

Results of the Virtual Discussion

Gender, Migration, Remittances and Development:

Towards a Participatory Research Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Women are increasingly involved in international migration for economic necessity and in the sending, receiving and managing of remittances and are thus critical players in the connection between migration and development. Despite women's important and growing role, very few studies have analysed the relationship between gender, migration, remittances and development. This is particularly disconcerting because it is recognized that integrating a gender perspective into international development policies and programs increases their effectiveness and sustainability.

To address this lack of research UN-INSTRAW hosted the Virtual Discussion "Gender, Migration, Remittances and Development: Towards a Participatory Research Framework" in September 2008. Experts from around the globe came together online to discuss how to improve current migration research frameworks and how to best incorporate a gender perspective in the study of migration. For four weeks more than 90 experts from 25 countries discussed UN-INSTRAW's Working Papers: *Migration and Development, Remittances & The Feminization of Migration*. This paper is a summary of the discussion's findings.

PART ONE: APPROACHING DEVELOPMENT

A Flawed Model

The definition of development determines the entire approach to and outcome of development and migration research, analysis and policy making. Participants reached a consensus that the current mainstream model of the migration to development paradigm is flawed and an alternative model is urgently needed.

The current approach to migration and development looks primarily at economic development and market growth. The primary actor in this model is the individual in the market place. The model focuses on the financial resources derived from migrants' remittances and their potential for entrepreneurship activities to guarantee the creation of sustainable livelihoods, thereby avoiding a dependence on migration. Success is measured by an increase in individual access to market-provided goods and services.

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with this model. First, there is little evidence that the model actually works. One participant stated, "The individualistic approach to remittance-based development, predicated upon market-driven, individual entrepreneurship, seems to be based more on the ideological preferences of neoliberal policymakers than on convincing empirical evidence as to the viability of such an approach" (Dominican Republic). Some participants believed that not only are policies based on this model bound to fail but that they are detrimental to development. The 'utopia of privatization and deregulation' advocated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund has only made more vulnerable the marginal strata of the population (Albania).

Making the individual and not the community the primary subject of the model makes it easy to overlook the socioeconomic disparities that result from migration and remittances. For example, while remittances improve access to housing for those who receive them, they also drive up real-estate prices and thus negatively affect non-remittance recipients. The same can be said of education and food – as remittances cause price inflation these items become more difficult for non-remittance receiving families to afford. Food security is also threatened by the reduction of local farmland due to housing and business construction. The mainstream discourse on migration and development has the wrong focus: "The focus should not be on individual access to capabilities, but on the potential to socially guarantee this access for the whole society" (Spain).

The mainstream model does not take into account the transnational context in which migration occurs. It ignores the dynamic between sending and receiving countries and focuses solely on the country of origin, implying it is the only country that needs to develop. No thought is given to the current socioeconomic organization of receiving countries nor is their dependence on the cheap labour of migrants to sustain themselves questioned.

Another flaw of the current model is its focus on monetary remittances. It doesn't account for the impact of non-monetary remittances such as technological transfers, social remittances, collective remittances and in-kind remittance (Dominican Republic). The heavy focus on remittances also risks instrumentalizing the migrants as 'pawns of development' and not as development beneficiaries. No thought is given to migrants' well being or human rights; only the amount they remit is studied. In this model it follows that the best strategy for increasing the impact of migration on development is to maximize the amount of remittances sent.

An Alternative Model

Many participants agreed that the alternative approach advocated by UN-INSTRAW is preferable to the current mainstream approach. Development, according to UN-INSTRAW's Working Paper "Migration and Development", should be defined as 'the comprehensive right to fully enjoy human rights'. At the center of the development process should be the holistic notion of increased capabilities and freedoms which then become rights. This model addresses needs of the entire community and it looks at migration in a transnational perspective. It measures the success of migration on development in both the sending and receiving countries by determining whether

- an improvement in the collective ability to satisfy human needs is observed,
- an increase in economic activity is driven by creating wellbeing instead of capital accumulation, and
- a more equal distribution of work responsibilities and access to resources is observed.

In addition to adopting the conceptual framework advocated by UN-INSTRAW, participants stressed the need to put migrants at the center of the migration to development paradigm. Many bemoaned the fact that migration studies rarely focus on the migrant, focusing instead on remittances or the sending and receiving states.

So what does turning our focus to the migrant really mean? 'Centering on the migrant' was defined in several ways. According to one participant it means three things.

- asking ourselves why people migrate in the first place;
- addressing the immigration policies of receiving countries which ensure that migrants are vulnerable;
- and addressing how differential access to resources and how global capitalist relations are racialized and gendered (United States).

Others wrote that to center on the migrant we need to ask ourselves why migrants are unable to benefit from educational and professional opportunities in their home country and why they must worry that if they don't send money home their families will not have access to the things they need

(United Kingdom). Putting migrants first also means realizing that migrants themselves know their realities and situations best and are best able to identify their needs.

A few concrete examples of how the focus can be shifted to the migrant were given. The Peruvian government imposes a 0.87% transfer tax on remittances that are sent to Peru but the resulting 45 million dollars accumulated every year rarely reach the migrants themselves. Spending the transfer tax improving the lives of migrants would represent a shift, not only in funds, but in priorities. It would give the migrant a more prominent place in the migration to development nexus. One participant asked "If we agree that migrants' wellbeing is a key aspect of the migration-development nexus, could any indicators on their living and working conditions be used to measure the developmental impact of migration?" (Spain). This too would represent a more migrant-centered approach.

PART TWO: GENDER

Gendered Behaviour

Gender operates differently across many factors such as class, ethnicity, and nationality etc. For example, as women's rights in the developed world in the past few years have been increasing, migrant women in the same countries have been losing their rights (Guatemala). Gender also affects migration in different, sometimes contradictory ways. However, there are some generalizations that can be made.

Many participants found in their research that women are more reliable senders and managers of remittances than men. Research from Peru shows that women have more opportunities to invest remittances in productive enterprises such as tailoring, producing handicrafts, commercial agriculture and raising cattle (Peru). One case study found that women migrants from the Dominican Republic prefer to send their remittances to women instead of men. Men, they found, spent their remittances irresponsibly; whereas, women invested them more effectively. Among Ghanaians in London it was found that while men send remittances in larger amounts and not so regularly, women send more regularly and respond more positively to calls from the country of origin in periods of crisis (UK).

Taking Advantage of Gender Identities

Women who migrate and the women who are dependent upon male or female migrants live in a broader world that takes advantage of them precisely because of the gendered identities (United States). This occurs at several levels.

Migrants

Migrants themselves take advantage of gender stereotypes. Research from Vietnam suggests that migrants construct women's absence from their children as part of the 'sacrifice' that is involved in being a mother to justify their necessary absences from home. Migrants and their families have an interest in constructing migrant women as virtuous to combat the rural social norms which are extremely critical of mothers who leave their children behind. Constructing new gender identities is a way for both men and women to cope with the challenges posed by the feminization of migration for gender relations.

The Development Community

The development community was also criticized for taking advantage of gender identities. Microcredit initiatives are often based on very essentialized notions of gender and can be hard on poor women "Through sureties of personal conduct and behaviour in lieu of capital assets for collateral" (US). Also, micro-enterprises for women have been blamed for increasing women's paid and unpaid workload to unbearable levels. The development community also takes advantage of gender stereotypes by indirectly blaming women when development fails. The challenges for

development are often associated with women, such as the number of children women have, the lack of female literacy etc., which all contribute to the image of women as disadvantaged. "If you add the law problems...[that give] more rights to men than to women, you will have a very vulnerable, ignorant and victim image...the latent conclusion for them is: if the development doesn't work, put the blame on women," (Spain).

Researchers

Gender roles are shaped by researchers. One participant asks, "Don't we tend to use pre-assumptions about gender relations that predetermine our own findings? i.e. our research reinforces the stereotypes on gender relations rather than testing them and understanding how they are reconstructed and negotiated," (Spain). By constructing women migrants as virtuous, feminist scholarship is in danger of fashioning its own myths. For example, "Women are often praised by their higher commitment to family wellbeing, while recipient men are often accused of using money badly (for their own luxuries, even for immoral purposes) Rather than asking to which extent this might be true, in which circumstances, why etc. this is seen as some kind of axiom that should inform policy making," (Spain).

Policy Makers

Policy is rarely gender sensitive. For example, national immigration policies such as those of Canada and the U.S. refuse to recognize the skills of many women as actual skills. They also fail to recognize the demand for feminized forms of labour into their immigration criteria. Indeed, policy makers not only write policy based on gender stereotypes but they (without being aware of it) write policies that reinforce patriarchal social relations. The Spanish Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration, for example, which recognizes immigrant families' challenges reconciling family and working life, is based on the idea that immigrant women do all the housework and immigrant men do very little. It reinforces gender stereotypes and serves to draw attention away from the lack of public services. The responsibility of solving the problem is transferred from the state to the private sphere.

Migration and Women's Empowerment

Women's experience of migration and of sending or managing remittances can be empowering. First, migration often offers women opportunities not afforded in their country of origin to start businesses. Mexican migrant women in the United States declare in their interviews that they find more space for maneuvering both in the family and economically than in Mexico. Entrepreneurship in the destination country can be empowering as women take control of decision making. According to one participant the number of businesses owned by women in the United States is increasing, especially in the ethnic economy.

The empowering effects that come with entrepreneurship can also be seen in the countries of origin where women are often recipients and managers of remittances. A participant from Senegal stated

that remittances empower women by giving them new responsibilities in the community, new opportunities for entrepreneurial activities and political leadership. Managing remittances increases women's bargaining power in the home and in the community.

Remittances are associated with improvements in girls' education which contributes to sustainable development, particularly when it results in higher female literacy and numeracy. Education also contributes to gender equality because it provides girls and women with information about their rights.

Banking services that have sprung up as a result of remittances often have programs geared towards women. These programs increase women's financial education allowing them to make financial decisions and thereby have more independence. Access to credit from these banking services increases women's possibilities to take on entrepreneurial activities.

Yet, a positive outcome from migration for the empowerment of women cannot be assumed. Migration can also be disempowering for women and "We can't be too excited about the power of remittances," (Mexico).

All migrants risk instrumentalization. However, women's image of being harder workers, better remitters and more altruistic puts them at a particularly high risk of instrumentalization. According to one participant, very often women migrants themselves believe that their role is to sacrifice for future generations. (Spain)

"[To call female migrants] empowered as they face discrimination, harassment and fear of deportation with no sight of "regularization" is a huge stretch of imagination"
(Mine Eder, Turkey)

One participant reminded us of the harsh conditions migrants face and his uncertainty that migration can really empower women. He was skeptical "of the presumably empowered Tunisian women who migrate to Italy to pick cherries, or a Moldovian domestic workers working for middle-class urban Istanbulites. Their lives and the lives of their family are clearly transformed, and yes, they might be better off financially, but to call them empowered as they face discrimination, harassment and fear of deportation with no sight of "regularization" is a huge stretch of imagination," (Turkey).

Ensuring Migration Means Empowerment

Participants made many suggestions about how to promote the empowering aspects of migration. It was stressed that researchers and policy makers must keep several things in mind when it comes to gender. They must "try to break away from these 'gate keeping concepts' of tradition/modernity that force us to perceive it in a very restrictive way and with very serious political consequences" (Spain). Researchers must look for ways to balance the discourse about the situation of women

without victimizing them. It must be remembered that women as monetary remitters is relatively new in women's history.

Non-sexist education was recommended to challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchy. Also, because research shows there is a strong relationship between patriarchy and violence, it was suggested that conflict- resolution education is necessary. It is important to work with men and families, not just women's groups, to combat patriarchy.

To ensure that migration is empowering for women the anti-trafficking framework needs to be challenged. The anti-trafficking framework is often anti-immigrant politics disguised in the name of 'protecting women migrants'. It is meant to inhibit women's initiatives to move independently and further enforces patriarchal standards of 'proper behaviour' for women (such as no involvement in sex work). The anti-trafficking framework has only made clandestine routes more expensive and more dangerous.

Women's organizations, both local and transnational, can play an instrumental role ensuring migration positively affects women's empowerment. As one participant writes, "There are needed processes of women's mobilization and organization in order that really they reach empowerment" (Guatemala). The organizations that are best suited to empower women are those that have a migrant centered analysis, that don't see migration as an evil necessity and that don't wish to criminalize migrants (U.S.).

Two initiatives were suggested for NGOs. NGOs could fill the need for more education and increased awareness about gender issues. They could also provide space for women's voices. A radio program called "Women's Voices" that transmits information for and interviews with Guatemalan immigrants in Los Angeles, has empowered many women and could be used as an example for future projects.

PART THREE: REMITTANCES

Productive Investment vs. Consumption

Remittances are the money sent by migrants to their countries of origin. The way in which they are spent is often categorized by researchers as either 'productive investments' or for 'consumption'. There was some disagreement among participants about how to define each of these terms. Some thought that remittances can never

been considered 'productive' because they cannot be used for large scale investments such as energy and communications infrastructure. Others thought that they can be considered 'productive' only when they are invested in projects that do not require continued funding from abroad to sustain themselves, such as investing in entrepreneurial activities. Some participants thought that because remittances lift millions out of poverty, they should be considered 'productive' no matter how they are spent. As one participant writes, "Who has determined that when remittances are used to provide food to a family, that it is 'unproductive'?" (South Africa).

Are we not compromising too much of our time, energies and to elucidate whether remittances are or could be a developmental tool, while taking time, energies and resources away from other significant aspects of the development-migration nexus?

(Amaia Orozco, Spain)

Benefits

Despite this disagreement over the definition, all participants agreed that besides the obvious increase of capital for families for daily expenses, remittances bring a whole range of benefits. In Indonesia, for example, remittances sent by women abroad are often part of a long-term social security system. Children who receive money from their mothers' abroad are expected to invest it in housing and healthcare for the retirement of returning migrants. Remittances can have positive spill over effects. For example, "In rural communities where they have a lot of migrants abroad you could see the trickle effects of remittances on the whole community. Other women have been able to learn a trade because a migrant woman has sent dyers to a female relative who now has a hairdressing salon," (United Kingdom).

Remittances often increase education which is an investment in human capital. For example, in Uganda "Many children in urban and rural areas are going to school thanks to the Diasporas and this has contributed to higher enrollment in tertiary education," (Uganda). Remittances can also make more credit available for families that receive remittances and those who do not. Banking systems that are set up as a result of remittances often provide financial education which, when combined with bank loans, increase the possibilities of creating income generating activities.

Limitations

Yet, there are limits to the benefits of remittances – they cannot be seen as the panacea for all that ails development.

There is an over emphasis on remittances that detracts from other important migration and development issues. As one participant asks, “Are we not compromising too much of our time and energies to elucidate whether remittances are or could be a developmental tool, while taking time, energies and resources away from other significant aspects of the development-migration nexus? Are we not too biased towards remittances when talking about development thus implicitly assuming an economic notion of development in which monetary aspects are emphasized?” (Spain) It was suggested that perhaps this undue focus on remittances can be attributed to the International Financial Institutions. Because these institutions do not wish to tackle the restricted migration and citizenship policies of receiving states and their frequent mistreatment of migrants, especially those from developing countries, they turn their attention to remittances.

There is a limitation on what remittances can achieve; one participant writes, “In Albania remittances have only been able to produce very small enterprises, while the political elites are able to sponsor more ambitious economic projects,” (Albania). Also, it was stressed that although “National (as well as many state and municipal) governments as well as the development banks have been salivating in recent years over the possibilities of this ‘untapped’ resource” (US) remittances are private funds and “The state should not consider them for development projects,” (Mexico). It was suggested the limitations of remittances could be overcome if the funding for large scale development projects were found outside of remittances.

One participant writes, “That migrants...are managing to send more [in] remittances than states receive in foreign aid reflects not only migrants’ commitment, but also a failure on the part of the governments of migrants-sending states to address these issues.” (UK). Because remittances are often used to purchase social services not provided by the state, these services are becoming privatized and pressure on governments to provide them is weakened. This, in turn, increases socioeconomic disparities between families who receive remittances and can purchase social services and those who do not.

Collective Remittances

Participants stressed the important role that collective remittances play in the migration to development paradigm. Collective remittances promote a more community based approach to development and can ensure that the benefits of remittances reach all members of society.

Participants remarked that benefits of collective remittances can be magnified by government supported programs. The Mexico 3 x 1 Program, for example, was held up as a model of success. In this program the local, state and federal governments match migrants’ monetary contributions. This helps prevent governments from neglecting their obligation to provide social services. Yet, some

participants cautioned that little evaluation of these programs has been done and more research is needed.

Collective remittances have other benefits besides promoting development. When invested in church and religious activities they can bring spiritual well-being. For example, during the month in which Peruvians celebrate their Patron Saint, Peruvians in the expatriate community send religious goods to Peru. "It is impossible to measure [these goods] in terms of money, but the subjective value is so great that it provides spiritual wellbeing namely to poor migrants," (Peru). Collective remittances perform symbolic roles such as preserving and strengthening the ties between the expatriate community and the country of origin. Collective remittance-based initiatives also help increase the social recognition and prestige of migrants both in their communities of origin and of destination. As one participant commented, "This has been important in the Dominican Republic, where migrants struggled hard to overcome stereotypes linking them to drug dealing and other criminal activity, especially in the New York area. They have been quite successful in reinforcing the image of Dominican migrants as hard-working, law-abiding citizens" (Dominican Republic).

Yet, there are problems associated with collective remittances. Hometown associations are often dominated by men; men make all the important decisions and women are relegated to positions of subordination such as secretaries. Hometown associations cannot always recognize the needs of their communities and they do not always have adequate information about options for investments. For example, expanding education may be very important for the community but this may not be high on the agenda of hometown clubs. A role for NGOs may be to provide information about alternatives rather than set priorities.

Many participants warned that, like monetary remittances, collective remittances are weakening the pressure on governments to provide social services. Government supported collective remittance programs were recommended as the best way to remedy this. But, these are not without their challenges; one participant wrote that these programs exclude certain demographics of communities.

PART FOUR: CO-DEVELOPMENT

Many participants spoke about the potential for co-development policies to maximize the benefits of migration and remittances of development. Co-development is the synchronizing of migration policies of the countries of destination with the development policies of the countries of origin with a focus on the migrants themselves. Co-development brings to the discussion a more transnational perspective which is a goal of the preferred model of development discussed in Part One.

Yet, many participants cautioned that co-development policies come with their own set of problems. First, they are never politically neutral. Second, despite their 'migrant focus' they do not necessarily solve the problem of the instrumentalization of migrants. For co-development policies to operate better migrants need to be part of the planning – not just implementation, to co-determine their needs and priorities. It was also stated that migrants should not have to give up any portion of their remittances for participation in co-development programs.

CONCLUSION

International migration and remittances present a tremendous historic opportunity for development. The Virtual Discussion illustrated how essential gender is to understanding this phenomenon and to designing sustainable development programs and policies. Yet studies about remittances and their potential for development have barely considered the gender perspective. Many participants complained that the lack of gender data is extremely limiting for conducting research; often researchers need to conduct their own surveys in order to generate data.

The Virtual Discussion was a first step in encouraging gender in the study of migration, remittances and development. We hope that participants will incorporate the new insights gained from the experience in their work and research.

ANNEX I: Institutions Represented

Africa Leadership Institute
African Economic Research Consortium
Asia Pacific Migration Research Network
Bogazici University
Brown University
CADES, Centro de Alternativas para el Desarrollo Social
Center For Migration and Refugee Studies American University in Cairo
Centre for Migration Policy Research Swansea University
Centre for Policies Analysis
Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at Oxford University
Centro de Estudios Superiores de México y Centroamérica
Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social
College of Social Sciences, University of the Philippines Baguio
COMPAS, University of Oxford
Consejo de Investigaciones e Información en Desarrollo
Corporacion Alma Mater Universidad Tecnologica de Pereira
CREA Comunidades de Emprendedores Sociales
CUNY Graduate Center
Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Granada
Department of Political Science and IR, Bogazici University
Eduardo Mondlane University
El Colegio de Tlaxcala
Emory University
Facultad Ciencias Juradicas. Universidad Javeriana Bogota
FLACSO Dominican Republic
Florida International Univeristy
French Institute of Pondicherry
Institute for Democracy in South Africa
Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown
Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatría Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz
Instituto Tecnológico de Oaxaca
Inter-American Development Bank
IOM Colombia
IOM Manila
IOM Mexico
IOM Switzerland
ISET-London Metropolitan University
London School of Economics
Migration and Ethnic Studies at the University of Amsterdam

Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana
Programa Universitario México Nación Multicultural de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
Red Internacional Migracion y Desarrollo
School of Development Studies University of East Anglia
School of Social Work, York University
Southern African Migration Project
Sussex Centre for Migration Research
The Heller School of Social Policy Brandeis University
The Heller School, Brandeis University
UFR de Géographie et d'Aménagement (Bordeaux3)
UMR Ades-Tempos (CNRS/Bordeaux3)
UNDP Morocco
UNDP Senegal
UN-HABITAT
Universidad Autonoma de Madrid
Universidad de los Andes
Universidad del Bío-Bío
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
University of Granada
University of Hawai'i at Manoa
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
University of Kassel
University of Nebraska-Omaha
University of Windsor
World Bank