



Women on the Move



IOM International Organization for Migration

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Facts and Figures

Over the past 40 years, there has been a steady increase in female migration. Of the approximately 191 million migrants in 2005, around 95 million were female, of which an estimated 60 million were in developed countries.

More women today are migrating independently for work, though family reunification is still the main reason for female migration. An unknown but significant number of women are forced by war or civil unrest to leave their countries. Other reasons for women to migrate include unequal gender relations, gender-based violence, poverty and economic insecurity.

Migration is not necessarily permanent: most refugees for example hope to return to their own countries;



women who migrate for work may do so several times, and families may return to their homelands at the end of their working lives. But there is little reliable information on flows as opposed to stocks of female migrants or about the numbers and frequency of cyclical migration.

Data on female migration are generally inadequate. Many countries have data but fail to process or publish it in usable form. Analysis from a gender perspective is almost completely lacking.

Why is the Linkage Between Migration and Gender Important?

Migration can be empowering:

For women

- Migration can permit women to escape conflict, personal violence, discrimination, cultural restrictions or oppressive gender roles, and in doing so assert greater autonomy over their lives.
- Migration can offer economic opportunities, increased financial independence and decision-making power.
- Migration can offer better education opportunities and access to health care, including reproductive health, for women and their children.

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For families, communities and governments in countries of origin

- Remittances are the second largest capital flow to developing countries, nearly three times official development assistance, and as much as 10 per cent of GDP in some countries. Women tend to remit more of their income than male migrants. Women use remittances for family needs, such as food, clothing, housing, education and health.
- Returning female migrants can bring with them valuable skills and experience to contribute to the socio-economic development of their countries.

For families, communities and governments in the country of destination:

- Women often fill gaps in the labour force in manufacturing, domestic and hotel work, and other unskilled jobs. The health and information and communication technologies sectors recruit qualified and graduate migrant women.
- Women in formal employment pay taxes and can contribute to social service funds.
- Female migrants can contribute to family and social cohesion as mothers, wives, community leaders and advocates.



Realizing the Benefit

Individuals and countries will derive the most benefit from female migration by addressing obstacles, pitfalls and drawbacks.

At all stages of migration

- Women are at heightened risk for coercion, violence, theft and fraud.
- Young women are at greatest risk, including for unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.
- Female migrants' relative lack of education and information compared with male migrants adds to their vulnerability.
- Countries would prefer not to lose qualified women and graduates. This is an increasingly high cost to many developing countries and countries in transition. Countries lose not only the services of migrants but investments in their education and training. The cost is especially high in the health sector, including for the countries most seriously affected by HIV/AIDS.

Before departure

Countries must address women's vulnerability

- To coercion of different kinds, including trafficking and forced migration for marriage.
- To fraudulent or misleading offers and contracts by unscrupulous employment agents.

In transit

Countries of transit are hosts to considerable numbers of female migrants in passage to third countries, some of them under coercion. Countries must ensure that women migrants in transit are not subject to discrimination and denial of their rights.

In countries of destination

Women migrants often find the experience of migration overwhelmingly positive. Migration however can be an unpleasant, risky and dangerous experience for women who are not well-prepared or supported. These include:

- Women who are irregular or undocumented migrants.
- Women who are trafficked or coerced, including for forced marriage.
- Women who know little of the language or customs of their country of destination.
- Women who travel as family members subject to cultural constraints;
- Women subject to gender-based violence or abuse.
- Women working in the informal sector or in domestic employment not subject to the protection of labour laws.
- Women who are or become socially isolated, separated from their families and out of touch with their own communities.
- Women without skills or qualifications, or whose skills or qualifications are not recognised.
- Women who experience discrimination and denial of human rights in their country of destination.
- Women who are denied health and other services, including reproductive health services such as family planning, maternal health and protection from unwanted pregnancy, and from HIV/AIDS and other sexually- transmitted infections.
- Women who are or become destitute.

Countries of destination may find women migrants a very valuable addition to their work force and society, but tensions can arise from:

- Unemployment;
- Extreme poverty, homelessness and destitution;
- Coercion and trafficking;
- Lack of integration.

On return

Women returning to their home countries often bring with them a wealth of experience as well as material benefits. Many however experience the effects of:

- Disjunction from family and community;
- Discrimination or attempts to re-impose cultural or social restrictions;
- Lack of employment opportunities;



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