



Women's Economic Migration in the Context of Globalisation

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Introduction

Migration is an integral feature of the world today. While migration to OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries attracts much attention, South–South migration is equally significant, given that a large share of migrants from developing countries (an estimated 74 million) live in other developing countries. Globally, more than 214 million people are estimated to be migrating. Around 105 million of them are women, which is about half of the total. According to estimates of the International Labour Organization in 2010, 90% of total international migrants are migrant workers and their families; this confirms that international migration for work is becoming a long-term aspect in the recent context of globalisation.

Migration of women is certainly not a new trend, but it has only just begun to be recognised more widely. Women – old or young, single or married, with or without their families – are increasingly moving within and across national borders in an effort to improve their own and their family’s well-being. Among them significantly more women are migrating today on their own or as heads of households.

Thanks to the rising collective pressure exerted by migrants – and women migrants in particular – on governments and international institutions, a number of migration and work-related issues as well as development- and gender justice-related concerns have been put on the

agenda of governments, international institutions and civil society organisations.

Strategic interventions initiated by migrant women’s organisations and networks aim to put pressure on governments and the international community to create an environment that enables and empowers women migrants to fully exercise their economic, social, political and cultural rights, protects their physical security, and enables them to fulfil their expectations and aspirations.

To safeguard the human and labour rights of migrant women, the legal and normative frameworks affecting women migrants need to be strengthened, implemented more effectively and applied in a non-discriminatory manner. While the importance of achieving more equality and social cohesion with the help of international standards for protecting migrant women’s human and labour rights should not be underestimated, it is equally important to address the large, structural economic and social inequalities in the world that stimulate women’s migration patterns.

This paper tries to offer an important contemporary political analysis of the influence of globalisation on women’s work, mobility and empowerment. It highlights that the existing gender discrimination against migrant women and girls, which is both a cause of migration to meet survival needs and a consequence of rights violations throughout the migration process, is a fundamental denial of human and women’s rights. In addition to underlining key features shaping women’s

economic empowerment, it specifically focuses on the global care chain, with a reference to migrant domestic work in the European Union (EU).

Globalisation as a Key Feature Shaping Women's Economic Migration

Globalisation shapes women's labour migration to a great extent. Global shifts in international trade and investment have had a significant impact on the geographical distribution and mobility of the workforce within and between countries. In recent decades we have witnessed a dramatic increase in international trade and investment globally. Alongside this, international and internal migration has increased. Today, large transnational corporations (TNCs) drive and control the production and trade of goods and services and technological development all over the world. Their activities have major impacts on regions, countries, communities and people in most of the world. Factories are closed and reopened in new areas or countries, natural resources and common goods are privatised, traditional knowledge is patented, agricultural production is 'modernised' through export orientation, and labour is exploited in both the formal and informal economies.

Countries create a regulatory environment to enable TNCs to operate smoothly and free of barriers all over the world, facilitated by a broad set of trade liberalisation policies at multilateral level through the World Trade Organization and

by a growing number of bilateral free trade agreements. The EU, with its aggressive push to open up new markets through wide-ranging bilateral trade agreements and its ambition to secure access to natural resources and cheap production costs, including labour, is a main player in this respect.

While women migrant workers are recruited in both skilled and unskilled jobs in many different sectors, the majority are concentrated in low-status jobs at the lower end of the job hierarchy, where work is characterised by exploitive working conditions and represents informal and insecure employment. An analysis of internal and intra-regional migration patterns shows that many migrant women find work in agriculture and export-oriented sectors, where women's relatively low wages constitute a comparative advantage. However, this is not incidental, as the hiring of (young, flexible, cheap) women workers forms an explicit strategy of governments and big corporations in the export sector. The low wages of women and women migrant workers have been fundamental to economic growth and export-oriented development strategies in many developing countries.

Additional Factors

The contemporary economic and social restructuring process, characterised by growing unemployment and underemployment, reduced social services, labour displacement, increasing poverty and inequality, and violence against women, shapes women's migration patterns to a great extent, but there are

additional factors which need to be considered.

Demographic factors such as lower birth rates, ageing, a static or declining workforce in developed countries accompanied by rapid labour force growth in developing countries play a role as well. State policies such as immigration policies in receiving countries and emigration policies of sending countries, labour market and social policies also contribute to defining patterns of migration. Demand for migrant workers in specific sectors can also be created by recruiting local labour in developed countries into better jobs and avoiding low-end jobs even during economic downturns, or the rising participation of women in the labour market and the consequent demand for care workers.

Moreover, there is a booming immigration industry and informal social networks that facilitate and sustain migration flows.

Trafficking is also a common problem which is on the rise, not only because of increasing demand but also due to larger and more diverse sources of supply, given the growing precarious livelihood conditions in many parts of the world. A considerable amount of trafficking of both women and children happens not only for commercial sex work but also for use as slave labour in factories and other economic activities such as domestic or informal service sector work. It should not be underestimated that the worst and most abusive forms of trafficking are those which relate to commercial sexual exploitation and child labour in economic activities.

Furthermore, increased migration due to a degraded environment is expected. Last but not least, the level of women's autonomy in the sending country or societal environment is an additional factor.

Gender Discrimination

International migration is a complex and often contradictory process, which provides women with opportunities for social and economic mobility but can also subject them to new forms of exploitation, abuse and exclusion. Women tend to be disadvantaged in the process of migration compared to men and face multiple challenges and adverse conditions based on the intersection of gender, age, nationality, class and ethnicity. The disadvantaged position of many migrant women leads repeatedly to increased exploitation and a growing vulnerability of their health, bodily integrity and well-being.

Women migrant workers engage in a wide range of activities and at numerous skill levels, but as a consequence of gender discrimination they are vastly over-represented in casual, temporary, subcontracted and informal employment. These jobs are characterised by insecure conditions, low wages, poor working conditions and a lack of social protection. In particular, many migrant women are employed as domestic workers, care workers, nurses or entertainers – reinforcing traditional gender segregation and inequalities in the labour market. In most migration flows involving high-skilled

employment – obviously less likely to take place under exploitative conditions – women are in a minority.

Most migrant women tend to be working in activities that do not reflect their training and skill levels; the downgrading and lack of recognition of formal skills and qualifications obtained in the country of origin are a common problem faced by women. This ‘deskilling’ or ‘brain waste’ is cause for serious concern, not only for the individual migrant but also for the society in which they work.

The Global Care Chain

An example of a key low-skill service profession relevant to migrant women workers is care work and, related to this, the emerging phenomenon of women’s role in global care chains: women’s labour is central to global care chains, an international network system of care provision stratified by class and, often, ethnicity. Many of the international care workers, including domestic workers, who leave their homes to care for others abroad also have their own children and elders to look after. Migrant women usually either pass this responsibility on to other female relatives or, with their higher foreign earnings, hire lower-income domestic workers to manage their own households.

For millions of women and their families, the global care chain offers both benefits and some serious drawbacks. Aside from salaries that can be several times higher than what they receive in their country of origin, women can also gain personal and

social benefits, such as improved educational and health opportunities for their children. But leaving one’s family takes a huge psychological and emotional toll on migrant workers, while at the same time they often provide their employer’s children with love and affection in exchange for earnings that can improve the quality of life of their own children.

The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers in the European Union

Women’s overwhelming participation in domestic work is not a new phenomenon in Western European countries, nor is the presence of migrants among domestic workers. On the contrary, demand for domestic services by private households has steadily grown over the past decade in many parts of Europe. There are many interrelated factors determining the size and relative relevance of domestic work within national economies. The reasons and implications of this growing demand are of an economic, social and cultural nature, and should be analysed in the wider perspective of gender dynamics within the labour market and family life.

Domestic work in private households is important to European family life, to European economies and to European welfare systems. As a consequence of low fertility rates, the European population is projected to decline significantly over the next decades, with an increasingly ageing structure and a particularly pronounced decline and ageing of the working age population.

According to EU sources, Europe could have a population of very elderly persons (80+) of nearly 34.7 million people by 2030, compared with the 18.8 million at present. The number of people living alone will also increase – especially the number of women living by themselves. This seriously challenges European care provision systems. Especially in Southern Europe, recent ageing demographic trends are accompanied by significant changes in household and family structures, characterised by an increase in the number of single-headed households and by the weakening of mutual family and community support networks. As the EU Green Paper on demographic change points out, families in Europe will not be able to face this caring challenge alone.

Another factor which facilitates an increasing participation of migrant women in domestic care in Europe is the ongoing change regarding gender relations in the European labour markets. Since the questioning of the traditional division of labour came to the forefront of the European debate in the late 1970s, most EU countries have experienced a massive increase in female participation in the labour market. This is an objective that ranks high on the political agenda of the EU and its Member States, among other things, to compensate for the forecast decline of the labour force. In absolute terms, this means that between 2000 and 2007 employment in the EU increased by 14.7 million persons, of which 9.1 million were women and 5.6 million men.

This massive entry of European women into the paid workforce over the past two decades has not been accompanied by a corresponding, more equal redistribution

of household work among the sexes. Different European data clearly show persisting differences in the use of time between women and men, especially with respect to the time dedicated to domestic work – therefore, generally leaving women with less free time compared to men. Disparities between the sexes continue to persist – and even increase – both in the public and private spheres, and women face great difficulties in reconciling their professional and family responsibilities. The availability of childcare services, together with other family-friendly policies (such as parental leave, flexible working time arrangements and financial allowances), clearly impact both the rate of women's participation in paid work and the extent to which they resort to domestic workers as a strategy to balance private and professional responsibilities.

In this respect it is important to emphasise a paradoxical relationship between different policy approaches to gender equality issues in contemporary Europe. On the one hand, the EU is strongly advocating for increased women's participation in the labour market as a way, among others, to ensure the sustainability of the social protection systems threatened by demographic change. On the other hand, at the national level, financial cuts in social expenditure and in provision of social services, especially for pre-school-aged children and elderly people, have de facto reduced the public coverage of care services – with significant sub-regional and national differences. The dismantling of welfare states in Europe since the early 1980s has reorganised the division of responsibilities between the state and families for the care of the

dependent sectors of the population, children, the elderly and the disabled. A growing market of private enterprises and individual workers is, therefore, picking up the demand for these services. This trend is likely to persist or be aggravated due to the 2009 financial crisis.

The growing insertion of native-born women into the European labour force has been undeniably accompanied by an increased female burden, which is eased by a rising participation of migrant women as domestic and care workers. In spite of the scarce acknowledgement of this phenomenon in the EU's gender equality policies and documents, migrant women often de facto replace national women in their traditional care and domestic roles, substituting the decreasing institutional and family support.

In that sense we can talk about the 'new gender order' in Europe – where middle-class, native European women have entered the European labour markets in large numbers, reconciling family and work by outsourcing parts of their care work to migrant women. Yet, migrant women seem to be mostly excluded or marginalised from European policy agendas on gender equality.

Empowerment and a Political Voice for Women Migrant Workers

The example of women migrants' work in the domestic and care sector in Europe illustrates that women migrants contribute to sustaining the contemporary economic system and social reproduction in the region. It highlights the contributions made

by migrant women to the wealth and sustainability of the welfare and employment system and their role in furthering economic and social development. Yet, this role is rarely recognised; on the contrary, migrant women workers are often poorly protected by labour legislation in host countries, and they face adverse conditions and multiple challenges in the labour market based on the intersection of gender, class, age, ethnicity and nationality. Particularly in the area of domestic work, where many migrants work undocumented or without an adequate contract, workers are left extremely vulnerable to exploitation whereby they are systematically denied a basic standard of living and face a de facto violation of their fundamental rights: they lack access to basic services such as health care or education, they are deprived of labour rights and social protection, and in the worst cases their bodily integrity and physical security are threatened.

This highlights the importance of guaranteeing further empowerment and a political voice for women migrants. In recent years, more and more migrants are mobilising in Europe. Grassroots organisations and non-governmental organisations are an important force for change in securing women migrant workers' rights. Old and new networks are active, and links to the women's movements, trade unions and other social actors are strengthened. At the same time, national, regional and international networks of civil society organisations working towards the human rights of women migrant workers have emerged in various parts of the world.

Further joint interventions to strengthen the rights and positions of women migrant workers and to improve their **protection** and **empowerment** by accommodating and not restricting migration flows – with the aim of preventing further exploitation of female migration – are needed. At the same time structural change to the current unsustainable and unjust economic development model needs to be promoted.

This combination of short- and long-term perspectives reflects the multidimensional strategies we have to undertake: in addition to frontline services and policies we need interventions in and a reframing of the current unsustainable economic, social and development policies which subordinate human and women's rights, global social rights and gender justice to corporate-driven trade and investment rules and their respective migration regimes. In other words, solidarity actions need to include elements to improve the protection of migrant women and prevent exploitation and abuse, but at the same time the search for sustainable policy solutions is equally important. Likewise, individual claims for rights need to be supported, while the struggle for structural transformation is also part of the agenda. This requires a dual perspective of looking at rights and livelihoods in the country of destination as well as in the country of origin.