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Migration and Remittances: The Gender Angle

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(The editorial is based on the article “Migration and remittances: The gender angle” which appeared in BusinessLine for 26th February 2019. In this article, we will discuss the gender distribution of cross-border migration.)

The gender distribution of cross-border migration is a matter of importance because women migrating for work face very different conditions from those of men migrants, whether in the source country or in the process of travel or in the destination country.

These are crucially affected by gender construction as well as the nature of labor markets in both societies of origin and destination.

However, the impact of such gendered migration has remained much less apparent and less analyzed. Specifically, the impact of gendered migration on the sending of remittances is an issue that is often ignored, even though it can be very significant. Women migrating for work have been known to send a greater proportion of their earnings back as remittances and to send more regularly than men as their nature of work significantly differs from those of men's.

- **Men migrant workers are mostly to be found in manufacturing and construction activities** in the host countries. **Women migrants, by contrast, are overwhelmingly in service work, particularly in care activities.**
- This has direct implications for earnings and therefore for the ability (apart from the willingness) to send remittances back to migrants' homes.
- **Male migrant workers are much more immediately affected by business cycles in the host economies**, tending to lose jobs or experience reduced incomes, which thereby affects the remittances they can send.
- **Women working in services activities, by contrast, especially those in care services such as nurses or domestic workers, are less likely to be immediately affected by the business cycle** as these activities are not the first to be curtailed. Therefore, their incomes and ability to send remittances are less affected.

- **This means that countries that send more women migrant workers out are likely to show a more stable pattern of remittance inflow than countries with dominantly male out-migrants.** This is clearly evident in migration out of Asian countries.

Global Stats

- **Women have been significant in cross-border migration in several Asian countries** — Sri Lanka, the Philippines and India have shown high ratios of female migrants, followed by Pakistan and Vietnam. In all these countries, remittances form a significant proportion of GDP.
- **However, Bangladesh showed a very low ratio.** Bangladesh has had very strict laws on women's external mobility (which require the permission of the male head of household) and has restricted women's migration. Remittance inflows have been much more volatile and have even fallen in several years, as the predominantly male migrant workers have been affected by fluctuating economic conditions in the major host countries (the Middle East and the US).
- **The most interesting contrast in remittance inflows is between Sri Lanka and the Philippines, on one hand, and Bangladesh on the other.** Between 1980 and 2013, women dominated out-migration from the Philippines, accounting for 60% of such migrants. Their share peaked in 2004 at around three-fourths of the outflow of workers abroad, and most of them were employed as domestic workers in the destination countries.
- Thereafter, attempts by the Philippine government to regulate their conditions of work and reduce exploitative practices led to a reduction in the number of such women migrants, whose share shrank to less than half in 2007 and 2008. A revival thereafter led to previous levels being surpassed in 2010. Correspondingly, remittance inflows also increased continuously, despite some slowdown in the late 2000s.
- **For Pakistan, less of the female migration has been for work and more for reasons of marriage** — and this has affected the volatility of remittances as well. In Vietnam, the growing significance of women migrants has been reflected in a smoother trend increase in recent years compared to the past.

Opportunities

- **Migration can be empowering** for women.
- The **introduction to more equitable societal norms can improve women's rights, autonomy, and access to resources.**
- When migrant women return home, they often maintain their newfound autonomy, as well as **bring home new norms, skills, and expertise.**
- **Family health and children's education may improve** as a result of migration.

Concerns

- **Migration and transnational parenting can put a strain on families.** Migration can have positive effects on the family and household, but the change in parenting and separation can be difficult, even with increased access to telecommunications and the Internet. Research is mixed on the effects of migration on children.
- **When high-skilled migrants leave, the results can be negative for the communities of origin, referred to as “brain drain.”**
- Many women employed in low paid sectors may not be in a position to save money to invest in their return. They may not even have an adequate pension, leaving them with no choice but to migrate again in old age.
- **High-skilled migrant women are often underemployed** and work in positions below their qualifications.
- Female migrants may be forced into prostitution or to sell sexual favors to survive or provide for their families.
- **Migrant women, especially irregular migrants, may be more vulnerable to violence.**
- Domestic work is generally not covered by employment laws.

Indian Scene

- **The Indian case presents a more complex picture.** Women workers have been around half of the recorded migrants, yet remittances display a more volatile pattern. This relates to the specific nature of the origin of remittances, which is in turn determined by the destination of migrants as well as by gender.
- In 2013, 52% of the stock of Indian migrants abroad were in just two countries in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Just under a quarter were in the United States.
- This excludes the Indians living in the US on temporary visas like H1B visas, who are more likely to send remittances than permanent migrants; indeed, remittances from the US have accounted for around half of the total remittances over the past decade.
- But such remittance flows emanating from temporary but high-skilled workers tend to be larger than the smaller amounts sent by women workers in less skilled care activities in the Middle East.
- Therefore, while the women migrants mostly continue to send remittances in periods of down-swing, male professional workers on short-term visas are more directly affected by adverse economic conditions.
- **So in this matter (and in so much else in the matter of employment patterns), the Indian experience tends to be somewhat of an outlier with regard to the relationship between gendered migration and remittances.**

Way Forward

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- **There is a need to ensure migrant women are granted full human rights** and can access services and resources for basic rights.
 - **Provide access to financial institutions and better channels** for sending and receiving remittances.
 - **The rights of migrant women should be legally protected and they should have access to legal services** and remedies and also for health services.
 - **There is a need to promote nondiscrimination in access to labor markets and job sectors**, thereby increasing access and opportunities for women
 - The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes for the first time the contribution of migration to sustainable development. Now, the Governments across the globe should create bilateral, multilateral, and regional dialogue and agreements that include provisions for sharing information and best practices to ensure migrant rights, support, and protection.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)

- Established in 1951, IOM is the leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration.
- IOM works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration for the benefit of all, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people.
- UN member states adopted a set of commitments, known as the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach to migration.
- The New York Declaration acknowledges the positive contribution of migrants to sustainable and inclusive development, and commits to protecting the safety, dignity and human rights and fundamental freedoms of all migrants, regardless of their migratory status.