

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON MIGRATION

The *UN Trends in Total Migrant Stock 2005 Revision* estimates that in 2005, about 3% of the world's population reside in a country other than they were born. The share of female migrants has increased consistently since the 1980s. Today, half of all international migrants are women.

Migration has the potential of reconfiguring gender relations. It can provide opportunities for improving women's income and status in the household and community. However, migration may also entrench traditional roles and inequalities and expose women to new vulnerabilities (R. Cortes).

A gender perspective takes into account the different experiences of men and women in migration. It considers patriarchal traditions and institutions within migration circuits and analyzes the impact of migration on gender structures. It is crucial to adopt a gender perspective to understand the consequences of migration on women and children in left behind households (R. Cortes).

WOMEN IN LEFT BEHIND HOUSEHOLDS

In many countries, migration of men changes women's economic roles. While there is some evidence of empowerment as women manage remittances, recent research shows that they often face greater responsibilities when left in charge of the household.

- UNICEF Mexico reports that women left behind by their migrating husbands are burdened with the responsibilities of taking care of children on their own (UNICEF/SU-SSC, 2006)
- Emigration from Mexico may be creating a new generation of "grass widows"—women, whose survival depends on marriages that in reality no longer exist. (Frank and Wildsmith, 2005)
- In Pakistan, seclusion of women is reinforced by their husbands' migration to the Middle East (Lefebvre, 1990).
- In India, research found that wives left behind were likely to suffer from loneliness and greater stress. Many women also exhibited symptoms of reproductive morbidity. (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003).

GIRLS IN LEFT BEHIND HOUSEHOLDS

Recent research conducted by the World Bank in Pakistan and Nicaragua found that remittances tend to have a positive impact on girls' access to education and healthcare (Ozden and Schiff, ed. 2007). However, other research has emphasized the vulnerability of girls in many patriarchal societies. Studies suggest that traditional roles for girls are often reinforced by migration.

- School performance of girls in left behind households in Mexico is compromised by their obligations to fulfill household duties and to care for younger siblings (McKenzie, 2006)
- In Sri Lanka, according to Gamburd (2005), the children of migrant mothers tend to drop out of school to look for work or help with household chores.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Migration policies need to address the constraints placed upon women and girls by traditional gender structures.
- More gender-specific research and comparable global data are needed on how migration affects women and children left behind.
- As heads of transnational families and providers of remittances, women's needs and contributions must be considered in the formulation of public policies
- Governments, international organizations and civil society stakeholders must collaborate to facilitate legal migration and increase women's awareness of the risks involved in irregular migration.
- All women migrants must have equal access to social services and legal protection.
- In migrant sending countries, pre-departure training schemes should be provided to female migrants, e.g. teachers and health personnel, and their families. Governments and civil society actors should support families in adapting to the host country.