention from policy makers or by the public, certainly nothing comparable to the attention given to international labour migration. It would be interesting to find out why this is so. Yet, internal migrants are also vulnerable to risks of exploitative and abusive practices, during the course of movement and recruitment, and at the workplace.

Informal, unregulated recruitment processes and human trafficking – risks for workers and for employers.

Compared to international labour migration, local recruitment is much less regulated, much more informal, and hardly documented. The operations of local recruitment and placement agencies are probably hardly monitored or inspected by governments even though licensing requirements may exist. Informal, unlicensed recruiters most likely outnumber registered agencies. Moreover, because there are few or no formal channels of information regarding available local jobs in domestic work and about job-seekers, and because employment relationships in domestic work tend to be highly personalised, prospective employer and workers often rely on networks of relatives and friends, and

on “word of mouth” to facilitate their search.

This unregulated, highly informal labour market situation breeds potential problems for both domestic workers and employers. For workers, there are risks of fraudulent job contracts, exploitative working conditions, trafficking¹² and forced labour.¹³ They may have no or little say over their terms of employment; and no means to seek redress for non-payment of wages and other abuses. In Zambia, the most common form of trafficking is internal trafficking of women and children for domestic work, farm labour and sexual exploitation. Because of poverty and unemployment, many victims are easily deceived into accepting the lure offered by human traffickers without realising the full extent of their future employment conditions in which they will be subjected to.¹⁴ Trafficking has serious implications even for an employer who may be ignorant of the true circumstances under which the domestic worker was recruited. The public is often not aware of these problems or believes that these do not occur. Human trafficking of children into domestic work could also be confused with child fostering.

Being a “stranger” and isolated in one’s own country. A domestic worker from a far-flung village may be as much a stranger in her/his country’s city as a migrant worker in another country. He/she might come from a tribe or ethnic group that is different from (and perceived as being of lower status than) the employer’s or the city’s; speak a different dialect or language; practice a different religion; unable to read or write; and simply be unfamiliar with the practices of urbanised households. Their social lives and access to public

services in the city might be limited and constricted; and information relevant to their work and personal life might be inaccessible. In such a situation, any domestic worker would be in a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis her/his employer and vulnerable to possible harassment and abuse. These risks are even higher if the terms and conditions of the employment relationship are not clearly defined and are unwritten.

Risks of gender and ethnic discrimination. Internal migration could follow gender and ethnic lines. Women from marginalised racial and ethnic groups are more likely to be recruited to work for private households or have little choice but to accept domestic work in spite of poor working conditions. For example, in Senegal, it has been observed that young women and girls particularly from the Sereer community migrate to cities in search of work as maids and laundresses; in Ethiopia, many from the Wollo community work as domestic workers; and in Niger, domestic work is performed by descendants of black slaves.¹⁵

Domestic work as a household survival strategy. Many women working as domestic workers do so in order to provide for their own families. They could well be the only or principal income-earner. Most of them probably have children of their own, whom they have left under the care of grandparents and other relatives. The situation of domestic workers in urban areas therefore has broader consequences that include the survival and welfare of families in rural areas. One relevant issue is wages and remittances. While shelter and food, as a form of in-kind payment, may be appreciated by migrant domestic workers, these

benefits do not adequately contribute towards the income of the families that depend on domestic workers' earnings. Channels for safely remitting money from city to rural areas might be limited or non-existing. Another issue is whether or not live-in migrant domestic workers have opportunities and means to sustain their ties with their children and family members.

Possible areas of action

In addition to the overall framework of protection for domestic workers as a whole, the following areas of action are suggested to address the issues and challenges that are specific to internal migration into domestic work.

1. Legal framework regarding local recruitment and placement of domestic workers for employment
 - Effective regulations governing operations and responsibilities of local private agencies and individual recruiters
 - Adequate machinery and procedures for the investigation of complaints, alleged abuses and fraudulent practices concerning the activities of local private agencies and individuals
 - Legal framework specifically addressing trafficking, including clear definition and indicators of trafficking, and penalties (e.g. Ghana's Human Trafficking Act in 2005)
2. Public information and awareness
 - Information resources in language(s) and media that are accessible and understandable to domestic workers of less formal education and from different language groups

- Public information and awareness campaigns against fraudulent practices of recruiters and against human trafficking into domestic work (e.g. community-based awareness creation workshops under District Development Coordination Committees in Zambia)¹⁶
 - Migrant support and repatriation centres that are more commonly associated with international migration but could also be beneficial for internal migrants
3. Community involvement and broad partnerships
 - Community-led actions, which involve traditional community leaders, local governments and local organizations in both origin and destination areas, aimed at raising awareness, detecting and preventing abuses and human trafficking (e.g. Community Vigilance Groups formed in Nigeria and Ghana under ILO Action Programme Against Forced Labour and Trafficking in West Africa)
 4. Improved data collection and knowledge base on domestic work and internal migration
 - Censuses and/or labour force surveys that are regularly conducted and effectively identify domestic workers, labour migration patterns, and key data on working conditions
 - Other rapid assessment surveys to capture incidence of labour exploitation, human trafficking and forced labour in domestic work

Points for Discussion

1. What are the principal channels used by private households to find domestic workers: reliance on relatives and friends, private agencies or individual recruiters? In your country, which provinces or regions do domestic workers employed in the cities usually originate from? Do private households generally have preferences regarding the geographical and ethnic origin of domestic workers they employ?
2. What are the main challenges and problems faced by local migrant domestic workers in your country? What are the challenges and problems faced by employers of domestic workers who come from another part of the country?
3. Share specific examples from your country that provide protection and assistance to internal migrant domestic workers and address any of the challenges mentioned. Can you provide an example of how social partners or civil society organisations in your country have been involved in providing support services to migrant domestic workers in the city or in their home province or region?
4. Does your country license and regulate the operations of local recruitment and employment agencies? Does your country have any legislation against human trafficking? Are there gaps in the law or in how these are enforced?

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- ¹ Deshingkar, P., & Grimm, S. (2004). Voluntary internal migration an update. Overseas Development Institute, London.
- ² Dinat, N., & Peberdy, S. (2005). Migration and domestic work in South Africa: Worlds of work, health and mobility in Johannesburg. Migration Policy Series No.40. Southern African Migration Project: Cape Town, and Southern African Research Center: Kingston, Canada.
- ³ Deshingkar, P., & Grimm, S. (2004), op. cit.
- ⁴ Momsen, J., ed. (1999). Gender, migration and domestic service. Routledge International Studies of Women and Place, Oxon: Routledge.
- ⁵ Kiaga, A. (2007). "Blaming the other woman: Rural housegirls and urban employers on identity, labor and migration in Tanzania", PhD Thesis, University of Minnesota.
- ⁶ M. Miles. (1999). Working in the city. The case of migrant women in Swaziland's domestic service sector. In Momsen, J. (eds.), Gender, migration and domestic service. Routledge International Studies of Women and Place (pp. 183-193). Oxon: Routledge.
- ⁷ Deshingkar, P., & Grimm, S. (2004), op. cit.
- ⁸ Deshingkar, P., & Grimm, S. (2004), op. cit.
- ⁹ Truong, T-H. (2006). Poverty, gender and human trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa. Rethinking best practices in migration management. UNESCO.
- ¹⁰ Momsen, J., ed. (1999), op. cit.
- ¹¹ Clark, S., Collinson, Kahn K., & M., Tollman, S. (2003). "Highly prevalent circular migration: Households, mobility and economic status in rural South Africa", paper prepared for Conference on African migration in Comparative Perspective, Johannesburg, South Africa. www.pum.princeton.edu
- ¹² The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, adopted in 2000, defines trafficking in persons in Art. 3 as "...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."
- ¹³ The ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) defines forced labour as: "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily".
- ¹⁴ ILO-EC project summary: "Support to the Government of Zambia for the Implementation of Policy and the National Plan of Action against Human Trafficking", 1 November 2009-31 October 2012, www.ilo.org/sapfl/Projects
- ¹⁵ Deshingkar, P., & Grimm, S. (2004), op. cit.
- ¹⁶ Current ILO support to Zambia's Decent Work Country Programme 2012-2013

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