

Women and Migration

1. The Principal Statistics

Out of 191 million international migrants registered in 2005, 94.5 million were women, that is nearly half the total. Today they represent the majority of immigrants for many countries, in particular North America, Europe, the Middle East and the South Sea Islands. In 2005 they represented the majority in all regions of the world except Africa and the Arab World. The increase in women migrants has become more pronounced since the beginning of the 1990s. Whereas for a long time, the migration of women took place in the context of family groupings, nowadays most movement is linked to work, as it is for men.

Women also represent the great majority of emigrants from numerous countries, especially from Asia and Latin America. In 2002, twice as many women as men emigrated from Sri Lanka. Between 2000 and 2003, they represented more than 80% of all Indonesian emigrants. In 2005, more than 65% of the 3000 Filipino emigrants per day were women. The same tendency is evident in Latin America: in 2001, 70% of Brazilian and Dominican emigrants heading for Spain were women. The Andean countries also send far larger contingents of women than men to Europe. Women also represented 70% of Latin American migrants heading for Italy.

When it comes to forced migrations, in 2005 women represent half of the total 12.7 millions refugees existing in the world.

2. The Principal Destinations

Contrary to generally accepted ideas, migrations South-South (regional and long distance), are more extensive than migrations South-North. Two million Asian migrant women work in countries neighbouring their own. The same applies to African women migrants, except in a few countries like Cape Verde where traditionally most migration involves sea crossings. Most migrant women from Sub-Saharan Africa (47% of the total from the sub-continent) only move within the confines of their region.

There is also a very large number of women migrating South-South over a long distance. The Gulf States represent one of the principal destinations for Asian women. Since 1995, the figure for Asian women emigrating to the Middle East each year is put at 800,000. One millions Indonesian, Filipino and Sri Lankan women work in Saudi Arabia.

However, women migrating South-North are increasing in numbers, women being more in demand in almost all the social occupations.

3. The economic contribution of women migrants

For many countries, women's remittances make up one of the largest cash revenues. At the end of the 90s they represented 62% of the total amount of money sent back to Sri Lanka. A third of the 6 million dollars annually sent back to the Philippines is down to women.

If they often send smaller amounts than men, that is because 'female' work is for the most part less well paid than that of men. On the other hand, all sources indicate that migrant women both within their country and beyond its borders (basically women moving towards urban areas), send home a higher proportion of their wages than men do. Bangladeshi women working in the Middle East send home, on average, nearly three quarters of their wages. 56% of the money corresponding to these remittances is used for the family's daily needs as well as for health and education.

It is established then, that a higher proportion of women's remittances is consecrated to the health, education and social needs of the populations which benefit from these transfers.

4. "Female" occupations.

The highest concentration of women workers is to be found in the most menial occupations or placed at lower levels of the professional hierarchies. Women are also in the majority in the least secure sectors like domestic work or in the unofficial sector, which makes them especially exposed to abuses. In all the host countries, women are mainly employed in health-related occupation or domestic work.

- Domestic employees. 60% of Latin-American women migrants are domestic employees in their host country. In Spain 70% of all women immigrants are employed in this sector. The proportion is the same for Ethiopian and Somali women working in Italy. The ageing of the population in all Western European countries greatly increases the need in this sector. They are also mainly domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. In the United Arab Emirates, each household has at least three domestic workers, mainly foreigners.
- Medical professions
The European and North American need for nurses has rocketed over the last few years. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), in 2008 Great Britain will need 25,000 doctors and 250,000 nurses more than in 1997. The United States will need to fill more than a million nurses' posts between now and 2020. Canada and Australia also are experiencing a great shortage in this sector.

The arrival of women with diplomas from Southern countries fill most of these posts. In Ghana in 2000, twice as many nurses left the country as those who had gained their diploma. 85% of Filipino acting nurses work abroad. In spite of the fact that these professional women send home most of their salary, the exodus of qualified women constitutes a serious loss of earning for the country of origin and is part of the dramatic tendency to a 'brain drain', which is greatly encouraged by the host countries' policy of selective immigration.

5. Exploitation and discrimination experienced by migrant women.

Migrant women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and abuse. Many of them are especially exposed to violence, insecure working conditions, and increasingly to the sex trade.

- Violence of employers. In a large number of host countries, particularly in the Middle East, domestic employees have their passport taken away on arrival and are therefore totally dependant on the employer. Many of them pay them no wages and keep them in virtual captivity. Without any means of seeking help, they have to work seven days a week until late at night and many of them suffer serious brutality which can extend to rape and torture.
- The trafficking of women The sex trade and exploitation of clandestine migrants today represent the third largest source of illicit revenue world-wide after arms and drugs. International human trafficking probably involves between 600,000 and 800,000 individuals each year. 80% of victims are women.

The main regions of origin of clandestine women workers, mostly destined for prostitution by the traffickers, are South Asia and the South-East, the countries of the former Soviet Union and Central Europe. The majority of these forced migrants are sent to countries neighbouring their own. So Turkey is the principal 'client' for prostitutes from Eastern Europe. The main international destinations are the United States, Western Europe and the Middle East.

Other forms of clandestine exploitation are forced labour in agriculture and manufacturing industries. The migration of women with a view to forced marriages is also increasing, especially in Asia (Taiwan and South Korea)

- Women refugees They are particularly vulnerable to all kinds of violence. Most of those living in camps have suffered rape. Since the beginning of the 90s, sexual violence has become a true weapon of warfare. This results in forced pregnancy, very serious genital lesions and the spread of AIDS amongst refugee and displaced women.

6. Legislation which is inadequate and inappropriate

Legislation and policies concerning migration rarely take into account the specific problems encountered by migrant women, all the more because statistics referring to them are scarce and incomplete.

For married women, national legislation usually makes their residence permit depend on that of their husband. They have no autonomy and, in the case of divorce, more often than not find that their situation has become illegal. Neither does legislation provide any specific protection against abuse committed against female domestic staff.

Legislation concerning the right of asylum rarely takes into account gender-specific discrimination. However this is beginning to be recognised. In 2002, the High Commissioner for Refugees confirmed that the right of asylum should take into account the requests on account of gender-specific violence and in particular rape, genital mutilation, crimes of honour and domestic violence.

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