



COVID-19 IMPACTS ON THE LABOUR MIGRATION AND MOBILITY OF YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



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**COVID-19 IMPACTS ON THE
LABOUR MIGRATION AND
MOBILITY OF YOUNG WOMEN
AND GIRLS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA
AND THE PACIFIC**

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Table of contents

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgements..... | iii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Economic dimensions | 3 |
| Social dimensions..... | 5 |
| Cultural dimensions..... | 7 |
| Structural dimensions | 9 |
| Conclusion..... | 13 |
| References..... | 15 |



Introduction

The IOM project “*Supporting Brighter Futures: Young Women and Girls and Labour Migration in South-East Asia and the Pacific*” resulted in a 2019 publication of the same name. Six experts contributed papers exploring issues that ranged from the role of adolescent and young girls as household income providers and the nexus between migration and education, to human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Collectively the papers paint a complex picture, raising challenging policy questions and highlighting gaps that need to be filled by further research.

While the papers address different components of a larger whole, a finding that emerges from each is that young migrant women and girls make significant contributions not only to their own prosperity and that of their families, but also to communities in sending and receiving countries. The “feminization” of migration is revealed not only as a by-product of economic and social development, but also as a key driver of this development. Accordingly, female empowerment is a theme that threads throughout the report, with gender equality being the common aspect underpinning its policy recommendations.

The picture of course, is not so simplistically sunny; labour migration and mobility pose significant challenges for young women and girls who migrate or whose family members do. Here, *Brighter Futures* emphasizes the need for a stronger evidence base to inform policy and programme responses to labour migration, labour rights and protection, as well as the gender dimensions that impact countries and communities of origin, transit and destination. In building understanding of female labour mobility as a determinant of development, the call is made to track the structural socioeconomic factors that drive harmful forms of migration, as well as the changing agency of young women and girls.

Yet 2019 already seems like a different era of history. Since *Brighter Futures* was published, COVID-19 and the measures taken in response to it have shifted the world in ways yet to be fully fathomed. Migration policy and programmatic responses are in rapid flux, and our understanding of the implications is constantly evolving. However, the disproportionate toll on female migrants is already clear, as is their leading role at the frontline of efforts to confront the pandemic. Against this shifting background, this paper offers speculative reflections on some policy implications that these shifts may have on the overarching and interrelated economic, social, cultural and structural findings of the report, and the gender dimensions at play in South-East Asia and the Pacific.



Economic dimensions

The vital economic role that female labour migrants play across South-East Asia emerges throughout the Brighter Futures report. Indeed, one of the world's top five remittance-receiving countries is in this region; the Philippines received USD 33.83 billion in 2018.¹ Female migrants are notably more likely than males to reliably send remittances home, making labour migration pathways not only to their benefit, but also to the benefit of their families at home.² Within the South-East Asian subregion, transnational labour migration serves as a multigenerational poverty reduction strategy.³ Yet the majority of females who migrate for economic purposes are young women migrating internally to enter into domestic work, hospitality or garment manufacturing.⁴ These industries have been acutely impacted by COVID-19.

Globally, women are more likely to lose their jobs than men as a result of crises.⁵ The International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that women are overrepresented in sectors at high risk of workplace closures; 42 per cent of women workers around the world are in high-risk sectors.⁶ The Asia-Pacific is host to 827 million informal workers, 62 per cent of whom live in countries with full or partial lockdowns.⁷ In manufacturing, people lower down in supply chains – many of whom are women – are the most vulnerable to losing their jobs as factories and other workplaces close.⁸

The closure of workplaces is not only to the detriment of individual migrants and their families, but also to their home countries and communities. In some countries lacking welfare support, labour is effectively “sold” by governments as a livelihood and development strategy. This labour is very often feminized; women in poor rural communities in Indonesia and the Philippines make up between 60 to 75 per cent of overseas workers.⁹ COVID-19 will hamper the economic health of affected families, the development aspirations of sending and receiving countries, and at a more macro level, the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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¹ IOM, 2020d.

² IOM, 2019b: 66.

³ IOM, 2019b: 48.

⁴ IOM, 2019b: 69.

⁵ Durant, 2020.

⁶ ILO, 2020: 7, 14, 18.

⁷ ILO, 2020: 7, 14, 18.

⁸ Guilbert et al., 2020.

⁹ IOM, 2019b: 45.

Movement and travel restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic are taking an incalculable economic toll. Every country in South-East Asia and the Pacific has imposed travel restrictions that impact on peoples' ability to migrate or to return home, throwing migration policies into confusion.¹⁰ Initiatives such as the Australia and New Zealand Pacific Labour Scheme that aim to promote women's participation and gender equality¹¹ may also be compromised, along with the economies of Pacific island States. In 2018, remittances to Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu amounted to USD 689 million.¹² Visa extensions offer immediate relief for those already participating in such programmes and families depending on remittances, which account for 18 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Samoa and 40 per cent in Tonga. For now, however, and for an indeterminate period ahead, prospective workers cannot fly from the Pacific to Australia and New Zealand.¹³

As migration routes and patterns shift drastically, "mobility bubbles" may emerge in their stead, offering economic opportunities for receiving and sending states within them. Migration corridors between Australia and New Zealand and countries in Oceania, as well as between Singapore and New Zealand, are already being explored.¹⁴ Whether and to what extent these labour mobility bubbles will promote women's participation and gender equality is uncertain, to say nothing of the fate of economies and populations that exist outside these bubbles.

Issues for further examination:

- Economic impact of lost remittances from migrant women and girls on their families and communities
- Short-, medium- and long-term economic impact of travel and movement restrictions on migrant worker programmes on economies of source and receiving countries
- Gender dimensions of acutely impacted labour sectors, including the impact of "mobility bubbles" on the labour migration of young women and girls

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10 IOM, 2020c.

11 IOM, 2019b: 74.

12 ILO, 2019: 9.

13 Ackman and Taulealo, 2020.

14 IOM, 2020a.

Social dimensions

Brighter Futures shows that young women and girls are motivated to migrate for a range of reasons, including to escape patriarchal control and gendered expectations about the roles of females, and more positively, to pursue formal and informal educational opportunities.¹⁵ Migration itself may even be a transformative educational experience for girls in its own right.¹⁶ Governments now need to anticipate and prepare for the medium- and long-term ramifications of COVID-19 on the formal and informal education–migration nexus.

Communities stand to lose the benefit of the education their young women and girls were migrating to achieve, as well as the gender equality that was promoted through such education. Women and girls may be compelled to return to unpaid care work and be afforded less time to learn than their male family members.¹⁷ In redressing this impact, it is significant that less than 25 per cent of low-income countries provide the possibility of remote learning, and gender imbalance in access to technology may have a discriminatory impact on young women and girls.¹⁸ Evidently, this digital divide must be bridged to ensure equal access to technology as a vector of education.

Brighter Futures notes that the adolescent and young girls “left behind” by migrants are often empowered by the mobility of their parents or siblings to make informed choices about their own economic and employment prospects.¹⁹ Policy recommendations to maximize these goods of migration include educational programmes for adolescents and young girls who remain at home, that are tailored to the job market within their country.²⁰ Such recommendations must now be calibrated to the reduced choices that remain as remittances decline or cease and providers are stranded without income, or return home to diminished employment options and higher competition for them.

The report also promotes youth-engagement programmes as a means of engaging with and understanding the needs of adolescent and young girls from migrant families, alongside recognizing and supporting their agency in making life choices.²¹ As COVID-19 diverts funding from and otherwise impacts these initiatives, methodologies and messages must adapt. Solutions based on information and communications technology (ICT) are needed to convene youth groups that can no longer gather in person. Again, investment must clearly be made to understand and address barriers that young women and girls may face in accessing technology. Vitally, the information disseminated through these channels must also be up-to-date, accurate and relevant to the viable and shifting life choices that remain.

¹⁵ IOM, 2019b: 13, 51.

¹⁶ IOM, 2019b: 34–38.

¹⁷ UN-Women, 2020: 19.

¹⁸ Vegas, 2020.

¹⁹ IOM, 2019b: 17–18.

²⁰ IOM, 2019b: 19.

²¹ IOM, 2019b: 19.

Issues for further examination:

- Impact of reduced mobility on education of young women and girls, including those left behind by migrants
- Implications of reduced mobility on gender equality
- Gender dimensions of barriers to accessibility of ICT among young women and girls from migrant families / returning migrant families

Cultural dimensions

Brighter Futures points to the existence of a “culture of migration” in many places. For migrant-sending countries, transnational migration of young women is often a positive intergenerational phenomenon.²² The gender dimensions at play include the expectation that females will migrate when old enough to contribute to their family’s well-being.²³ There are cultural and religious aspects to this; daughters who do not provide for their family may be considered “immoral” in Myanmar, and traditional Theravada Buddhist beliefs in Cambodia prescribe a role for daughters in providing for their families.²⁴ Conversely, female migration may be problematized; in Vanuatu, women migrants in urban areas are seen as challenging traditional customs.²⁵ Yet elsewhere (e.g. Java), negative moral judgement of independent female migration can be countered by remittances to support families at home, thereby restoring the normative notion of what it means to be a “dutiful” daughter.²⁶

This culture of migration in sending countries and the aspirations tied to it may be fundamentally changed by COVID-19, as restrictions on movement and shifting migration policies deny young women and adolescent girls opportunities to migrate. Instead, they may be stigmatized for failing in their responsibility to provide and come to be perceived as financial “burdens” to already-struggling families, rather than as assets to them. Young women and girls facing closed mobility pathways may return to traditional roles of child and parental care that “left behind” relatives (including males) had to assume in their absence, or be pressured to marry as a means of survival. Eventually, the result may be a return to gender norms that were challenged by the empowerment of females through their labour migration.

As unemployment rises, competition for work may have gender dimensions in both sending and receiving countries. Paid care work that is mostly done by migrant women from low- and middle-income countries includes work as domestic workers, child minders, nurses and doctors.²⁷ Citizens who need to replace lost jobs may assume these roles, potentially resulting in de-feminization or even masculinization of some sectors. For now though, the feminization of certain sectors has implications in determining which people are exposed to COVID-19.

Many young women and girls live and work in conditions that not only expose them to violence, but also insufficiently protect them from the virus. Eighty per cent of migrant domestic workers in the Asia-Pacific region are women,²⁸ many of whom do not have access to government social welfare or health

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²² IOM, 2019b: 11, 17, 48–49, 71.

²³ IOM, 2019b: 49.

²⁴ IOM, 2019b: 69.

²⁵ IOM, 2019b: 49.

²⁶ IOM, 2019b: 35.

²⁷ ILO, 2018: 16.

²⁸ UN-Women, 2020: 40.

support. Seventy per cent of global health-care workers on the frontline of the pandemic are women, many of them migrants.²⁹ An estimated 85 per cent of nurses from the Philippines work internationally and now face higher health risks in their work, rapidly declining working conditions, and unpredictable changes and restrictions imposed on movement and migration policies.³⁰ COVID-19 raises significant questions for host communities about who is viewed as being essential and who is dispensable.

These situations also highlight the gender dimensions at play in the “culture of migration” in receiving countries and communities. Women and girls in precarious situations, particularly in informal sectors, may be disproportionately affected by hostile migration policies, and be at acute risk of stigmatization and discrimination.³¹ By way of example, the majority of workers in the sex and entertainment sectors of the informal economy are female. Rural Cambodian women working in urban karaoke bars were left without government support when these establishments closed down.³² As sex work establishments closed across Thailand (where sex work remains criminalized), hundreds of thousands of sex workers appealed to the government for help.³³ Many of these workers are migrants in the informal economy, while contributing significantly to the formal economy; yet they are now left abandoned by a host country culture that would rather deny they exist.³⁴

Issues for further examination:

- Medium- and long-term gender dynamics of reduced migration of women and girls from migrant-sending countries
- Gender dimensions of migration policy shifts in formal and informal sectors in migrant-receiving countries
- Barriers to access to state assistance services for migrant women and girls in culturally “taboo” areas of the informal economy

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²⁹ IOM, 2020b.

³⁰ UN-Women, 2020: 16.

³¹ UN-Women, 2020: 40.

³² Blomberg, 2020; UNODC, 2020.

³³ Kemasingki, 2020.

³⁴ Nortajuddin, 2020.

Structural dimensions

The most significant tectonic shifts to labour migration of young women and girls in a post-COVID world may be structural. Brighter Futures underlines gender inequality as a root cause of human trafficking in South-East Asia (and Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste) that denies young women and girls education and employment opportunities, channels them into low-skill, low-paying and precarious work, and increases their vulnerability to exploitation.³⁵ Neoliberal economic and political structures are also criticized for reducing social welfare and the safety of migrants' working arrangements.³⁶ COVID-19 will exacerbate these structural inequalities, which result in the exploitation of women and girls in South-East Asia, the Pacific and everywhere else in the world.³⁷

For migrants who live where they work (as is often the case for young migrant women and girls in domestic work, sex work, agriculture and other sectors), the loss of employment may also be tantamount to losing accommodation and visas. Debts may be incurred to meet basic needs on top of those incurred to pay often-exploitative recruitment and migration fees.³⁸ These vulnerabilities that existed pre-pandemic confirm that recruitment policies and assistance packages must be crisis-proofed to protect vulnerable migrant workers.³⁹ They also show that policymaking must be informed by an understanding of the vulnerability that migrant workers in high-risk sectors and situations face from structural factors and social fractures.⁴⁰

Brighter Futures notes that environmental catastrophes and civil conflict exacerbate the structural context of trafficking in persons.⁴¹ Points made about these crises also apply to this one; gender inequality and gender-based violence are widespread and deeply entrenched, and must be urgently confronted in preventing trafficking and other exploitation from sprouting up along the fault lines caused by crises. This is evident in the present crisis. Forty per cent of women in South-East Asia and up to 68 per cent in the Pacific have experienced violence at the hands of their intimate partners, and pandemic-related pressures are rapidly driving up these numbers.⁴²

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³⁵ IOM, 2019b: 89

³⁶ IOM, 2019b: 45, 89–90.

³⁷ Quinley, 2020.

³⁸ McAdam, 2020.

³⁹ Migrant Forum Asia, 2020.

⁴⁰ McAdam, 2020; IOM, 2019b: 72; IOM, 2019a: 81.

⁴¹ IOM, 2019b: 91–92.

⁴² UN-Women, 2020: 6.

The report also points to the likelihood that climate change, natural disasters and other environmental, political or economic factors will cause unregulated flows within and from the region (particularly the Pacific).⁴³ Grafted on to these factors is now the prospect that COVID-19 and future pandemics may also deprive people of opportunities to safely relocate, leaving only risky mobility options, including those offered by migrant smugglers or human traffickers. In the absence of regular labour migration schemes, migrants with the means of moving irregularly may be delivered into weakened labour markets that no longer welcome them, but expose them – including the young women and girls among them or left behind – to heightened risk of abuse and exploitation.

The maritime movement of Rohingya starkly reveals the ongoing role of traffickers and smugglers in this crisis. Amid continuing armed conflict and extreme violence in Rakhine and Chin states of Myanmar, women and children have been killed, while more than 157,000 people have been displaced since fighting began in December 2018.⁴⁴ In the same way that traffickers and smugglers abandoned those whose journeys they were facilitating across the Andaman Sea in 2015,⁴⁵ a similar phenomenon played out again in April and May of 2020 with people fleeing substandard living conditions, persecution and violence. The gender dimensions at play are grim; many people who have taken to the sea are women and girls fleeing sexual violence, including the context of exploitation in and around Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, where COVID-19 has resulted in both exacerbated gender-based violence and scaled-back services to address it.⁴⁶

COVID-19 thus adds another dark dimension to State responses. Confronted with desperate people in distress at sea, some countries upheld their international obligations to rescue and allow safe disembarkation, using screening and quarantine to address public health considerations. However, other States, such as Bangladesh, pointed to COVID-related concerns as a basis for pushing them back to sea.⁴⁷ The capacity and generosity of Bangladesh to respond to this humanitarian disaster was severely strained even before COVID-19. It is now called on to continue providing support to rising numbers of refugees, while also protecting its own citizens from a pandemic, including the thousands of workers returning jobless from abroad. Mechanisms such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process) have once again been called on to support regional policy solutions to these complex challenges.⁴⁸

Finally, the Brighter Futures report notes that smuggling of women and children is not a cause of irregular migration, but a symptom of it, and one that largely results from insufficient opportunities to migrate regularly.⁴⁹ The special vulnerability of women and girls is pointed to in emphasizing the need for States to create accessible and affordable legal avenues, using the Global Compact on Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration as a blueprint to address complex questions.⁵⁰ But questions have become more complex now, as COVID-19 drastically changes mobility pathways and policy priorities, potentially giving way to a deluge of border controls and restrictive immigration policies that will increase demand

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⁴³ IOM, 2019b: 104.

⁴⁴ OHCHR, 2020.

⁴⁵ IOM, 2019b: 91–92, 101; McAuliffe, 2016: 19, 23, 29.

⁴⁶ IOM, 2019b: 91; IOM, 2020b.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2020.

⁴⁸ UNHCR, IOM and UNODC, 2020.

⁴⁹ IOM, 2019b: 105.

⁵⁰ IOM, 2019b: 105; UNHCR, IOM and UNODC, 2020.

for smuggling services to circumvent them.⁵¹ Migration stakeholders in South-East Asia and the Pacific have long pointed to border and migration governance policies that discriminate against young women and girls.⁵² Contrary to fulfilling recommendations to address these issues, the measures put in place in light of COVID-19 may exacerbate them. Whatever policies are implemented now in responding to dovetailing disasters will have ineffective outcomes and exacerbate inequalities, unless a gender lens is applied.⁵³

Issues for further examination:

- The impact of public health and other emergencies on human rights protections
- The impact of debt and recruitment fees on migrant workers in times of crises
- Gender-based violence risks and mitigation in times of crises
- Whether the Global Compact for Migration remains fit-for-purpose post-COVID
- The role that regional mechanisms such as ASEAN, Bali Process and the Pacific Immigration Development Community can play in supporting brighter futures for women and girls in South-East Asia and the Pacific

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⁵¹ IOM, 2020c; Bird, 2020.

⁵² UN-Women and ILO, 2017.

⁵³ Roy, 2020.



Conclusion

Brighter Futures is offered to policymakers, researchers and practitioners working to improve the lives of young women and girls across South-East Asia and the Pacific. The dynamics of migration have rapidly and profoundly shifted since the report was released, but the importance of implementing policies that reflect the gender dimensions of labour migration and keep pace with the changing nature of the agency of young women and girls, has never been more critical.

Brighter Futures points to the dearth of research on labour migration of young women and girls in South-East Asia and particularly the Pacific. New realities suggest that this gap will widen, underscoring the need to prioritize research that supports evidence-based policies and reflects a crises-informed perspective. Future research must critically consider the economic, social, cultural and structural dimensions at play, and adapt to the shifting aspirations and realities of young migrant women and girls and their families.

Many of the lessons learned now may be too late to benefit those affected by this current crisis, but must be harnessed and extrapolated from to inform preparedness for the next. A key finding that emerges from the difficult lessons learned so far, is the need to pressure-test labour migration policies in South-East Asia and the Pacific, and the countries and subregions within it. In doing so, attention must be given to the young women and girls whose labour migration is so vital for the economic, social, cultural, and structural health and development of both sending and receiving countries.



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