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**(Women in International Migration: The Context of Exit and Entry for
Empowerment and Exploitation)**

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**Women in International Migration: The Context of Exit and Entry for Empowerment and Exploitation**

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## Introduction

In most places throughout the word, the term "migrant" conjures images of men, while the phrase, "migrants and their families" introduces women and children into the picture. Yet, statistics show that half of all migrants globally are female and studies document that women are active participants in migration, both within and between countries.

However, active participation and statistical equality do not mean that conditions eliciting migration are the same for women and men or that woman face the same circumstances and experiences as men in migrating and in settlement. Migration is in fact highly gendered. Stating that a process or outcome is gendered calls attention to the fact that gender is a core organizing principle of social relations. Gender exists in the societal expectations of the appropriate social roles and behaviors for women and men; gender is shown by practices as well as beliefs found in economic, political, social and cultural institutions that differentiate between men and women. One implication is that seemingly gender neutral phenomena associated with migration, such as exit, entry and experiences in countries of destination are in fact gendered and produce different propensities for migration as well as different outcomes for women and men (Boyd, 2004).

To say that migration is gendered also can imply the existence of gender inequalities at exit, entry and in experiences. Closely intertwined with gender as a core organizing principle of life are asymmetrical relations of power between men and women, where power is defined as the capacity to control, or influence others regardless of the resistance offered by others. These asymmetries exist in social relations between individuals but they also are embedded in societal institutions ranging from families, education, the economy, law and politics. The consequences are often unequal access to resources, diminished social and economic status, vulnerability to abuse and violence, and reduced life chances for women compared to men. Gender inequalities that disadvantage women more than men and opportunities that offer empowerment can be powerful motives for migration. Similarly gendered migration policies or gendered inequalities in destination countries may exert greater negative impacts on migrant women compared to migrant men while gender-informed policy may promote gender equal outcomes.

What, then, are the gendered conditions of exit and entry that are associated with empowerment and equality or with the exploitation of migrant women and men? Recent country specific studies as well as broad surveys offer examples (see: Asis, 2004; Boyd

and Pikkov, 2005; Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Kofman et. al. 2000; Piper, 2005; United Nations, 2005). This paper addresses the question through a gender analysis that outlines the influence of structural, familial and individual factors. As noted elsewhere (Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Boyd and Grieco, 2003) gender differences and their opportunities for empowerment or the risk of exploitation frequently arise from the subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men in both sending and receiving communities. These subordinate statuses, however, occur with the larger contexts of economic and social development that influence migration flows in general. Together, poverty and gender inequality are strong determinants of the propensity to migrate, the type of migration and the consequences of migration for women.

**Conditions of Exit**

The phrase "feminization of migration" refers to the gradual increases in the percentages of migrants that are female (Castles and Miller, 2001; Migration Policy Institute, 2003). However, the feminization of migration is associated with the "feminization of poverty." Recent discussions of economic change note the following contemporary challenges that can exist in developing countries: structural change including the transformation of the agriculture industry, the demise of small locally owned industries and/or the introduction of new industries by multinational corporations; rising male unemployment due to the loss of traditional sites of employment; and increasing international debt load accompanied by government need to generate foreign currency. Researchers suggest that growing insecurities cause states, households and individuals to increasingly rely on women's labor for their survival, a phenomenon that has been referred to as the "feminization of survival" (Sassen 2000).

If the "feminization of survival" is associated with the "feminization of migration," under what conditions does the latter occur and what forms does it take? First and foremost, the status of women relative to men and the level of gender equality within sending societies and within families are critical factors stimulating or retarding the migration of women compared with men and the conditions under which migration occurs. Gender specific propensities to migrate reflect access to information, access to resources, and societal beliefs about appropriate behaviors of women and men. If men control the decision making processes, have greater access to resources, and to information, they may be more likely to migrate than women. A male dominated migration pattern also is enhanced when strong gender scripts exist that deny women agency and autonomy in decision making and in actions. Different gender specific propensities to migrate also may reflect differences in "human capital," defined as job related skills that arise from education and labor market experience. If women face greater barriers than men in receiving education and/or in enhancing labor market relevant skills, the perceived and real payoff for migration may be less, thus reducing their propensity to migrate.

In actuality, the impact of women's status and gender equality on their propensity to migrate operates at three different levels: the larger society, the family and the individual (Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Lim, 1995). Societal factors include the following three traits: the capacity of the state to protect its members and their livelihoods; state policy toward migration; and community norms and cultural values that determine whether or not women can migrate and, if they can, how (i.e. labor or family reunification) and with

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whom (alone or with family). In the first case, migration is often an involuntary option for those living in areas characterized by war, political strife, and governmental incapacity to protect individuals and their livelihoods. Many of those in flight-situations, monitored by the UNHCR, are women and children. Loss of livelihood, either by women themselves or by family member also is linked to the risk of being trafficked for sex, forced labor, begging or the provision of body parts.

When which migrants are viewed as valuable exports that stimulate remittances, state policies often encourage out-migration. But these policies impact differently on the likelihoods of male and female migration. Policies reflect existing beliefs and practices about appropriate behavior of women in the countries of origin, and they often respond to gender specific labor demands by destination countries. For example, beliefs that sexualize single women may act as deterrents to women migrating alone without family members; but they also may induce marginalized women to migrate. On the other hand, long standing patterns of female migration may both normalize the continued migration of women, as has happened in with respect to domestics and nurses from the Philippines. As a result, country specific patterns in the migration of women are likely, particularly when labor migration exists; workers from one country may be largely men (for example the past migration of Bangladesh men to the oil fields of the Middle East), while those from other countries may be primarily women (for example, Filipina domestics migrating to countries as diverse as Italy, Singapore, Israel and Canada).
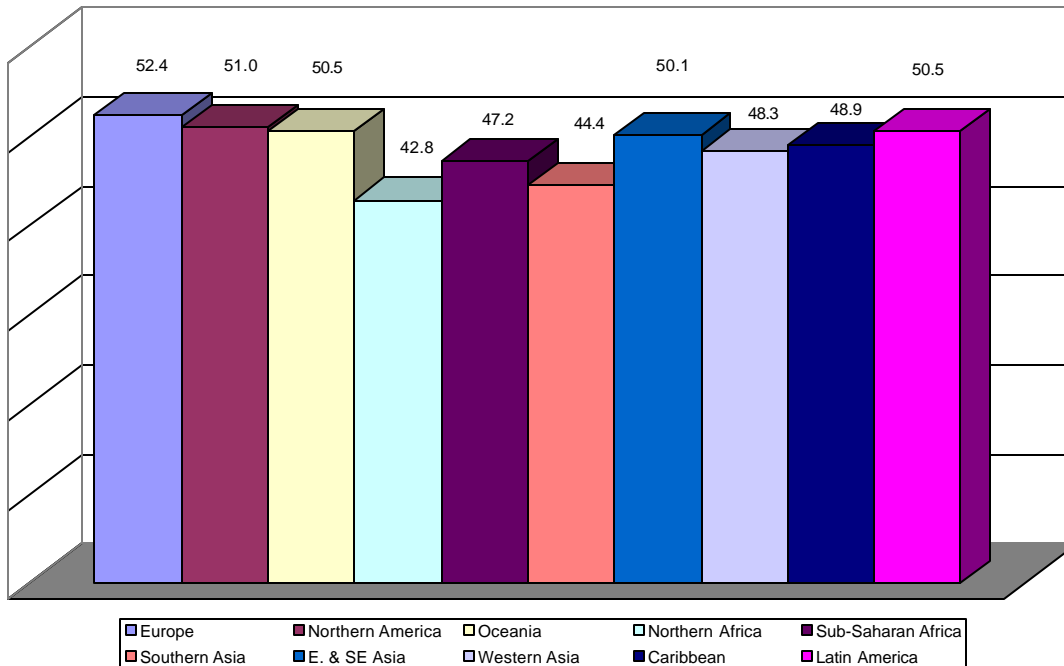
In addition to state policies and cultural beliefs and practices about women, the family or household is particularly significant for the study of female migration for three reasons. First, male and female roles are defined, practiced and re-enforced within families and households. Second, these roles and related behaviors and beliefs about men and women are arranged hierarchically within families and households with senior men often having greater access to resources and greater control over their own lives. And third, families and households provide settings in which migration motivations and values are shaped, human capital is accrued, information is received and decisions are put into operation. In sum, family and household contexts are significant because they determines a woman's position relative to other family members and influence her ability to make decisions autonomously, to contribute to the total decision-making process and to access familial-based resources for purposes of migration (Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Lim, 1995).

Although families and households are sites that shape the status of women and their propensities to migrate, individual characteristics of women (and men) influence migration propensities. These characteristics include age, birth order, race/ethnicity, urban/rural origins, marital status (single, married, divorced, widowed), reproductive status (children or no children), role in the family (wife, daughter, mother), position in family (authoritative or subordinate), educational status, occupational skills/training, labor force experience, and class position (Grieco and Boyd, 1998; Lim, 1995; Tienda and Booth, 1991; UN, 1994). Many of these characteristics bear the imprint of societal and familial treatment of women. Feminists and demographers note that gender scripts which deny educating women and treating them as equal partners in economic, political and legal spheres often go hand in hand with restricting female roles to reproductive and domestic spheres. Such conditions may suppress the migration of women relative to that of men.

Although gender (in)equality provides a powerful context in sending societies for gender based migration, the interaction between the three levels influencing the status of women mean that the propensity of women to migrate cannot be neatly polarized into low levels where women's status is low and high levels where women's status is high. In the first place, women may have strong motivations for migrating under conditions where gender inequality is high. In such circumstances migration may be viewed as empowering, as allowing women (and men) to gain greater control over their lives and to make decisions and take action over issues that are important to them. Secondly, in some circumstances, even when female statuses are low, women may be migrants if they accompany or subsequently join male family members who migrate; in such situations their status within the family may be unaltered but they will be participants in the migration process. And third, in some settings, women rather than men will be more likely to migrate, either because they are perceived to be more reliable in sending remittances to family members remaining behind and/or because of high labor demand for "female" stereotyped skills such as care giving and nursing. Although circumstances underlying the migration of women around the world vary greatly, the end result is that is that women from countries around the world have a formidable presence in migration (United Nations, 2005; Zlotnik, 2003).

Chart 1 shows that females represent between 43 to 52 percent of international migrants by region. It is worth noting that females represent more than 50 percent of migrants to North America, Europe and Asia; this over-representation reflects many factors including the presence of daughters, wives and widows in family flows and the autonomous migration of women as workers. In other regions, particularly Northern Africa and South Asia, males predominate.

**Chart 1: Percent of females among international migrations by region, 2000 (Zlotnik, 2003)**



Chart data labels: 52.4, 51.0, 50.5, 42.8, 47.2, 44.4, 50.1, 48.3, 48.9, 50.5

Legend:
- Europe
- Northern America
- Oceania
- Northern Africa
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Southern Asia
- E. & SE Asia
- Western Asia
- Caribbean
- Latin America

The complexity of factors determining the migration of women raises two questions pertinent to the topic of women migrants: 1) what are the mechanisms for ensuring that migration decisions are empowering for women; and 2) what happens to the women who migrate. With respect to the first question, two factors – development and gender equality – are key levers of change. Historical examples based on migratory flows to traditional countries of settlement (North America, Australian, New Zealand) indicate that development brings with it disincentives for the out-migration of both women and men. As well, growing gender equality may afford women greater opportunities in their own societies. Such opportunities may reduce the need for migration for economic reasons while simultaneously giving women great autonomy and capacity in the migration decision making processes.

Overall, both development and growing gender equality should reduce the propensities of women (and men) to migrate in the long run. In the short term however, growing development and improvements in gender equality may stimulate migration – a phenomenon known as the migration hump. The phrase "migration hump" captures comparatively low levels of migrating at very early stages of development in part because people lack the resources to move. As conditions improve, greater knowledge of opportunities elsewhere can be acted upon. People also may receive higher levels of education that either cannot be fully exploited in the developing economy or afford them jobs in other countries, thus stimulating rises in out-migration that last until development reaches levels that diminish the gains accruing from migration. Improvements in gender equality are likely to working in a similar fashion. Where the status of women is low, women are not likely to have resources to migrate and societal and familial gender scripts may be highly proscriptive of attempts to do so; under conditions of rising gender

equality, the improved status of women, coupled with rising education, may both make women competitive in a global labor market and empower them to become migrants (see: Chant and Radcliffe, 1992). Overall, improvements in levels of development and in gender inequality are likely to increase the participation of women in migration, at least in the short term. In particular, as women seek to migrate in order to improve their situation and that of their families, the proportion of women in labor flows should increase.

However, these transition stages in development and in gender equality can mean increasing vulnerabilities of women to exploitation. During the process of migration, intermediary institutions and agencies, both legal and illegal, can increase the likelihood that women will migrate because they act as networks linking potential female migrants with demands for female labor in destination countries. These intermediaries include recruitment agencies, including those seeking domestic workers or entertainers or facilitating "mail order" and web-based marriages, as well as smaller informal networks or single individuals who offer illegal entry (smuggling) and/or arrange exploitative working conditions (trafficking). In the case of illegal entry, women (and men) may be accessing intermediaries in order to work around established entry policies that implicitly or explicitly restrict their entry (Grieco and Boyd, 1998). Fraudulent entry as well as entry for certain types of work (care work, entertainers, sex work) and entry for purposes of marriage often means that these women are vulnerable to exploitation.

**Conditions of Entry**

Ironically, having left gender stratified societies, the subsequent experiences of migrant women may also reflect the status of women and gender inequalities in destination societies. Again, issues surrounding the status of women and their influence on migrant women are found at the societal, familial and individual levels. In destination countries, state immigration policies, migrant policies and gender policies determine the rights and entitlements of migrant women and men; contained within these policies are capacities to facilitate gender equality or perpetuate gender inequalities.

Immigration laws and regulations of destination countries influence entry statuses of women and men migrants. Migration policies of many receiving countries may implicitly assume a "dependent" for women and an "independent" migrant status for men. In particular, administrative practices that automatically assign the role of head of household to men increase the likelihood that women are designated as spouses, both by visa officers and the immigrant family (Boyd, 1995). By placing "de facto" distinctions between the entry status of male and female migrants, migrant women admitted as "dependents" may be placed in a legally dependent -- and potentially disadvantaged -- position in relation to men. This is particularly the case for women arriving as fiancées or recent brides, who may receive temporary – rather than permanent - residency rights for up to two years to assure validity of the marriage. Women also may face difficulty in securing permission for entering paid work if they are initially classified as dependents (Boyd, 1995, 1997; Kofman, et. al., 2000; Lim, 1995). This is especially true in labor importing countries that separate the right to work from the right to reside. In such cases women may resort to working illegally in situations characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, and little worker protection.

Migrant women's entry status in destination countries also can affect the level of social protection available to them. Women who enter countries illegally have few or non-existent rights and risk expulsion. While this also is true for men, women who are trafficked face the double impact of exploitation and criminalization along with expulsion, often back to the same conditions that created the initial motivations for exit. Women migrant workers who are admitted legally, but temporarily, may be poorly protected by existing labor laws in destination countries and they may have little recourse to state protection if abuse occurs. Female specific demand for domestics and nurses can lead to temporary rather than permanent residency for many female migrants.

Migrant policies – those targeted at aiding the integration and welfare of immigrants currently in a destination country – may also be implicitly "gendered," frequently assuming a "male breadwinner" or "male sponsor" model. Thus, women who are not labor force participants may not have easy access to income security programs should their marriages fail. And, in some countries, extended use of income security programs increases the risk of expulsion for those already in precarious positions. Further, migrant women – particularly those who assume familial care giving responsibilities alongside paid employment– may have greater difficulty in meeting the time frame of integration requirements that some countries have recently implemented (see: OECD, 2003, 2005 ).

Finally, at the societal level, the status of women and the degree of gender equality in the destination society provides an important backdrop for the treatment of all women, including migrant women. Where equality of opportunity or of outcome is readily accepted, where rights based jurisprudence exists, and where associations are allowed to form (thus creating NGO groups), migrant women may have more options in having their voices heard and their needs met than in other settings. This is evident when considering domestic workers, who risk exploitation because of the highly private and personal conditions of work. Media reports of extreme abuse, exploitation and death of domestic workers exist for countries where the status of women is low, where women are confined to private settings, and where migrants have few rights. High levels of gender inequality in destination countries also means immigrant women are disadvantaged.

Much of the discussion about the family context for women migrants centers on their administratively defined relationship of dependency to a (usually) male member. This dependency can be highly problematic under conditions of spousal violence or when immigration and welfare regulations lack provisions for marital dissolutions. However, another strand of debate asks how family relationships change – are women emancipated or empowered vis-à-vis previous roles after migrating, and do gender relations changes. Here, evidence is mixed – studies find both change and stasis. The latter is most likely to occur when women are considered to embody the cultures left behind, thus reinforcing previous gender scripts. However, for some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy (Zentgraf, 2002).

It is also the case that individual characteristics influence experiences in a destination country. In particular, educational levels, labor market experience and knowledge of the language(s) of the destination country are associated with increased knowledge of all dimensions of the receiving country, including rights and entitlements. These are not static characteristics; women and men alike may increase their levels of education, labor

market experience and language skills over time. However, such improvements may filter through gender scripts that permeate families, public policies and the larger receiving society. For example, decisions made within the family may favor language acquisition or educational training by men rather than women, particularly when men hold employment and women do not. Similarly, where they exist, language and skills training policies may favor participants in the labor force, thereby risking the privileging of men rather than women who may remain at home. Finally, reflecting the prevailing sex segregation of jobs in destination countries, migrant women may be explicitly recruited for work in the health services and care sectors and in seamstressing occupations.

In sum, gendered outcomes for migrants are produced through gendered conditions of entry and re-enforced by existing gender inequalities in the destination countries. In such circumstances gender mainstreaming – defined as the process of assessing the implications for women and for men of any planned action – may be a useful tool for removing gendered outcomes for migrant women and improving the level of gender equality for all women and men. As well, many of the recommendations found in various UN declarations and conference reports are relevant, particularly those that pertain to violence against women, the treatment of trafficked women and the integration of documented migrant women (for a review see: United Nations, 2006, especially pp.113-114).

However, left unacknowledged in the preceding review is another challenge to improving the status of migrant women in receiving countries. In addition to the impact of being female and foreign born, migrant women (and men) often are from phenotypic distinctive groups compared to majority populations in destination countries. Consequently, where societies are characterized by strong distinctions of "we" and "they," and where societies lack effective mechanisms of combating racism, migrants experience ethnic/racial discrimination. Migrant women, then, potentially bear a triple burden – they experience the impact of being female, foreign and racialized. One result is that migrant women, especially those who are defined as phenotypically different, risk being the least well off compared to men, to non-migrant women and to migrant women from areas that are either culturally or legally given precedence (for example women who are EU nationals in the European context). Increased sensitivity to, and action against, discrimination by race, as well as by religion and sex is required to remove these disadvantages. Again, numerous UN based resolutions call for such actions (United Nations, 2006).

**Conclusion**

In both origin and destination areas, gender operates at societal, familial/households and individual levels, thus affecting gender composition of migration and the situations faced by women migrants. Poverty and gender inequalities set the stage for the international migration of women, particularly within developing regions and from less developed areas to more developed parts of the world. In destination countries, gender inequalities also influence the experiences of migrant women, and may circumscribe their civic, legal and social rights and entitlements. Intertwined goals of empowering migrant women (increasing the participation of women in migration decisions and in taking control over issues of concern to them) and assuring gender equality at home, in the migration process and in destination countries require a number of key interventions. These include

development and the inclusion of women in development processes; they also include actions aimed at eradicating gender inequality in both sending and destination countries and improving the situation of migrant workers and their families.

| *Summary Points of Discussion* |
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| *Together, poverty and gender inequality are strong determinants of the propensity to migrate, the type of migration and the consequences of migration for women.* <br><br> *Improvements in levels of development and in gender inequality are likely to increase the participation of women in migration, at least in the short term. These transition stages in development and in gender equality can mean increasing vulnerabilities of women to exploitation.* <br><br> *Immigration laws and regulations of destination countries influence entry statuses of women and men migrants. Migrant women admitted as "dependents" may be placed in a legally dependent -- and potentially disadvantaged -- position in relation to men.* <br><br> *Migrant women's entry status in destination countries also can affect the level of social protection available to them.* <br><br> *High levels of gender inequality in destination countries also means immigrant women are disadvantaged.* <br><br> *Gender mainstreaming – defined as the process of assessing the implications for women and for men of any planned action – may be a useful tool for removing gendered outcomes for migrant women and improving the level of gender equality for all women and men* <br><br> *Increased sensitivity to, and action against, discrimination by race, as well as by religion and sex is required to remove the cumulative disadvantage of being female, foreign and racialized.* |

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