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The Gender-Migration-Employment Nexus

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This paper discusses the broad theme of this conference – that is, how migration impacts upon families - from the specific perspective of gender in the context of employment. I shall give particular attention to those migrants who end up working in low skilled, low paid jobs in destination countries. Gender is treated here as a relational concept, juxtaposing not only male migrants versus female migrants, but also pertaining to relations between generations (parents, children, grandparents), employer and worker, based on socially constructed understandings of specific roles and patterns of behavior according to sex, generational standing and socio-economic status. When a gender dimension is incorporated into the analysis, it also brings to the fore the *social* dimensions of the issues under debate.

I start this paper by outlining the main analytical framework used for the analysis of the issue of gendered labour migration which is based on establishing a link between three feminisations: of poverty, work and migration, thus addressing the causes and consequences of migration, posing the question what the implications of the three feminisations are for gender and family relations more broadly (dealt with in section II). The final section outlines the main rights issues and makes suggestions for policy intervention.

I. Feminisation of poverty, work and migration

The feminisation of migration has become a widely recognized phenomenon which has been highlighted by United Nation (UN) agencies and the global policy-making community (UNFPA 2006; UNRISD 2005; UN 2004; ILO 2004). This type of feminisation of migration is related to the feminisation of work and poverty, i.e. it is a phenomenon that characterizes the causes and consequences of migration. The feminisation of work is related to two broad trends: on the one hand, more women obtain higher education and enter the labour market in greater numbers (which is partly down to the successes of the international women’s movement and hugely improved equality between the genders); and on the other hand, the increasing informalisation, casualisation and precariousness of work has pulled more women into the labour market (Standing 1989; Sassen 2000), with men being unable to earn a family wage and shrinking employment opportunities in traditionally male dominated sectors ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’. Resulting from the latter scenario, feminisation has also become the key feature of poverty, especially in the specific definition provided by Sylvia Chant (2008) which refers to the increased burden placed upon women in securing families’ livelihoods and economic survival, i.e. ‘managing poverty’ is increasingly becoming a woman’s job. The rising numbers of paid domestic workers filling the care gaps left by middle class women¹ who have moved into fulltime employment, together with other gendered job opportunities

¹ Domestic work constitutes the most significant source of *legal* employment for foreign women worldwide and also in Asia which in fact has the highest number of workers engaged in domestic work (ILO 2011).

having opened up, have led to the feminisation of migration both internally and internationally.

Since the 1980s academic studies on contemporary flows of migration have increasingly acknowledged and highlighted a wide range of issues related to the rising numbers of women involved in all migration streams. This has led commentators to coin the phrase ‘feminisation of migration’. The feminisation of migration from certain countries is often an indicator for rising male un- or under-employment in the origin communities and also overseas related to changing demand structures with regard to types of jobs, changing labour markets due to restructuring of economies, social dumping and the lowering of labour standards (Sassen 2003). Furthermore, the feminisation of work and migration is also a signifier of specific economic development processes, such as export-led industrialisation and/or enhanced investment in certain industries such as tourism (Oishi 2005).

Global division of labour, gender and (internal and international) migration

The gendered division of labour is predicated upon gender-segregated labour markets, with men being the dominant workforce in certain sectors and women in others (differentiations *between* sectors). But this division also pertains to different tasks being carried out by workers of different genders *within* the same sector. In agriculture and manufacturing, for example, women are typically designated to do jobs that require ‘nimble fingers’ (Elson and Pearson, 1981) whereas men usually occupy middle and upper managerial positions (Dias and Wanasundera, 2002). In this latter context, Wright (2006) has argued that what is actually happening is a mythical construction of female labour as ‘disposable’ (read: unskilled). This in turn allows managers to use female workers as skilled labour without changing their ‘unskilled’ status within the division of labour at production sites, and, as a result, avoiding the necessity of raising women’s wages accordingly.

More women who are not married migrate to urban areas where they fill jobs typically given to young, single women as domestic workers in households or in factories (especially textile) such as those located in export processing zones. The race to the bottom that characterizes the global production and supply chains drives the wages so much down that it is ultimately a young female or migrant workforce (often combined) that is relegated to perform the lowest paid work in small and medium-sized factories at the bottom end of these chains.

At the lower-skilled end, many migrant workers end up working in a narrow range of sectors, especially in agriculture, construction and food packaging/processing, as has been well-documented in the case of the UK for instance (Markova and Black, 2007; TLWG, 2007; TUC, 2007). Migrant workers have come to provide up to 80% of the agricultural labour force in some countries or regions (IUF 2008). An increasing number of employers in agriculture and food processing industries are employing women rather than men, and some 70% of all child labour in the world takes place in agriculture. The age of 16 is the actual minimum age set for farm jobs and 18 for employment in agriculture in dangerous jobs. Despite this, some 132 million 5 to 14 year olds are believed to be employed in agriculture around the world (IUF 2008:6). They are exposed to dangerous work and toxic pesticides.

Domestic work has proven to be an increasingly important sector all over the world and thus a vital employment opportunity for newly arrived women in Europe, North America, Asia and elsewhere. Migrant workers’ location within specific sectors of the (formal or informal) labour market and the often temporary nature of their migration status usually produce a number of legal and economic constraints. With female-dominated domestic work and male-

dominated agricultural work being subject to rigid migration control exercised by both origin and destination countries,² work in both sectors can be said to constitute a form of unfree labour, as argued by Tanya Basok (1999) in the context of Mexican agricultural workers in Canada, and Leah Briones (2009) in the context of Filipino domestic workers in Asia and Europe.

Foreign agricultural workers are often brought to northern countries under seasonal migration schemes, due to the seasonal nature of this sector and the reluctance of home-state workers to perform the kinds of low-paid and erratic work involved. In Australia, this type of seasonal work is to a large extent performed by young people who take advantage of the ‘working holiday visa’ during their ‘gap year’ (Khoo *et al.*, 2008). Elsewhere, many more migrants who work in agriculture are undocumented (Martin, 2006).

As more women migrate, more children travel with them, boys and girls, and in the event often become part of the workforce. In Africa, children from Mali and Burkina Faso work in Cote d’Ivoire, a country which produces about 40% of the world’s cocoa. In the US, over 300,000 children work as hired labourers on commercial farms; nearly three-quarters of them are Hispanic, including migrants from Mexico. Employers use and abuse the labour of children rather than pay a decent wage to adult workers. Migrant children have often little or no access to education (IUF 2008; ILO 2002). In this sense, the feminisation of migration is also linked to child migration and child migrant labour.

In addition to seasonal migrant worker schemes, poverty enters the picture in terms of governance (that is, management) via Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), popular with the EU and Japan, and the effect they have on sending countries. The EU Commission, for instance, is pushing the ACP (African, Caribbean, Pacific) countries into signing such agreements. Women in developing countries are said to be particularly affected by EPAs as it is ‘they who mainly work in the agricultural sectors, e.g. as poultry and vegetable farmers, which will be most adversely affected by trade liberalisation and the EPAs’ (Groth, 2008: 4). Similar to this, it has also been shown that regional trade agreements like NAFTA have had no effect on reducing the economic hardships which constitute the main push factor for migration from Mexico to the US. The effects of such agreements are therefore related to the feminisation of poverty by being linked to the feminisation of agriculture, when men are ‘forced’ into out-migration to industrial cities or abroad, leaving women behind as heads of households and the main people to work the fields.

China is a case in point (Jacka, 2008; Solinger, 1999). As part of China’s efforts to develop a globalised market economy, increased rural-urban migration has taken place. From the mid-1980s rural incomes began to stagnate and, as a result, rural/urban income inequalities increased markedly, pushing larger numbers of rural people to move to urban centers where they were welcomed by employers of domestic and foreign-owned companies as cheap, flexible and unskilled labour. Broken down by gender, roughly two-thirds of all rural-to-urban migrants in China are said to be men, but sex ratios vary quite significantly from one region to another. In the Pearl River Delta region, for instance, young rural women are reported to make up 65 to 70 per cent of the labour force, being the type of worker favoured by the transnational clothing, textile, toy, electronics and other labour-intensive manufacturing

² Origin countries display a certain control via the imposition of bans – either total bans on the out-migration of lower-skilled women or bans on specific destination countries. Government policies in origin countries are also shaped by elite interests (collusion between recruitment agencies and politicians) as well as bilateral agreements, although origin countries typically have a weaker bargaining power with regard to the latter.

companies. Migrant women are found to be younger and more likely to be single than men. They also tend to be less educated than rural migrant men, partly due to their lower average age and partly to gender inequalities in education attainment across rural China (Jacka, 2008).

New and more desirable off-farm work leaves many women behind to take care of farms, a trend which has resulted in the ‘feminisation of agriculture³’. Today across China a higher proportion of women than men are agricultural labourers. When women are left behind, they typically experience an increased workload, particularly in poor households in which women can neither afford to hire labour to help with farm work nor not to farm their land. To cope with labour shortages on the farm, it is commonly girls who are withdrawn from school rather than boys. The ‘reversed’ form of the gender division of labour, with the wife becoming the migrant worker and her husband taking care of farm and domestic work, is rare and considered the very last resort (Jacka, 2008). In Sri Lanka, by contrast, women’s participation in agriculture has declined and, as a result, women’s out-migration has been on the increase (IOM, 2005). All of this indicates the increasing burden placed upon many women in their role as principal migrant or left-behind adult. Moreover, migration as a route to socioeconomic betterment is also increasingly exposed as a myth, especially in the case of the majority of migrants who are less skilled (Piper, 2008). According to Tamara Jacka (2008), for instance, the 1999 household survey taken in Sichuan and Anhui revealed that 75 per cent of returned migrant women and 63 per cent of male returnees worked primarily in agriculture post-return. The temporary or seasonal migration schemes, thus, have clear limitations with regard to allowing migrants to develop either ‘here’ (destination) and/or ‘there’ (origin).

II. Gendered migration and family relations – care work and agricultural work

In the absence of family unification policies or in the case of temporary contract migration (which is experiencing a revival in much of the developed world), children are usually left behind by one or both migrating parents. The feminisation of migration then means that it is the mother who migrates (often to engage in paid domestic work), often leaving the oldest daughter or other female members of the family in charge of household responsibilities and the (unpaid) caring for siblings and the elderly (IOM 2008). In some cases, this leads to daughters being withdrawn from full time education in order to take care of household chores and the rearing of their siblings.

With regard to the academic literature, migration studies have largely viewed children as accompanying their migrating parents or as being left behind by one or both migrant parents, thus conceptualising migration largely as an adult enterprise. Those two scenarios raise important issues in their own right but the different implications for girls and boys are unknown. Even less is known about the third category of children – unaccompanied children – who remain largely misunderstood. The significant numbers of migrant children moving alone are mostly adolescents but a distinction has to be made between internal, cross-border and international migration. Independently migrating children are typically assumed to be trafficked – and the trafficking lens focuses almost exclusively on women and girls in the sex trade although there are other forms of trafficking along the ILO’s ‘forced labour’ framework and other migration channels or scenarios which involve significant numbers of young women and children.

³ A phenomenon that has also been observed in the case of India.

As for migrant girls in specific, domestic service has globally become the main economic activity for girls under 16 years than any other form of work. In an international migration context, however, foreign household workers are assumed to be somewhat older. Many countries have implemented minimum age requirements ranging from 20 to 25. This notwithstanding, there is anecdotal evidence of faked birth certificates or faked work permits to allow officially under-aged young women to migrate for household work. Having less education and less experience, this leaves under-aged women more vulnerable to exploitative practices. To my knowledge, there are no academic studies which have investigated different age groups among migrant household workers.

Household work abroad has become the dominant channel for legal economic migration for women. According to data from UNICEF (2007), child domestic workers in South Asia are very often migrants. Those who migrate to abroad are typically young, single women but married women who leave their children and husbands behind are also among them in considerable numbers. There is an increasing body of academic literature on ‘transnational motherhood’ or ‘absentee motherhood’ discussing the impact of international migration on both the migrant mother and her children left behind. Findings are mixed but generally point to children of migrants doing better in terms of the material indicators and in terms of academic performance compared to the children of non-migrants. However, the children of migrant mothers are found to do not as well in school and were more likely to say that they were lonely than other children⁴. An unknown factor in the assessment of the effects on children of an absent parent is gender, i.e. possible differences by gender.

In terms of academic studies, household work has been subject to debates on ‘global care chains’ and ‘care regimes’. The concept of ‘global care chains’ is defined as “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work or caring” (Kofman and Raghuram 2007). Girls and women have been incorporated into both formal and informal labour markets as paid and unpaid caregivers. This demand is increasingly met by female (international) migrants in middle income and high income countries all over the world. In other words, girls and women migrate not only to work as domestic helpers but also as nursing aides and registered nurses in a variety of establishments (private and public institutions as well as private households). The mobility of these girls and women leaves care gaps to be filled in areas they leave behind. Young children are among the care recipients. Older children might fill gaps left by their mothers. The analytical focus in this literature, however, is more on gender rather than childhood. Children appear here mostly as care recipients, and there is still very little knowledge on older girls taking over the role as caregivers and the impact on their own social development, especially in the context of the prolonged absence of mothers.

Because of the time limited nature of their contracts (as foreign domestic work typically falls under “temporary migration schemes”), many migrants, such as in Asia, re-migrate in order to remain in overseas employment. A considerable number of women working as domestic workers manage to obtain extensions on their contracts with the result of some spending many years, if not decades, abroad. In the absence of family reunification policies for this type of migrant – or increasing barriers where they existed (such as in Europe) - migrant families become what has been termed “transnationally split households”, either with one parent

⁴ This is based on a study carried out in the Philippines (entitled “Hearts Apart”, downloadable from www.smc.org.ph) which was based on young children between 10 and 12 years of age who belong to two-parent families. The children were divided into five groups: children of migrant mothers, children of migrant fathers (land-based), children of migrant fathers (sea-based), children whose two parents are migrants, and children of non-migrant parents (Scalabrini Migration Center et al. 2004).

working abroad or both but in different countries. Also, the initial idea about working abroad for a couple of years often change when family projects become more ambitious over time and when the caring for own children turns into caring for grandchildren's needs when migrants' own children are still in a financially unstable situation. The long-term implications of these generational dynamics are unknown.

One of the main foci within the literature on migration and development (and also one of the main interests within the policymaking world) is the issue of remittances. There is also evidence of women using parts of their remittances to pay for care services to elderly and children left behind in a context where public services are non-existent. These paid carers are often family members – an aunt, cousin, grandmother. The significance of remittances for social reproduction, however, is not fully acknowledged nor understood (Kofman 2006).

Gendered analyses of the remittance issue have further argued that gender affects the volume of remittances, with women sending more than men, but this very much depends on other elements such as the migrants' marital status, migration status as well as age (UN 2004). Temporary migration seems to result in higher flows of remittances than permanent migration (especially if the latter involves family reunification) and lower skilled migrants tend to generate more remittances than highly skilled whose numbers are smaller and who tend to migrate with their entire families (Ramamurthy 2003). As women and girls tend to participate in larger numbers in temporary and lower skilled migration flows, their capacity to remit is linked to their lower earnings and, thus, tends to be less than that of the average male migrant in absolute figures. What remains unexplored is the effect of sending remittances on the (female and male) migrant – and his/her own personal development. In this sense, remittance research would benefit from taking a “resource flow” perspective, that is looking at outgoing resources sent by migrants and resource needs by migrants themselves and the gendered differences thereof. This is also an important issue in terms of acquisition of skills while working abroad. Many women are stuck in jobs where there are hardly any prospects for skill improvement, such as household work. Moreover, temporary contract schemes mean being tied to one specific employer in one specific area of employment so that ‘moving out’ (sideways or upwards) is legally not possible and renders the household workers highly vulnerable to abusive employers. Another problem for young migrant women is that they often have above average levels of education and qualifications but opt for lower skilled work overseas because it is the only legal channel available. Being unable to switch to a different type of employment, they are subject to ‘de-skilling’ or ‘brain waste’ (Piper 2008).

The acquisition of skills in the country of origin as correlated to the issue international migration is largely under-explored. Investing time and resources in training young women in order to provide them with employment opportunities overseas, as evident from the case of the Philippines, thereby empowering them but at the same time reducing them to a ‘commodity for export’ raises the intersection of two policy areas, education and migration, and also the MDG strategies adopted by certain governments to address the gendered nature of education and skills development and the extent to which policymakers take demand factors in international labour markets into consideration.

III. Labour rights and areas for policy intervention

One of the biggest problems for migrant women and girls is that household work is not recognized by national employment laws as ‘proper’ work (and often explicitly excluded). In this context, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Bangkok has

become pro-active over recent years and pressurized Jordan, a major destination country for household workers mainly from other Asian countries, to regulate the employment conditions of household workers. Some progress has been made towards this with the implementation of the "Special Working Contract for Non-Jordanian Domestic Workers". It guarantees migrant workers' rights to life insurance, medical care, rest days, repatriation upon expiration of the contract, and reiterates migrant women's right to be treated in compliance with international human rights standards.⁵ This contract came after signing the memorandum of understanding between UNIFEM and the Jordanian Ministry of Labour in August 2001 marking the beginning of the project "Empowering Migrant Women Workers in Jordan" (Piper 2008).

The new ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Worker, adopted in June 2011, addresses this lacunae but needs to be ratified and implemented in order to make a difference "on the ground" and thus in the real life of the many migrant domestic workers.

A crucial role is played by social policy: three broad sets of policies to help bridge social policies and migration policies are: one set of policies aimed at addressing migration *indirectly*, including such policies as harmonizing labour market legislation or facilitating employment creation; one aimed at *directly* addressing migration, such as creating and monitoring labour migration organisations (for example labour bureaux) and bilateral labour market regulatory frameworks; and finally, a set of policies to address the impact of migration on the left behind (children specifically) and returned migrants. Such policies would include such policies as compulsory education, portable and free primary health care services and school meal entitlements, incentives for school enrolment aimed at reducing child labour, and incentives for care provision to address the situation of children left behind (UNRISD 2008).

Migration studies have largely focused on the motives of migrants treating them largely as a homogeneous mass, especially within the black box of the household. Less is known about poor households and on intra-household processes in terms of gender and generational dynamics (de Haan and Yaqub 2007). Migration needs to be integrated within broader strategies for poverty reduction beyond viewing migration as a 'problem' or 'solution'. Furthermore, in the context of migration and development, the literature on migration and poverty has not made sufficient links to the debate on how childhood poverty may cause adulthood poverty, i.e. as a life course issue with longitudinal implications. Thus, a connection to literature on social and economic determinants of the intergenerational persistence of poverty has not been established (de Haan and Yaqub 2007). Debates on remittances, which are the focus (together with 'brain drain') of policymakers' concerns, often suggest that private flows can be seen as making up for public investment in quality services. This fails to recognize that children's development and other social policy has "public goods" characteristics and an important dimension of equity is across generations (de Haan and Yaqub 2007). Questions need to be raised around what sustainable social policy can mean when production and tax collection occurs in destination countries elsewhere. Also, the "decent work" agenda needs ratcheting up so that adults can earn decent wages and not depend on children's work input and primary education has to be for free.

The lack of family unification in many regions and the increasing barriers imposed by rich countries in the North to allow legal migration of the lesser skilled is another problem area. The former goes in fact against the spirit of the CRC.

⁵ See for instance, <http://www.december18.net/web/docpapers/doc631.pdf>.

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