## IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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**Abstract**
*This paper provides a thematic discourse on the impact of migration on women and children. The study aims to contribute to deepening the understanding of migration as a gendered phenomenon and its impact on women and children and human rights in general. Women comprise slightly less than half of the international migrant population. While women and men decide to migrate for similar reasons, gender-specific social and cultural norms also play decisive roles in the migration process and therefore, affect the experience of migrant women and children. Furthermore, the paper juxtaposes that a greater understanding of migration as a gendered phenomenon can enable States to better protect migrant women and children from gender based discrimination, abuse and violations at all stages of migration, and fulfill their human rights. The study focuses on the impact of migration on women and children, especially girls, given that they are uniquely and disproportionately affected by gender-based discrimination, abuse and violence. The paper concludes by submitting that migrant women, who comprise half of the total migrant population in the world, provide important social and economic contributions to their countries of origin and destination. For many women and children, migration provides opportunities for their economic and social development. Indeed, migration experiences can contribute to the empowerment of women and children by increasing their self-confidence, autonomy and control over their lives. Finally, the paper notes, their exposure to different gender norms may contribute to the achievement of gender equality in their societies of origin.*

**Introduction**

The number of migrant women is said to have doubled between 1960 and 2015. In 2017, women comprised slightly less than half, or 48 per cent, of the international migrant population. Interestingly, they outnumbered men in all regions except Africa and Asia.[1] Data indicate that the rate of female migration is growing faster than male migration in many receiving countries

While migration has moved up in the international policy agenda, its wide-ranging implications for children have received little attention. Children are affected by migration when they are left behind by one or both migrating parents, migrating with parents (or born abroad), or migrating alone.[2] The impact of migration on children and adolescents must be seen in the broader context of poverty and conflict, and within the perspectives of vulnerability and resilience, gender relations and children's rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) protects every child, regardless of nationality or immigration status. States have obligations to respect the provisions of the Convention in their policies and actions toward each and every child within their jurisdiction. These provisions include the right to citizenship, physical integrity, health and education as well as the right to be free from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers reaffirms these rights set forth in the CRC.[3]

Policies should protect children's rights by enhancing access to the potential benefits created by migration, while also providing protection for those who are vulnerable to its negative consequences. Effective migration policies need to be accompanied by additional investments in health, education and social protection to address the risks faced by children and adolescents who are migrating or left behind.[4]

**Definitions of Terms**
**Children:** According to international standards, children are defined as "individuals below the age of 18" (CRC, Article1). However, it is important to note that only some of the documents included in this paper provide information

disaggregated to specify the 0-18 age group.[5] In most of the research examined children are defined by the age group 0-15, and youth by the age group 16-24.[6]

**Migration:** The United Nations defines a migrant as "any person who changes his or her country of usual residence".[7] Identifying who is a migrant can be difficult due to the dynamic nature of migration, which in turn implies defining and assessing temporal and spatial criteria. Migration can be permanent, if a person never return to his or her place of origin, or long term if a person moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence.

**A short-term migrant** is defined as a person moving to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least 3 months but less than a year (12 months), and often is the status of a person who moves from one region to another in accordance to the seasons. However, if a person moves to a new country for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends and relatives, business, medical treatment, or religious pilgrimages, he or she is not considered a migrant.[8] In terms of space patterns, migration can imply the movement from one country to another (international migration), or movement within a country (internal migration, particularly between rural and urban areas), or movement transnationally if migrants "forge and sustain multi-stranded relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement".[9]

**The Conventions on:**
**The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women:** Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, discrimination against women is prohibited and States are obliged to eliminate discrimination against women. There are 189 States parties to the Convention, which includes obligations to suppress trafficking in women (art. 6); grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain nationality (art. 9); eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment (art. 11); eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care and ensure access to health-care services, including those related to family planning and maternal care (art. 12); and accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile (art. 15 (4).[10]

**The Rights of the Child:** The principle of non-discrimination is codified in article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In joint general comment No. 3 (2017) of the Committee on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families and No. 22 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration, both Committees gave their interpretation of the application of the non-discrimination principle in the context of international migration. The non-discrimination principle in the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that States parties should respect and ensure the rights set forth in the Convention for all children, whether they are considered, inter alia, migrants in regular or irregular situations, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless or victims of trafficking, including in situations of return or deportation to their country of origin, irrespective of their or their parents' or legal guardians' nationality, migration status or statelessness.[11]

**Migration channels and specific challenges while migrating**
Until recently, women were thought to migrate primarily to join a partner or for family reunification. Today, an increasing number of women are moving on their own,[12] notably to find work, which is leading to a so-called feminization of migration. While the way in which women are migrating is changing, more women are also likely to be the lead migrant, that is, the first member of the family to migrate. Highly skilled women are more likely to migrate on their own than low-skilled women.[13]Some women, however, still face difficulties in leaving their countries because of prohibitive, gender-specific discriminatory laws or restrictive social norms. Those measures can push them to migrate through irregular channels[14] which is more common when coupled with institutional failures to address the obstacles, as well as insufficient information on the migration process and a low level of education. It should be noted here that a network of migrant women in their countries of origin, or previous experience of women's migration, can help to stimulate migration. Social networks, as a set of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin, transit and destination countries through kinship, friendship or a shared community of origin, can prompt rural women to migrate across borders.

In countries of destination, regardless of their migratory status, migrant women encounter multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, not only as women and as migrants, but also on other grounds, including age, race and ethnicity, nationality, religion, marital and family status, sexual orientation and gender identity. As a result, they are at risk of abuse and exploitation. It is well

documented that migrant women in general struggle in many countries to have their credentials recognized, which leads to "deskilling" as a result of being underemployed.[15]

**Migration and socio-cultural gender norms**
The migration of women may amend the social and gender norms both for migrants themselves and for their home communities. It may influence their home communities to adopt more equitable norms with regard to education, reproductive rights, marriage and the organization of families and communities.[16]The migration of women has the potential to contribute to a reformulation of gender roles and cultural norms, and may improve women's autonomy, self-esteem and social standing.[17] For example, in one study, South Asian migrant women reportedly used their increased decision- making power to direct their remittances to health care and education for their families.[18]

**Migration and economic empowerment of women**
In his opening remarks at the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the Secretary-General emphasized how important migration was for the functioning of economies, as migrants performed vital roles, such as in health care and care for elderly persons.[19] Migration can fill critical gaps in labour markets in countries of destination, with a positive impact on employment, production and the country's gross domestic product. It is important to note that the migration of women also leaves gaps in their countries of origin. In 2011, the World Bank pointed out that physicians and nurses were the professionals that migrated most often than other classes of professionals.[20]It is therefore not surprising that according to one study; sub-Saharan countries are experiencing a shortage of 600,000 nurses. It was found in another study that from 1999 to 2001, 60 per cent of registered nurses left tertiary hospitals in Malawi, likely to migrate. As a result, 64 per cent of nursing positions (heavily dominated by women) remain unfilled, with medical centres operating with no nurses or with employees who have as little as 10 weeks of medical training.[21]

**The Impact of Migration on:**
**Children in general:** In order to formulate policy recommendations that enhance children's welfare, there is a need for reliable data that allow the assessment of positive and negative effects of migration. UNICEF, in collaboration with UNDP and the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation (SU-SSC), has initiated policy research and operational work in six countries (Ecuador, Albania, Moldova,

Philippines, Mexico, Morocco) on the impact of migration on women and children left behind. Some preliminary results from country-level studies and a review of current literature highlight the magnitude of the impact of migration on families.

According to a report by (Save the Children, 2006), around 1 million Sri Lankan children are left behind by their mothers, who migrate in search of work. In the Philippines, it is estimated that between 8.8 and 9 million children, or around 27% of all minors in the country, live separated from one or both parents. In Moldova, a study estimated that 31% of children aged 0-14 have been left behind by one parent and 5.4% by both parents.[22] In 2002, 13% of Mexican and almost 22% of Salvadoran immigrants living in the U.S had children left behind in their home countries.[23]

**Children left behind:** The social cost of migration can be very high, particularly due to the lack of parental care. Children left behind inevitably grow up in single-headed families (if only one parent is migrating), or with grandparents and other relatives (if both of the parents are migrating), filling the vacuum left by migrant parents. Negative effects can be exacerbated if long term migration of one of the parents may lead to permanent disruption of family unity. Absence of men can create material and psychological insecurity, leading mothers (or children when both the parents are migrating) to pressures and negotiations with wider family members. Migrants may start having "dual families" relationships: one in the country of origin and one in the country of destination; this phenomenon may actually reduce the amount of remittances sent home.[24] However it is important to stress the fact that children left behind are not orphans and most of them do keep some sort of contact with their migrant parents.

The impact of the absence of one of the parents on children can be mediated by an extended family safety net, which is an effective response to economic and social crises, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. For this reason, children in left-behind households do not appear to suffer greater social or economic problems than their peers in non-remittance-receiving households, with the exception of younger children.[25] However, care by the extended family, or community or institutional care, often does not provide as much protection from abuse and exploitation as parental care.

**Children's health:** The effects of migration on child health are contested and complex. Whereas on the one hand, migration itself poses significant hazards to children and their health, movement to a destination country also can increase access to health care. Moving to countries or regions with better health services will have a positive impact on children. Migrant children moving from a rural area to the urban area are more likely to survive due to a greater number of hospitals and doctors, improved infrastructure including potable water, flush toilets, and refrigeration, and better health information (prompting cleaner food preparation and storage and improved hygiene practices).

Health benefits of migration, due to access to better health services and information, are sharply contrasted with the inherent health risks to moving in the first place. According to Whitehead and Hashim, child health is often directly associated with the type of work child migrants find, whether it be abusive work, sex work, hazardous work in the informal economy, or physically beyond the child's capacities.[26] The working conditions, if illegal (i.e. prostitution) may also prevent child access to health care if there is a fear of raid, discovery, or deportation.

Finally migrant may face serious difficulties in accessing health services if based on a registered residence system. In China, for example, migrants may face a lack of adequate health care for a variety of reasons: caretaker lack of knowledge, both in terms of prevention and access to care; passive attention to disease; poor economic situations. These factors lead to higher child mortality rates among migrants.[27]

**Education and economic activity of migrant children**
Migration may also have a negative impact on education attainment of children. Children of migrant workers and children migrating alone face serious exclusion from education due to social and cultural isolation, strenuous and hazardous work, extreme poverty, poor health conditions and language barriers. Children may leave the household of origin with the objective of performing economic activities that may keep them out of school. Comparing education achievement between migrants and non-migrant children in a given country may be misleading in assessing the impact of migration on migrant children. In order to measure how and whether the decision to migrate has increased school attainment, it will be necessary to compare levels with children of the same age group in the country of origin, and not the population of children in the country of destination.[28]

Children who migrate may end up in being involved in economic activities as a specific decision (work migration) or as a result of the conditions, need and opportunities in destination countries. Regardless of the extensive literature on child work, disproportionately focused on children who work in the worst form of child labour (i.e. trafficked jobs, prostitution), there is a lack of quantitative research looking specifically at economic activity patterns of migrant children. Child migrant workers have a variety of experiences due to a complex set of factors, and often one child will have a mixture of positive and negative experiences.[29] Negative effects may include exploitation, poor working conditions, physical, verbal, or sexual abuse from employers and foregone access to school.

**Psycho-social:** Migration may have psycho-social impacts on children due to the experience moving from the country of origin to the country of destination, and also due to exclusion and marginalization in countries of destination. Leaving their communities, migrant children lose contact with their family and friends, as well as lose customs and traditions. At the same time, coming into a new community, they may be required to become accustomed to new language, culture and lifestyle.[30] Even if children may adapt to new contexts more quickly than adults, this may generate conflict with parent or other members of same migrant group. As in the cases of health and education, the psycho-social impact of migration varied greatly depending on specific characteristics of the migrant group and its receiving country, as well as other methodological factors such as variance in data collection.

**Children in Host Countries:** Children of migrants face challenges in adapting to host societies. They stand a greater risk of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and juvenile crime; they get exposed to incomplete citizenship rights and therefore, may have difficult access to social services which may also lead to the danger of social exclusion.

**Ensure respect for the rights of migrant women and children**
In order to ensure the rights of migrant women and children, the following steps should be aggressively taken:

(a) Promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and children in efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

(b) Ensure that the implementation, review and follow-up of the Global Compact for Migration is human rights-based, gender-responsive and child-sensitive;

(c) Formulate human rights-based, gender-responsive and child-sensitive policies to govern migration that promote gender equality and non-discrimination;

(d) Increase avenues for regular migration, where migrants, including women and children, can make informed choices and have access to legal protection, services and social networks in countries of origin, transit and destination;

(e) Revise national laws and regulations governing migration to make them more gender-responsive by including provisions on anti-discrimination, equality between men and women, mandatory health insurance for migrant workers at all levels and special protection for vulnerable categories of workers, including domestic workers;

(f) Take measures to ensure that family reunion policies are applicable to women migrant workers at all levels, including domestic workers, in order to enable their spouses and children to join them in their country of destination;

(g) Involve migrant women and relevant civil society organizations in the formulation, implementation and review of policies and regulations governing migration to ensure that the specific needs of migrant women and children are addressed;

(h) Provide pre-departure orientation training specific to migrant women, which should include information on their human rights, potential methods of exploitation and available complaint mechanisms; and make financial literacy programmes available to migrant women to enable them to better manage their earnings;

(i) Ensure the provision of basic services as enshrined in international human rights law, so that citizens do not have to rely on remittances to compensate for the absence of affordable, accessible, publicly funded services and social protection;

(j) Ensure the provision of human rights-based, gender-responsive and child-sensitive reintegration programmes for migrants who return to their countries of

origin, and more specifically, ensure that economic, sociocultural and psychosocial support is provided to returnee migrants and communities in their countries of origin prior, during and after their return;

(k) Provide gender-sensitive human rights training to immigration officials, border police, social workers, health-care providers, educators, judicial officers and media workers to raise their awareness of the human rights of migrant women and children;

(l) Take all measures necessary to prevent, investigate, prosecute and sanction human rights violations and abuse against migrant women and children, whether perpetrated by public officials or private individuals;

(m) Guarantee adequate recognition of foreign qualifications and skills to ensure that migrant women do not become underemployed or "deskilled", and to ensure that their professional experience and skills are fully recognized;

(n) Lift sex-specific bans and discriminatory restrictions on the migration of women, whether they are based on age, pregnancy or marital or maternity status, and particularly restrictions that require women or children to obtain permission from male family members in order to travel;

(o) Strengthen State oversight and monitoring of private recruitment agencies and brokers to ensure that overseas employment programmes and work permits are administered in a manner that respects gender equality and the rights of migrant women;

(p) Ensure that migrant women have equal access to legal remedies and complaint mechanisms, and provide legal, vocational, medical and psychological assistance to victims of trafficking, particularly female victims;

(q) Ensure that migrant women and children have access to education, social protection, health care, including reproductive health care, and other basic services;

(r) Establish firewalls between public service providers and immigration authorities to allow access to justice for migrant women and girls without fear of being reported, detained or deported;

(s) Invest in and support the capacity of national agencies to collect and use sex- and age-disaggregated data on migrants regardless of their migratory status, and support research initiatives to better understand the impact of migration on women and children;

(t) Conduct awareness-raising campaigns to better uphold the dignity of migrant women and children, and to highlight their social and economic contributions to society;

(u) Include the protection of the rights of migrant women and children on the agenda of intergovernmental dialogues on migration-related issues at the global, regional and bilateral levels.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Migrant women, who comprise half of the total migrant population in the world, provide important social and economic contributions to their countries of origin and destination. For many women and children, migration provides opportunities for their economic and social development. Migration experiences can contribute to the empowerment of women and girls by increasing their self-confidence, autonomy and control over their lives. Their exposure to different gender norms may contribute to the achievement of gender equality in their societies of origin. However, circumstances such as discriminatory social and cultural norms and policies have contributed to the specific vulnerabilities of migrant women and children. Many are disproportionately affected by gender-based discrimination, abuse and violations of their rights during migration. A limited understanding of the realities faced by migrant women and children affects the ability of States to formulate and implement gender-responsive migration laws, policies and programmes, and ensure that women and children can enjoy their human rights throughout their migration journey.

We conclude this discourse on the impacts of migration on women and children with the following recommendations:

1. Children and adolescents must matter in migration policies and debates. Children and adolescents affected by migration are particularly vulnerable and should receive special protection.
2. To increase the visibility of children in policy agendas, more research and comparable global data on how children are affected by migration are needed. *ƒ*

3. Policy and programme interventions should aim at maximizing the benefits of remittances and limiting the negative effects of migration on children and families left behind.
4. Governments, international organizations, and civil society stakeholders must collaborate (a) to advocate for the rights of children and women affected by migration, (b) to monitor and gather information on the well-being of children in migrant communities and (c) to promote awareness in sending migrants to host societies so that the risks of discrimination and social exclusion are reduced.

## Endnotes

1. International Migration Report 2017 (Highlights), United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.XIII.4)
2. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
3. International Migration Policy Programme, Meeting the Challenges of Migration: Progress since the ICPD (2004), p. 13.
4. The impact of migration on migrant women and girls: a gender perspective: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants (A/HRC/41/38) (EN/AR/RU)
5. The lack of disaggregated data specifying 0-18 as an age group includes international statistics that should follow the definition in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
6. *Ibid*.
7. In the 1976 recommendation, a migrant was defined as person who has entered a country with the intention of remaining for more than one year and who either must never have been in that country continuously for more than one year or, having been in the country at least once continuously for more than one year, must have been away continuously for more than one year since the last stay of more than one involved (United Nations, 1998)
8. *Ibid*.
9. www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-12-10/remarks-intergovernmental-conferenceadopt-the-global-compact-for-migration
10. Nicola Piper, ed., New Perspectives on Gender and Migration: Livelihood, Rights and Entitlements, Oxon: Routledge, 2007, pp. 1–2.
11. See also Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 6 (2005) on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, paragraph 12.

12. Alyson L., Dimmit Gnam, "Mexico's missed opportunities to protect irregular women trans migrants: applying a gender lens to migration law reform" in Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal, vol. 22, No. 3 (2013), pp. 713–749.
13. O'Neil, Fleury and Foresti, "Women on the move", p. 9.
14. Bandita Sijapati, "Women's labour migration from Asia and the Pacific: opportunities and challenges", IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and Migration Policy Institute, 2015, p. 8.
15. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Global Education Monitoring Report Team, "The intersections between education, migration and displacement are not gender-neutral", document ED/GEM/MRT/2019/WP1, p. 4.)
16. O'Neil, Fleury and Foresti, "Women on the move", p. 5.
17. Rita Afsar, "Contextualizing gender and migration in South Asia: critical insights" in Gender, Technology and Development, vol. 15, No. 3 (2011), pp. 389–410.
18. www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-12-10/remarks-intergovernmental-conferenceadopt-the-global-compact-for-migration
19. Camilla Spadavecchia, "Migration of women from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe", p. 108.
20. *Ibid.*
21. UNICEF Moldova / SU-SSC, 2006)
22. Cortina & de la Garza, 2004)
23. Nyiri and Saveliev 2002
24. In the available policy literature on development, the term "children left behind" is sometime also used to refer to children orphans due to HIV/AIDS.
25. Whitehead and Hashim (2005)
26. Beijing Health Bureau's (2007).
27. The effect of a lack of parental care on children has been addressed in detail in a series of recent studies looking at the conditions of the large number of children orphans due to HIV/AIDS, and some of the policy concerns and interventions are similar to the ones developed for of abandoned children or orphans.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Camilla Spadavecchia, "Migration of women from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe", p. 108.

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