

Gender and the contemporary migrant journey

July 2015

Summary

From the 30 June – 2 July 2015 a group of researchers, policy analysis and civil society representatives met in Singapore to debate and discuss how gender roles and expectations influence the factors leading to migration, male and female migrants' different experiences of migration and its impact on migrants, their families and communities. Our analysis does not equate gender with women and girls but aims to unpack how changes to occupational niches and flows of female migrants shape relationships with employers, families and friends, how they shape society and change our notions of gender and age appropriate behaviour. This conference was also an important opportunity to see men and boys as gendered persons.

This brief provides a summary of some of the ways that gender shapes and is shaped by contemporary migrant journeys. Our work focusses on migration within low- and middle-income countries as a strategy to overcome poverty and build a brighter future for migrants, their families and their communities.

Gender as a driver of migration

There is a prevailing narrative that migration drives changes in gender norms as people are exposed to new ways of understanding and living outside their countries of origin. However speakers also talked about the ways in which gender drives migration, in that gender norms affect who migrates and how labour is structured inside and outside the family. Some speakers noted the increase in women migrating and suggested that this is a by-product of the feminisation of poverty. However, other speakers highlighted that gender norms are highly situated in time and space. Thus women's migration may also be an outcome of changes in the organisation of local livelihoods, new mobilities and openings in the labour market. A historical view of the intersection of gender and economics provides rich insights into migration patterns.

Deirdre McKay explained how the Philippine economy is supported by gendered migration – it is part of the fabric of society – with 10-12% of the population outside the country for work. In part this is a by-product of the green revolution. New varieties of rice and associated pesticides altered patterns of planting, harvesting and rice pounding which had previously been done by women. Over time farming became men's work and the time that was freed up for women's labour meant that migration, with its high rate of return, became more attractive.

Binitha Thampi and Panchali Ray both explored the ways in which changing labour markets and education have reconfigured migratory moves of Indian women. New openings in national and international labour markets deepen differences among women who migrate. Those with higher education enter into destinations and occupations that afford them more opportunities and higher incomes while those with less education find work in sectors with less scope for upward mobility.



Credit: Benjamin Zeitlyn

Seeing men as gendered persons tends to foreground migration as a perceived remedy for the failure to meet societal expectations of providing material well-being for the family. The main driver for migration, then, is poverty. Yet, notes Matthew Maycock, acting upon poverty is not an intrinsic character of all societies. His study of the Kamaiya - a group of former bonded labourers in Nepal – shows that once they were free, they had to learn how to be unemployed and how to be poor. As for other Nepalis, migration became one way of contending with precarity and 'successful' migration (that generated wealth and remittances) became bound up with the notion of the performance of being a man.

The migrant industry creates gender norms

Source countries are linked with migrant destinations in all manner of ways. It is useful to view the two together. Malini Sur suggested that the state, employers and the migration industry work in concert to produce workers and cheap labour. This can lead to the gendered commodification of labour, differential pricing and changes in law and policy as power relations are played out between countries.

At the conference we also heard how gender shapes the regulations and policies which structure people's migration opportunities and the intermediaries in the migration process who provide employment options. Igor Bosc explained how many South Asian countries have gender and education bans, particularly for domestic workers. For example in Nepal there's a ban that prevents domestic workers below 30 years of age working in the Gulf. The purpose of this ban is supposedly to protect women from abuse overseas. However, these policies and regulations can inadvertently increase vulnerability, for example Nepali women are migrating through India which is riskier.

Intermediaries in the migration process

In her study of recruitment practices in South Asia, Katharine Jones explored the gendered workings of agencies recruiting domestic workers for Jordan and Lebanon. Agencies do not only mediate between workers and employers but are also in the business of creating a 'cheap and compliant' workforce. Advertising and the bio-data forms that employers peruse to choose a worker reinforce this notion. Recruiters advise customers not to get a worker with experience and social networks which would make her 'harder to control'. If women are not compliant they play a role in disciplining them through the confiscation of phones, threats and intimidation and imprisonment. She argues that there is a built-in incentive to control women in structures and legal processes employed in recruitment.

Beyond recruitment agencies we also heard about other international organisations that act as intermediaries influencing the migration process. Stanford T. Mahati's research found that humanitarian workers used conflicting discourses about young women who had crossed the border

from Zimbabwe to South Africa. Their migration was thought to be positive and empowering, yet their desire to work was opposed using a discourse about child labour and the need to protect them against abuse and exploitation.

This is not the only way in which the non-governmental sector influenced migration options. In line with current academic debates Kuda Vanyoro pointed out that anti-trafficking discourses have been used by non-governmental organisations to mobilise their own political economy. Bandana Pattanaik added that the bluff of the anti-trafficking agenda is that protection frameworks are being used by states as a tool to justify more restrictions on migration and the closure of borders whilst not acknowledging women's agency in their decisions to move for work.

A much more informal set of intermediaries that has slid into the shadow of recruitment agencies, anti-trafficking discourses and state politics to benefit from the 'export' of labour power, emerged in Thao Thi Thanh Dang's study with young rural-urban migrants in Vietnam. Upon arrival in Hanoi, all the young men entered the labour market with the help of male friends and relatives whereas the young women primarily found work through female friends, relatives and employment brokers, suggesting that informal networks are highly gendered.

Labour is shaped by gender

We heard that patriarchal structures push women and men into particular niches in the labour market. There are national and transnational hierarchies of employment possibilities where intersectionalities of age, gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity/race and religion come into play.

Research presented by Joseph Teye on migration for domestic work within Ghana highlighted how male domestic workers are mainly gardeners, drivers and security men, who receive regular wages. Women performed multiple tasks, including cooking, cleaning, caring for children and were more likely to live with their employer and work without a regular salary. There were instances of exploitation for both men and women working in this sector, but the men had a stronger agency to negotiate better conditions of work and remuneration than their female counterparts. However for the Philippine domestic workers in the UK in Deirdre McKay's study, irregular domestic and care work was found to be more lucrative and flexible than work in formal occupations such as nursing. This finding draws attention to the importance of interrogating closely the merits and demerits of seemingly stereotypically gendered occupations to understand occupational mobility and what lies behind such mobility. As the migrants settle for shorter or longer time their understanding of the purpose of migration and what constitutes success alters.

The gender segregated labour market also has a profound effect on workers' bodies and identities. Binitha Thampi pointed out that migrant women from Northeast India had comparative advantage over local women in gaining employment in beauty and personal care (Chennai) and hospitality, retail and front desk work (Banga-

lore) due to their physical (ethnic) features. However, to retain the advantage migrant women have to work on their own bodies and observe specific forms of behaviour to fit into the expectations of them in a consumer-based, body fixed environment. The aesthetics surrounding labour impacted the employees' social life. On the one hand they were perceived as too unrestrained in the local community, on the other hand their working hours and, in some occupations, a demand of working in silence, barred them from social interactions.

In China, male service workers are also subject to work induced constraints. The rural migrants working as taxi drivers interviewed by Susanne Y. Choi had to abide by state regulation to conform to the state's definition of modernity. Apart from a particular dress code, regulating the sector has resulted in the concentration of taxis in the hands of a few companies from which the drivers must hire their car. This centralisation has eroded the taxi drivers' income to the point of breakage, as it has become increasingly difficult for them to fulfil the moral economy of the family stipulating that men support their children first, then their parents. Having to make choices about who they support with their meagre earnings, taxi drivers' manhood is shaken.

Gendered precarity

Many presentations touched upon the fact that poverty pushes migrants to do jobs that would bring shame on their families if they did them at home. Trond Waage's film 'Les Mairuwas' visualised the dynamics both among migrants from the Central African Republic doing lowly paid, degrading work in northern Cameroon and between the migrants and the local population. Historicising the relations between locals of Fulani descent and migrants (strangers), Waage drew attention to how slavery that was the norm up until the country became independent shaped contemporary relationships. The young migrants survived by delivering water from a communal tap to houses in the neighbourhood but the handcarts on which their work depended were owned by local Fulani women who used the word slave when talking about the men working for them. Men's performance of masculinity differed depending on whether they were among their peers or the Fulani.



Many migrants perform their work in situations of precarity and what Maria Platt called 'unfreedom' which is gendered. Her analysis of temporary migrants in Singapore was that debt-financed migration creates greater insecurity. But that debt needs to be seen through lens of temporality and read within the context of migrant's past experiences and future life plans. In fact debt can be a strategy for upward mobility in the complex environment that migrants are negotiating. She found that men and women's debt pathways differed with women rarely paying upfront fees whilst men often did and sold assets and borrowed to do so. Men's loans were at home whereas in the case of women loans for paying travel costs were paid off directly to the employer or the recruitment agency at the beginning of the employment. Once women's debts were paid they were freer to change employers. Men were typically dependent on employers for daily work.

Anja Wessels' research within Singapore discovered that one in five of the 670 domestic workers that they surveyed had mental health issues, which is higher than the general population. Some of the causes of this included discrimination against women and migrants and a lack of education, particularly in relation to language skills. A lack of health coverage for mental health issues meant that these workers were reliant on the voluntary sector for support and services.

Remittances

Given their importance to some national economies and many migrant households remittances were a big theme of the conference. Who sends money home, to whom, and how much were all discussed. Patience Mutopo explained that in Zimbabwe men remitted more than women while women tended to remit soft goods. Social networks, especially religious and totemic ones, were seen as implicated in influencing remittance sending patterns and gendered more towards women. Rozana Rashid's work in Bangladesh demonstrated that remittance behaviour is mediated by social relations based on factors such as trust. Tendency to remit money is higher among women and female migrants sent more than men. This was done through social networks of sending bulk money with co-workers. Migrant women who challenged gender roles come to be seen by the society in negative terms. However, men's position was not often challenged as they retain their power by taking control over remittances sent by wives abroad. Sallie Yea reminded us that remittances have a non-material form and symbolic value which are embedded in social and moral codes.

Pamungkas A. Dewanto explained how the Indonesian state constructs the notion of the 'Pahlawan Devisa' or Remittance Hero. This is one example of how migration can raise the social standing (of women). Yet this is not always the case, Ishret Binte Wahid's presentation on female Bangladeshi migrants to Gulf States demonstrated that their employment or access to formal paid work does not necessarily change their position either in family or society. Migrants were doing the same household chores that they did at home whilst experiencing more patriarchal forms of gender relation in destinations where women always wear the

burka and there are other gendered religious restrictions on women's behaviour. Demonstrating piety was a way of avoiding the negative judgements of their home communities.

Migrant family life

The challenges of keeping up family relationships when separated arose in many presentations at the conference. Dipesh Kharel's film *When Ram Left Home*, of a Nepali migrant man who went to work as a chef in Japan, illustrated the difficulties experienced by his family in coping with a \$20,000 debt, quarrels between his wife and her in-laws about her alleged infidelity, and her worries that Ram is unfaithful to her. Deirdre McKay's work showed how among Philippine migrants and their families money, gifts and information are moving around mediated by information communication technologies. For example mothers overseas are with their children at the big and small moments in life using snap chat and Facebook. Whilst from home social media is used to point out absences, inadequacies and missed obligations.

McKay's work also highlighted tensions between mothers and their children. Children receive remitted allowances and gifts and they have a distinct cultural capital. As a result of remittances the family in the Philippines can become middle class yet the migrant will remember being working class at home and live very simply in the UK.

Maycock's work also spoke to issues of performing upwards mobility. Nepali migrants pointed to the importance of having visibly branded clothes and on their return home being able to take everybody out and buy bottled beers rather than local alcohol. Some took on more debt from the moneylender to facilitate these actions.

Closing messages

- While both recruitment and labour practices attract attention it is also important to interrogate the gendered aspects of the immigration process, which is situated within a wider political economy
- Gender impacts on masculinities – both in terms of the migrant and men who are left behind – keeping up the performance of masculinity can cause stresses and strains, financial and emotional
- The relationship between women's empowerment, migration, and remittances is not straightforward and requires further analysis
- Gender intersects with other axes of inequality such as age, caste, class, ethnicity and a rich and nuanced understanding of this should inform our research and policy development
- As a result of an often hostile social, political, and economic environment, many migrants, especially those engaged in illegal activity such as sex work, the sale of illicit drugs and counterfeits, choose to remain hidden and as a result are often under-represented in research and policy
- There is a need for large scale economic and other surveys to inform our knowledge base. However ethnographies, visual, and participatory methodologies can bring to light a richer picture of migrant lives than traditional research methods alone

Read more:

Storify that summarises social media content from the meeting <https://storify.com/MigrationRPC/gendered-dimensions-of-migration-material-and-soci>

PowerPoint presentations from the conference <http://www.slideshare.net/MOOPCOMMS>

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